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The Influence of the Irish Folk Tales on the Notion of Irishness

Thesis

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2002
Univerzita Pardubice
Fakulta humanitních studií
Katedra anglistiky a amerikanistiky

Vliv irských lidových příběhů na irství

Diplomová práce

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2002

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Introduction

The Irish of the twentieth century are a complex, scattered nation, living not only in Ireland, but also in a part of the United Kingdom--Northern Ireland, as well as in the rest of the country. In large numbers, they can be found in many

other countries of the world, mostly the United States of America.

The Irish have a long history. Originally a specific Celtic people with a distinctive culture, for many centuries they were exposed to the cultures of numerous invaders, for many centuries they suffered oppression--most painfully under the English overrule. As Professor Falaky Nagy comments, the Irish are "a people who, for centuries, have been told that their language, their culture, and their religion were worthless and that they should try to be more like the English" [Tay]. Yet they resisted and managed to preserve their peculiarity, the national characteristics that are understood under the term *Irishness*.

It was the Irish cultural nationalists of the late nineteenth century who contributed most significantly to the revival of the Irish national self. They claimed that although Ireland, a culturally distinct nation, had been terribly damaged by British colonialism, "it could nevertheless rediscover its lost features and thereby recognize once more its true identity" [Deane 53]. It was them who popularized the ancient tales of the Irish, the tales embracing the features that became the traits of the Irish national identity. Thanks to their endeavour, the Irish people re-gained their national confidence and pride. Not only the ancient tales but also the Irish language, customs and traditions underwent a great resurgence, and eventually, the primarily cultural nationalism led to the Irish political independence and establishment of the new Irish State.

This work shows the influence of the Irish folk tales on the notion of Irishness, the connection between the Irish legends, fairy tales and especially myths, and some of the symbols and features typically associated with the Irish people. In this sense, the work treats the Irish as a whole, irrespective of the place where they live. As the manifesto issued by the Irish Republican Army on the twelfth of December, 1956, put it, "the whole of Ireland--its resources, wealth, culture, history and tradition--is the common inheritance of all our people" [Magee 100].

Although the work does discuss the religious belief of the Irish, especially in connection with the legends of Saint Patrick, it does not deal with the topic of the separation of the country and the troubles in Northern Ireland.

In the work, the terms of myth, legend and fairy tale are presented. To discuss them in more detail, it is necessary to define them first. The definitions of these terms differ in various sources; for this work, the definitions given by The Random House Dictionary of the English Language and The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language have been chosen as their wording best suits the requirements of the subsequent analysis.

Irishness

The meaning of the word *Irishness* can be explained in a simple way as it basically denotes what is normally called the Irish national identity. But what is then to be comprehended under the label "Irish national identity"? The answer is not a simple one, possibly hardly two people would agree on one definition of the term, if it can be defined at all.

As Robert Kee points out, the problem is "to define an Irishman at all" [7]. From the historical point of view, nationality in general is difficult to delimit, on which Kee comments that "there is a fairly close limit in time beyond which it is pointless to go back and try to trace nationality" [Kee 9]. However, it is the Celts (or the Gaels), coming to Ireland during the first millennium BC, with whom the roots of the Irish life and character are popularly associated. The fact that the Romans never reached Ireland and the Celtic civilization survived long after their retreat from Britain, left "a mark of difference" on Ireland [Kee 9]. Still, even though the Celts might be considered the first Irish, the "pure Irish race" soon blended with Norsemen and other invaders (interestingly enough,

many of the names considered typically Irish today are of Norman origin, e.g. Joyce, Burke, Fitzgerald) [Kee 10].

Throughout the history, the original Celtic population further absorbed a great number of the English (especially after the Ulster plantation in 1609). Nevertheless, mainly the extensive diaspora of the Irish people, mostly during the nineteenth century, added to the reality that the Irish today are a complicated amalgam of different nationalities.

It has been shown that it is rather impossible to define Irishness with regards to the definiteness, purity and unity of origin of the Irish nation's members. Yet there are other attributes that denote national identity. Before these are specified, it is necessary to discuss what actually is a *nation*.

Anthony D. Smith suggests that there are two basic conceptions of what is understood under the label of "nation": Western and non-Western [9-11].

Western conception is seen as primarily territorial, i.e. the nation must own some specified territory to which the people of the nation belong, the important fact being that this relationship is historic, that the people have stayed in the particular place for several generations. This "homeland" is then perceived as unique by the nation: "a repository of historic memories and associations", the space where the nation's "sages, saints and heroes lived, worked, prayed and fought" [Smith 9]. (This is a crucial statement as regards the relationship of the nation's mythology and its identity, which will be discussed later.) Another significant trait of this conception is that the community shares a system of laws and institutions of the same political will, providing legal equality of the community's members, and the people also benefit from the same resources (exclusive to the nation) [Smith 10]. The final characteristic denoting Western model of nation is that the people share common culture, i.e. they respect the same values and traditions, and a "civic ideology", i.e. common "understandings and aspirations, sentiments and ideas" [Smith 11].

Non-Western conception of the "nation" can be called "ethnic" as it principally emphasizes common ancestry and native culture of a community's members, the territory and laws are not as important here as in the previous conception [Smith 11-12]. More, vernacular culture, especially languages and customs, plays a crucial role in the ethnic model.

The problem with the latter conception of the nation is that it is usually very difficult, if not impossible, to trace the true descent of a nation (as pointed out above), and so its principal characteristic is rather idealistic. Nevertheless, many notions of the origin of a nation are actually based on presumptions that might be far from the truth. For example, according to their mythology, the Gaelic predecessors of the Irish, Milesians, came from Spain, which belies to the archaeological findings [Moody 17-20]. What is important, however, is to what degree people believe these notions and identify with them. As Smith grants, what "matters for the sense of ethnic identification" is "fictive descent and putative ancestry", not the real facts [22]. Eric J. Hobsbawm adds that nationalism in general "requires too much belief in what is patently not so" [12], on which Ernest Renan commented that "Getting its history wrong is part of being a nation." [as quoted in Hobsbawm 12].

National identity then contains elements of both the conceptions mentioned (as well as all nationalist movements are based partly on each of them). Consequently, the cardinal characteristics of the national identity are the historic territory (homeland), common myths and historical memories, common culture, common legal rights and duties for the members, and common economy [Smith 14].

All these features can be with no difficulty applied on Ireland today, so it is possible to speak of the "Irish national identity". Yet, characteristics like "Celtic myths" or "Irish culture" do not reveal anything about what it means to be Irish. The term *Irishness* implies something much more concrete, even though obviously something within the broad traits listed above. The important thing is what the

Irish themselves and also people outside Ireland feel Irishness to be, and how it has been represented.

The journey towards the self-realization of the modern Irish nation, a journey towards the rediscovery of the Irish national identity has been long and one full of struggles, suffering and distress as can be seen from the outline of the Irish history.

History

To expound the origins of the Irish identity, it is necessary to turn to the ancient history of the Irish nation.

As it has been stated above, the first Irish people are associated with the Celtic inhabitants who settled not just in the place that today is called Ireland but also in the north of England. As Karl S. Bottigheimer notes, the Celticization of the area as such is a confusing period of ancient history for it is not quite clear who to refer to as the *Celts* [9-10]. There are basically three theories about these people: the first comes from the ancient Greek and Roman authors who wrote about "a widespread European people" calling them "Keltoi" or "Galatae" [Bottigheimer 10]. The second theory is based on modern archaeological research, matching a certain material culture with the people whom the ancients called "Celts"; the last theory is a linguistic one, identifying the Celts with a group of common languages (which is substantiated mostly by place-names) [Bottigheimer 10]. It is not really known who these people were but the important fact is that originally these Celts lived not just in Ireland but all over the British Isles, providing a relative cultural unity in the whole area. The change and historically the first division came with the advent of the Romans to Britain.

After Caesar's campaigns to southern England in 55 and 54 BC, in 43 AD Claudius conquered and colonized it [Bottigheimer

15]. Romanized Celts in the colony progressively penetrated the Roman administration and also adopted Roman religion and culture. Scotland and Wales were slightly touched by this change, too, as the unyielding Celts fled there from the south-east region. Thus, Ireland (in spite of trading with the Romans) remained the only place intact by the Roman life and culture [Bottigheimer 15].

Although it is not known when exactly, or even how the partition started, by the time of the Roman approach the Celts of the British isles were divided linguistically into two groups, marked "P Celts" who spoke "Brythonic" (or British) and "Q Celts" who spoke "Goidelic" (or Irish) [Bottigheimer 15]. The presence of the Romans in Britain then only enhanced this difference and (irrespective of the further linguistic influences of the later coming Germans and Normans) the discreteness of the Irish language was formed.

Another wave of change arrived with the Germanic invaders, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, who started to appear in Britain in the fifth century. Their impact on the country was much stronger than that of the Romans: they represented a great population and they also brought a new language that after time became the vernacular in England; they set up "settlement patterns, legal systems, and widespread customs" that became the very basis of the English civilization; the British Celts were either conformed or escaped to Brittany, Cornwall, or Scotland [Bottigheimer 17]. Again, it was only Ireland that stayed untouched, and an "ethnic gulf" was created in an originally culturally cognate archipelagic civilization [Bottigheimer 17].

Ireland became a distinct nation, with its own specific language, culture, and no doubt a specific character. Unfortunately, only little is known about the civilization of Ireland during the Roman and Germanic inhabitation of Britain, for there are no written records of it. The only source of information are the tales of the earliest Irish literature, which indicates how important they are

in picturing the nature of the primordial Irish character.

Nevertheless, the trait giving a picture of Ireland's particularity was not brought about by numerous invaders, but by a single man, a Christian. The Roman and Germanic invasions strongly influenced the social development in Britain, while they meant no turn in the course of life in Ireland. With Christianity, this was vice versa. Although Christianity reached Britain already during the Roman overrule, it also disappeared with the Roman retreat. At the same time, Christianity experienced an incredibly positive acceptance in Ireland where it was spread by a legendary person called Patrick. The impact of Christianity on the people of Ireland was so immense that Patrick became not only Saint but also a patron and one of the symbols of Ireland. But this will be discussed more minutely later.

During the following three and a half centuries before the Norsemen came to Ireland, Christianity flourished in the country. Monasteries started to proliferate, and reaching the climax in the sixth and seventh centuries, they became the centres of not only the new faith but also of learnedness and art. Although Ireland received the Christian message comparatively later than England, by the sixth and seventh centuries the Irish monasteries propagated it back so successfully that Ireland became known as the "Isle of Saints and Scholars" [Leerssen 264]. The deal by which they have contributed to the Medieval art (especially illuminated manuscripts, e.g. Book of Kells) considered, it is evident how great an impact the Irish monasticism made on the English (and European) culture of the Middle Ages.

Despite being prominent in the sphere of culture, Ireland lacked political integrity, it was split into a large number of tribal units, the tribes often contending with one another. This unstable situation then made it easy to the Vikings to attack and subjugate the country at the turn of the eighth and ninth centuries [Bottigheimer 44-45]. With a break during the tenth century, the Vikings plundered Ireland until 1014 when they were finally defeated by the legendary king Brian Boru [Bottigheimer 52].

Nevertheless, the Vikings left a lot of indelible traces in Ireland. The Irish language adopted numerous Norse words, especially those concerning trade; they appear in many place-names:

curiously enough, even the word "Ireland" itself is of Norwegian origin [Moody 75].

Although Brian had meanwhile succeeded more or less in unifying Ireland, after his death in 1014, the monarchy collapsed and Ireland became disjointed again. In the course of struggles over power in the middle of the twelfth century, one of the potential rulers, Dermot MacMurrough, went in search of allies to ask the Norman king of England, Henry II, for help [Moody 88]. He eventually made an agreement with one of the king's commanders, called "Strongbow", who--after successfully defeating Dermot's enemies and after Dermot's death--himself became the king of Ireland [Bottigheimer 53-54]. Naturally, Henry II did not approve of his subject building a kingdom and came to Ireland to subdue it himself, which he reached with no difficulty, although he (and no other Norman) never gained control of the entire country (which showed to be critical for the Norman overrule later on). Yet, as Bottigheimer comments, the arrival of Normans meant a "watershed" in Ireland's history: although there had come invaders before, never had they settled there on such a large scale, and, more relevantly, never had they intruded for the sake of a whole kingdom [55]. Now, for the first time, the English monarchy entered the politics of Ireland.

The Norman invaders had a much stronger impact on the appearance and character of Ireland than their Norse predecessors did. It is noticeable on its harbours, infrastructure and architecture, Irish songs and literature, and Frank X. Martin claims that even the physiognomy of the present inhabitants reminds of the Norman knights who settled on the island [Moody 87].

Thus, already at this point in history, the Irishness was difficult to delimit, as the original Celtic inhabitants became outnumbered, or more precisely absorbed, by the invaders; their language, culture and way of life had been irreversibly affected by those of strangers. From this time on, the Irish would be struggling not only for independence but also for the definition of their own, genuine identity.

It has already been said that some parts of Ireland were not overpowered by the Normans, they stayed Gaelic and independent. In the second half of the twelfth century some of the chieftains of

these enclaves confronted the invaders in two battles, which meant the end of the Norman expansion and, consequently, the florescence of the Celts [Moody 112]. It was demonstrated especially by the effort to establish a High King of Ireland again; for a while at the beginning of the fourteenth century Scot Edward Bruce (the brother of the famous Scottish king Robert Bruce) held this position, which could be seen as an attempt to unite the Gaels against the Anglo-Norman oppression [Bottigheimer 59-60]. However, this never became the truth.

The most important strand of this national revival was the renewal of Gaelic institutions and way of life. Thanks to the growth of the Gaelic territory, Irish poets, historians and other scholars gained more supporters amongst the aristocracy, to the benefit of the Irish language [Moody 112]. Also in the scriptoria of the Irish monasteries, the vernacular language of Irish was used much more, and so many of the greatest pieces of the Irish literary heritage originated at this time, for example The Yellow Book of Lecan that contains many tales of the Irish mythology.

Despite the general Irish aversion against the Anglo-Norman inhabitants, they were inevitably gradually assimilated by the Irish. This was, as Bottigheimer writes, seen by the English monarchy--that still actually controlled Ireland--as "degeneracy, the deterioration of a superior culture under the influence of an inferior one" [67]. Consequently, Parliament met at Kilkenny in 1366, but in spite of the attribute "Irish", it was an Anglo-Norman body serving the monarchy. It produced the famous statutes of Kilkenny; these apart from other things forbade:

alliance by marriage, fosterage, or concubinage; the presentation of Irishmen to cathedral or collegiate churches; the reception of Irish minstrels and other entertainers amongst the English, the acceptance of Irishmen into profession in English religious houses; the use of the Irish language, mode of riding and dress; the giving of pasturage on lands to Irish.

[as quoted in Bottigheimer 67]

This attitude could no doubt be called a policy of apartheid and (while stressing the difference of the Irish) it also clearly gives grounds to the Irish resentment over England, and to their need to prove that they are a full-value nation, with culture at least as good, if not better, as the English.

Notwithstanding the various means of oppression and disdain of the Irish, the Normans never conquered Ireland in the full sense. It was the Tudors who dealt the country a fatal blow, who at last put an end to "heroic Ireland".

By his ruthless manners, quelling pitilessly every mark of rebellion and executing every person that he found inconvenient to his purposes, Henry VIII Tudor finally became the king of Ireland in 1541, thus dismantling the native rule completely [Moody 132]. He launched all kinds of changes to adapt the Irish to the English way of life, the most relevant of which was definitely the introduction of the religious reformation. After becoming the head of the--by himself established--Church of England in 1534, in 1536 he became also the head of the Irish Church, and within a few years, most of the Irish monasteries were dissolved [Moody 134-135]. Yet the new faith never became popular among the traditionally Catholic population, and Catholicism grew into one of the principal vehicles of the Irish resistance.

Henry VIII's descendants followed his policy of expansionism and assimilation in Ireland. The policy of Queen Elizabeth, institutionally called "plantation", was openly hostile toward Irish society, her "reformation" went "far beyond religion, to include law, language, custom, and even social habits" [Bottigheimer 102]. Although these had been condemned already by the statutes of Kilkenny, only in the second half of the sixteenth century were they despised with such a grudge. Moreover, this attitude was accompanied by frequent "militarily unnecessary killing" during the

pacification of some rebellious Irish [Bottigheimer 103]. Their land was confiscated and distributed among the English gentry. By the end of the sixteenth century, the country had attracted around 15,000 English immigrants, thus in fact becoming England's first colony [Bottigheimer 105].

Some parts withstood the English expansion for tens of years, but in 1603 the last Gaelic domain, Ulster, was defeated and Ireland was fully conquered [Moody 142]. During the seventeenth century, new immigrants from England and Scotland were settling down in Ulster, bringing their own traditions, institutions and way of life. They brought new architecture, built markets, churches and schools, supported craft production [Moody 145]. A completely new society, different not only in being Protestant but also in the entire lifestyle, developed in Ulster, giving the region a character totally dissimilar to the rest of Ireland.

Oliver Cromwell then continued the repression against Catholic inhabitants, transferring their wealth to Protestants (expropriating nearly the whole nation) and thus creating a Protestant upper class [Bottigheimer 128-132]. Numerous Irish Catholics emigrated, continuing a tradition already well established in the previous centuries and followed in the centuries to come, tradition that has become one of the most typical attributes of the Irish nation.

The Catholics' situation did not improve during the Restoration, and got rather worse after Protestant William of Orange (who was invited to Ireland by the Protestants fearing Catholic reign of James II and his heir) defeated James II's army in 1691 [Moody 154-163]. Bottigheimer suggests that, in a sense, this year can be regarded the "birthdate of the Protestant ascendancy" in Ireland, and consequently the eighteenth century is often described as the period of the "Protestant nation" [139]. The original Irish Catholic majority would be treated as an inferior nation, suffering

subordination in their own land, especially due to the penal laws that restricted their civil, social and economic freedom. They represented, with some scarce exceptions, the poorest people of the country, a nation of their own, with a special identity characterized not just by their religious faith but also by old Irish traditions, including the Gaelic language. Already at this time Gaelic bards recalled in their songs the national roots and heroic history of the Irish, well preserved in the folk tales [Moody 172].

Nonetheless, it was the Protestants who introduced the idea of Irish independence, for English economic interests made them perceive the government, even though Protestant, as oppressive towards them [Bottigheimer 145-146]. The defeat of England in the war of independence in America significantly influenced the course of development in Ireland and in 1782 the Protestant nation achieved "Constitution" securing the independence of the Irish Parliament and Irish judicial system [Kee 32-33]. While also the Catholics were, step by step, gaining more religious and civil freedom, in the last decade of the eighteenth century the Society of United Irishmen was founded, being incredibly a mixture of Protestant and Catholic dissidents joined in the struggle against the English Parliament [Bottigheimer 154]. In spite of its uprising and growing Irish nationalism, in 1800 the Act of Union was passed in the Irish Parliament and in 1801 the century-long notion of independent Ireland was ended by its incorporation into the United Kingdom [Moody 187].

After the emancipation of Catholics in the 1820s (thanks to the Catholic Association of Daniel O'Connell), the idea of uniting all the Irish against the English hegemony to reach independence grew more and more popular [Kee 185-6]. This was also reflected in the new notion of the Irish nation that became to be understood as a community of all the people living in Ireland, irrespective of their religious faith or origin. This new kind of liberal nationalism

evolved around a group of radical idealists, *Young Ireland*, associated with a newspaper called The Nation founded in 1842 [Bottigheimer 182]. The Great Famine in the 1840s, caused by the destruction of potato crop on which the majority of the population depended, only intensified the nationalist separatist tendencies, as the British government appeared unwilling to render the disaster-stricken Ireland any big-scale assistance.

Many of the Irish radicals believed less and less in the possibility of reaching independence from Britain by negotiation and began to count on armed resistance. In 1858 a clandestine nationalist movement was founded simultaneously in Dublin and New York under the name of the *Irish Republican Brotherhood* (IRB), its founders being mainly the members of the now extinct *Young Ireland* [Bottigheimer 201]. Obviously impressed by the Ireland's heroic past, they called themselves the *Fenians* after the mythic Celtic hero Finn and his warriors.

Evidently, by this time the need for national emancipation and self-identification was felt by the general public, the feeling based on several hundred years of experience of the British oppression. In 1867, the Fenians proclaimed the Irish Republic and attempted insurrection, but it failed and its initiators were executed [Kee 330-338].

At the end of the nineteenth century, the nationalist tendencies took a direction quite different to the previous ones. Disappointed by the political haggling bringing no serious progress in the Irish question, especially in the attempt to win Home Rule for Ireland, there appeared various apolitical nationalist movements that became generally known as the Irish Ireland movement. It covered for example the Gaelic Athletic Association that sought to raise the Irish consciousness by reviving the traditional Irish sports, especially hurling--a game favoured according to the myth already by Cúchulainn, while another strand, the Gaelic League, strove to foster the Irish language [Kee 426-431].

Yet the most outstanding of these movements was definitely the one that manifested itself in form of Gaelic literary revival. It

was this particular movement that based its nationalism on the Gaelic literary heritage, on the power hidden in the ancient Celtic folk tales. Before the connection between the Irish myths, legends and fairy tales and the nationalist movement of the late nineteenth century is analyzed, first the folk tales will be introduced in general.

Folk tales and the oral tradition in Ireland

The Celtic folklore, of which the Irish folklore represents a considerable component, has a unique characteristic compared to the folklore of other European nations. Nowhere else there exists such a large and consistent body of oral tradition about the national and mythical heroes as amongst the Gaels [Jacobs xii]. This fact gives grounds to the positive stereotyping of the Irish who are often called "a nation of talkers", having "the gift of the gab" [Sharkey 119], which is one of the attributes ascribed to Irishness.

The Irish oral tradition has a long history, the beginning of which could be probably traced to the beginning of the Irish race itself. Originally a diffuse phenomenon, in modern history, storytelling (and folklore in general) has commonly been associated with the country life [Harvey 7]. In the Irish countryside, there is an old custom of "nightly visiting, known as *ar cuairt*" (i.e. "on a visit") that represented, as Clodagh Brennan Harvey claims, the major social entertainment in most areas until the recent time [7]. Only the introduction of television, which is quite a novelty in the Irish countryside--the Irish television broadcasting started in 1961, caused a decline in the popularity of the visits [Harvey 7]. Before that, especially during the long nights of the winter months, when there was no work in the fields, the Irish peasants relied on one another for pastime. As one of the storytellers describes:

When the long nights would come long ago, the people . . . would

gather together every night sitting beside the fire or wherever they could find room in the house. . . . The man who had a long tale, or the man who had the shorter tales . . . used to be telling them.

[as quoted in Harvey 7]

Although other activities were practised, storytelling seemed the best favoured one. The stories narrated were (and still are) of two kinds: *seanchas* (sean = "old") told by *seanchaí* (i.e. tellers) and *scéalaíocht* (scéal = "story") told by *scéalaí* (i.e. narrators) [Harvey 4-5]. The first category refers to shorter, either matter-of-fact narratives (e.g. local or family histories) or tales dealing with the supernatural, while the latter one refers to longer tales, with an elaborated structure and often a number of side tales [Harvey 5]. The *scéalaí* have usually been more respected, probably because of the fact that their tales are longer, and so more difficult to remember. Also, these tales are basically the myths and legends of the ancient times; centuries ago, their versions were written down and thus relatively fixed, and so the narrators feel that they have to keep more or less to the original. As Vladimír Karbusický put it:

Words that are passed by word of mouth are changeable like the sun and rain, they will not keep their uniqueness, for each person's command of them is different. . . . Words that have once been written down are, after all, impossible to be changed quite arbitrarily.

[Pověsti české 258, my translation]¹

The fairy tales belong more likely to the other category: they are usually short, often telling only about an encounter with a fairy being. Until the first folk collectors appeared in the nineteenth century, these stories existed only in the oral form. The tellers not only variously adapted the fairy tales that they had been told by someone else, but they also created their own stories.

The nationalists who wished to revive the sense of Irishness among the Irish people by providing them with "a window on a wonderful, heroic, Celtic past" [as quoted in Harvey 2], focused on

¹ Slovo předávané z úst do úst je proměnlivé jako slunce a déšť, neudrží svou jedinečnost, neboť každý jím vládne po svém. . . . Slovo, které bylo jednou zapsáno, není přece jen možné tak zcela libovolně měnit. [258, original in Czech]

the *scéalaíocht*, particularly the Irish myths as they contain the praised values and achievements of "the old Gaelic order, the 'real' Ireland" [Harvey 2]. However, they searched primarily in the written sources. Others were interested more in the Irish country people themselves and in their culture, finding there the features of the Irish that could not be found among other nations, the traits of the true Irishness. These nationalists concentrated on the tales stemming from the fabled Irish imagination and spirituality, that is, fairy tales.

Although there exist other forms of folk narratives, the three main genres of the Irish literary folk heritage are fairy tales, myths and legends. These will be discussed in detail.

Fairy tale, myth, legend

Fairy tale (also *fairy story*) is a story about fairies, elves, hobgoblins, dragons, and other magical features; usually for children [Stein 511]. Compared to the other two folk genres, fairy tales are considered "more poetic", while myth and legend "more historic" [Schenda 78].

Fairy tales are supranational; they do not normally play a vital role concerning a nation's identity. On the other hand, among the various forms of folklore narratives, they have developed into the major genre [Schenda 89]. Further, among the Irish people, fairy tales have always been extremely popular, on which Lady Gregory comments that to the nature of the Irish people, who love "the vague, mystic, dreamy, and supernatural", there is something captivating in the belief that the fairies live around them [6].

As regards *myth*, most dictionaries give quite a broad explanation of the term, e.g. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language says that it is:

A traditional or legendary story, usually concerning some superhuman being or some alleged person or event, with or without a determinable basis of fact or a natural explanation, especially a traditional or

legendary story that is concerned with deities or demigods and the creation of the world and its inhabitants.

[Stein 946]

However, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language looks at the term from several different points of view, giving three definitions of the word *myth*. The first one states that *myth* is:

A traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes that serves as fundamental type in the world view of a people, as by explaining aspects of the natural world or delineating the psychology, customs, or ideals of society.

[1164]

But *myth* can also mean "a popular belief or story that has become associated with a person, institution, or occurrence, especially one that is considered to illustrate a cultural ideal", or "a fiction, or half-truth, especially one that forms part of an ideology" [1164]. As it will be shown later, in case of some of the Irish myths, all the three interpretations of the term can be applied.

Finally, *legend* (as a tale) is, according to The American Heritage Dictionary, "an unverified story handed down from early times, especially one popularly believed to be historical" [1000]. This interpretation of the term is very simple and basically does not make any difference between *legend* and *myth*. Nevertheless, there is one characteristic of *legend* that generally distinguishes it from *myth*: *legend* was originally a story concerning the life of a saint. In fact, this interpretation of the term is supported by the origin of the word *legend*. The Middle-English word *legende* that developed from the Medieval Latin word *legenda* meaning "to be read" stayed for a collection of saints' lives, and it was so called because it was appointed to be read on the respective saints' days [The American Heritage Dictionary 1000]. A clear distinction between the two genres has been made by Lady Francesca Speranza Wilde, who separates *myth* and *legend* on the basis of which religion each concerns. Thus she speaks of "pagan myths" and "Christian legends"

[xi].

This work will keep to the original meaning of *legend* and in the context of Irish legends, it will speak about the Irish principal saint, Saint Patrick.

Irish myths

Concerning the Irish folk tales, the ancient myths seem to have the prominent position. They are the largest in number and they also are a source of information about the ancient Irish people. In fact, they say much about the original Celtic people in general. Thanks to its isolated position within Europe, until the approach of Christianity in the fifth century and later the invasion of Vikings, Irish society did not change much. As a result, the culture of the Iron Age Celts was preserved in Ireland considerably longer than in the rest of Europe.

Nevertheless, although, as Karbusický points out, there is a tendency to consider all the earliest tales a reliable source of historical information--based simply on the fact that they are of folk origin, they should not be treated this way [Báje 8]. The form in which the stories are known today is definitely remarkably different from the original: they have undergone many changes during their long existence.

The earliest Irish myths are supposed to have been composed in the pagan Celtic Iron Age of Ireland, possibly as early as 300 BC, and for a long time they were passed only by word of mouth [”Lugodoc’s Guide to Celtic Mythology”]. Although the Irish were among the first peoples outside the Roman Empire who developed their own writing (Ogham), and even before that time the Celtic clergy, the *druids*, probably knew the Greek script, the tales were written down only centuries later by Christian monks [Heaney ix]. Even Julius Caesar remarked upon the apparent taboo that the use of writing meant for the druids: ”They commit to memory immense

amounts of poetry . . . they consider it improper to commit their studies to writing . . . lest it should be vulgarised and lest the memory of scholars should become impaired” [as quoted in “The Ogham”].

The motive of the forbiddance to write down the knowledge of the druids could have been for example the protection of religious secrets that were supposed to be unfolded only to those who had been especially prepared for them [Clarus 13].

After the advent of Christianity and the decay of the druidic priesthood in the fifth century AD, stories started to be transcribed by the Irish monks. The tales, the original version of which had been by that time substantially altered by repeated retelling (Jeffrey Gantz presumes that rather than memorizing the whole tales, the storytellers memorized only the summary and filled in the details ad-lib [19]), were now to await even more changes. Writing the tales down, monks often reworked them, especially in concordance with their religious conception, nonetheless giving them a “literary veneer” [Gantz 19]. On the other hand, the tales had also declined before they reached the earliest preserved manuscripts of the twelfth century: “banquet-hall transcription cannot have been easy, and the scribe doubtless grew wary before the storyteller did”, this fact bringing many errors and inconsistencies into the texts [Gantz 19].

According to the oldest variation of the Irish vernacular used in the tales, it can be estimated that for the first time the tales must have been recorded in the eighth century, or even before [Gantz 20]. Unfortunately, almost all the literary relics of that time were destroyed by the Viking invaders who terrorized Irish monasteries during the eighth and ninth century, and during various wars.

The myths of the Irish folklore that are known today are scattered in several still extant ancient Irish manuscripts written by Christian monks between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries; the best known being probably The Book of the Dun Cow, The Book of

Leinster and The Yellow Book of Lecan [”Lugodoc’s Guide to Celtic Mythology”].

By convention and tradition, the myths have been arranged into four groups, or cycles. These are the Mythological Cycle (or Book of Invasions or Aliens), the Ulster Cycle (or Ultonian or Connorian Cycle; also known as the Red Branch Cycle), the Fenian (Fianna) Cycle or Ossianic Cycle and the Historical Cycle or the Cycle of Kings (the Kings Cycle).

Gantz claims that although this division is useful, it is nevertheless ”modern and artificial” as the tales are not particularly classified in the manuscripts and in his own arrangement, the Kings Cycle is preceded by the Fenian Cycle that he calls the ”Find” Cycle [Gantz 22]. Strict separation of the tales would be even impossible as their characters are often present in more than one cycle: e.g. the Síde-woman Bóand of the Mythological Cycle appears again as Fróech’s aunt in the tale of *Cattle Raid of Fróech* in the Ulster Cycle; Ailill and Medb, king and queen of Connacht, who belong to the Ulster Cycle, participate in the *Dream of Óengus* of the Mythological Cycle, etc.

However, the arrangement outlined is probably the most convenient one, its major advantage being the chronological ordering of the tales. This way, many of them seem more likely to correspond to the real historical events and so appear more authentic, which has suited the needs of various Irish nationalist seeking for their national self in the ancient literary heritage.

The tales of the Mythological Cycle are set mainly among the burial mounds of the Boyne Valley. The central theme is concerned with the successive invasions of Ireland by supernatural clans, the tales creating the mythological conception of how Ireland was inhabited. According to Lebor Gabála (Leabhar Gabhala or The Book of Invasions) dating back to the twelfth century, there were

six such invasions: of Cessair, Partholón, Nemed, the Fir Bolg, the Tuatha De Danaan and the Sons of Mil Espáne (or the Milesians) [Gantz 6]. Except for the Milesians, who were the human ancestors of the present inhabitants of Ireland, all the previous invaders were semi-divine people. The chief characters of these tales are then the Tuatha De Danaan (Danand, Danann), i.e. the People of the Goddess Danu, who, after being defeated by the Milesians, retreated to live underground in the otherworld. In the Irish folklore they have become known as "the People of the Sidhe, the Faery, the Little Folk or the Good People" [Heaney x].

The best-known Irish mythological tales are undoubtedly those of the Ulster Cycle, especially its principal tale called *Táin Bó Cualgne* (Cuailgne, Cúalnge, Cúailnge or *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*). The action of the stories takes place mostly in the north of Ireland, at the royal court of Emain Macha (today Navan Fort) and along the Ulster borders. It is set in the time around the birth of Christ, in the reign of Conchobor (Conchobhar, Conochobor, or simply Conor) Mac Nessa, king of Ulster, and Medb, queen of Connacht. This period has been referred to as the "Heroic Age" in Irish literature and as such often recalled by Irish nationalists. The tales of this cycle narrate of the heroic feats of the king and of the Red Branch Knights. The best-known character of these tales (and possibly of the whole Irish mythology) is Cúchulainn (Cuchulain, Cuchullain, Cú Chulainn, Cú Chulaind; originally called Setanta).

The Fenian Cycle is set in the reign of Cormac Mac Art (Airt), supposedly in the third century of the Christian era [Smyth 12]. It revolves around Finn (Fionn, Find) Mac Cumhaill (Cumhaill, Cumhal) and the Fianna (or the Fenians), a group of aristocratic warriors and hunters, which Finn became the leader of.

The Historical Cycle has been termed "a mixture of genuine history with symbolic fiction" [Smyth 13]. The tales are mainly set in Tara, the centre of ancient Ireland and the seat of kings until the

sixth century [Smyth 166]. They deal predominantly with the deeds of the historical kings: from Labraid Loingsech, a supposed king of Leinster, believed to have reigned in the third century BC, up to Brian Boru [”The Historical Cycle”].

Some Irish myths in detail

Now the Irish myths have been introduced in general, some of them will be discussed in greater detail, thus highlighting certain characters, events and various features that have become relevant in the different waves of Irish nationalism, and in the notion of Irishness.

Concerning the Mythological cycle, the importance of its myths lays in the fact that they explain the origin of the Irish nation. In concordance with the definitions above, these myths speak about supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes. According to what is recorded in the Book of Invasions, the first invader of the island was a woman, called Cessair, accompanied by fifty other women yet only three men [Delaney 3]. This gender imbalance could suggest that matriarchy was in operation at that time. The fact that the leader was a woman also sets up the tradition of strong, independent and admirable women that appear throughout the whole of Irish mythology.

The next one to come was Partholón with his beautiful wife and a large retinue, who came from the sea (*bar* = sea and *thola* = waves [Clarus 58]). They reshaped the original landscape:

Partholón began by surveying the entire island and found that the country had three lakes, nine rivers and one plain. He gave orders to clear as many forests as would make three more plains and divert as many rivers as would make seven more lakes.

[Delaney 3]

His people began to breed cattle on the island, which became the chief source of living of the Irish for hundreds of years. Another significant attribute of the Irish culture ascribed to this mythical figure and his people is the invention of brewing ale that is still so popular today.

Already these people had to fight with the Fomorians (Fomhoire), semi-demonic creatures, some of them "so ugly and rough they were frightful to look at, and some of them had only one hand and one foot" who lived in the islands scattered around Ireland [Heaney 4]. They were to trouble all the following invaders up to the Tuatha De Danaans: "not only did the Fomorians capture ships, but they sailed to Ireland and made raids there, seizing lands and slaves and levying taxes" [Heaney 4]. Yet the Partholonians were not destroyed by these monsters but by plague: "Then, sudden as a rising wind, between one night and a morning, there came a sickness that bloated the stomach and purpled the skin, and on the seventh day all of the race of Partholón were dead." ["Tuan Mac Cairill"].

Some years later they were replaced by nine people, leaded by Nemed (Nemhedh). They multiplied and continued cutting down forests and undergrowth, "enough to open twelve further plains" and "by diverting rivers they created four new lakes" [Delaney 4]. Thus they gave the country its final geographical definition and identity.

According to one tale, Nemed's wife Macha gave name to the court of Emain Macha that was later raised on the place of her sepulchre. There are other tales about the origin of the name of the royal seat. One of them is set in the pre-Celtic time of matriarchy when Ireland was governed by an independent and confident queen, a woman warrior called Macha (her name being derived from the Indo-European root *magh* meaning "to fight" [Clarus 52]). When her nephews planned to deprive her of her power, she found out, outwitted them and made them her slaves. They had to build a castle on the area that she demarcated with her clip. *Eo* means "clip" and

main means "neck" in Irish, so the castle was named Emain Macha [Clarus 23].

Another story set in a later time narrates that there lived a farmer in Ulster called Crunnchu and when he lost his wife, a beautiful woman called Macha came to his house to take care of the household, and they lived happily together. One day there was a fair in Ulster and the farmer decided to go there. When he told his wife of his intention, she asked him not to mention her living with him. Crunnchu promised that he would not say a word of her. But it was a great occasion, there were "tournaments and contests, feats of strength and skill, processions and games, but the climax of the meeting was the chariot race" and Crunnchu forgot his promise and shouted: "My wife can run faster than the king's horses!" [Heaney 66]. Macha was brought to the fair and ordered to prove this but being nine months pregnant, she pleaded for mercy. Yet the king threatened to kill her husband if she would not race and none of the men around would stand up for her. So she did and won but at the end of the race she fell to the ground and gave birth to twins, in Irish *emain*:

As her twins were born, Macha let out a loud scream and the strength of all the men who heard it suddenly ebbed away. They became like Macha lying on the ground, helpless and weak with labour pains.

[Heaney 68]

For their callousness she cursed the Ulstermen, announcing:

"From this day on you will be afflicted by this weakness because of your cruel treatment of me. At the hour of your greatest need, when you are under attack, every Ulsterman will become as defenceless and helpless as a woman giving birth to a child."

[Heaney 68]

Ever afterwards the place was known as Emain Macha, "the twins of Macha". Macha's curse was fulfilled many times, which is reminded

in the Ulster Cycle. The power of women is apparent in both the stories, as well as the exigency to respect and appreciate them.

After being bedevilled by the Fomorian beasts for a long time, the Nemedians were finally destroyed by them. Only a few succeeded in escaping, one of them called Britain, who settled on the neighbouring island. Thus the Irish mythology explains also the origin of the name of the country that was to become its most persistent oppressor.

The fourth wave of invasion was represented by the Fir Bolg (Bholg) coming from Greece where as servants they used to carry leather bags of soil and thus got their name (*builg* = bag) [Clarus 58]. Together with the Gálioín (Gailion, Gailioín) and the Fir Domnann (Domhnainn, Dhomhnann) they were the descendants of the remnants of the Nemedians. Their contribution to the shaping of the ancient Ireland was of sociopolitical character as they divided it into five parts: Ulster in the north, Leinster in the east, Munster in the south, Connacht in the west and Meath in the centre. Thus they instituted the provinces--the Irish word *cóigedh*, "a province", literally means "a fifth" [Mac Cana 57]. They also introduced kingship, creating the classical Irish social system, headed by a just and sacred ruler. Eochaidh mac Eirc was a typical example of such a king: "No rain fell during his reign, but only dew; there was no year without harvest. Falsehood was banished from Ireland during his time, and he it was who first established the rule of justice there." [Mac Cana 57].

The next invaders, who became the best known, were the Tuatha De Danaan. With these people the inception of the Irish-Celtic culture is associated and it was them who brought the cult of druidism:

Their men of learning possessed great powers and were revered as if they were gods. They were accomplished in the various arts of druidry, namely magic, prophecy and occult lore. They had learnt their druidic

skills in Falias, Gorias, Findias and Murias, the four cities of the northern islands.

[Heaney 3]

They brought with them four magic talismans, gifts of their famous Celtic gods:

From Falias they brought Lia Fail, the Stone of Destiny. They brought it to Tara and it screamed when a rightful king of Ireland sat on it.² From Gorias they brought Lugh's spear. Anyone who held it was invincible in battle. From Findias they brought Nuada's irresistible sword. No one could escape it once it was unsheathed. From Murias they brought Dagda's cauldron. No one ever left it hungry.

[Heaney 3]

The chief of the Gaelic gods was Dagda ("the good god") who is traditionally pictured with an oak club, a harp and the cauldron. The club (in Irish shillelagh [Sepulveda]) became later associated with Saint Patrick, as well as sometimes the harp; anyway, their position as the Irish national symbols is unquestionable. Today the harp appears on Irish coins, flags, the national coat of arms, and the presidential flag; the shillelagh is used in the typical Irish game of hurley (or hurling, in Irish cluich-bhal, a kind of ball game similar to hockey ["The Shillelagh"]).

With the help of the talismans, the Danaans were the first to defeat the horrid Fomorians: "The Fomorians were beaten back to the sea They fled to their ships, boarded them in great haste and speedily set sail for their islands, never to return to Ireland." [Heaney 21]. The Morrighu, the goddess of battle, affirmed that now the island would live in peace:

"Peace in this land
From the earth up to the skies
And back down to the earth.

² Today, there is an imitation of the Stone on the Hill of Tara. The supposed original was placed in the Westminster Abbey until 1996, when it was, as the Scottish coronation stone, returned to Scotland and today it is deposited in the Edinburgh castle [Clarus 62].

Honey and mead in abundance
And strength to everyone.”

[Heaney 21]

Yet the peace did not last forever. After a few hundred years, the Danaans were defeated by the last invaders to come, the Gaels, or Sons of Mil, who came from Spain, and so they retreated to the land of the Sidhe (where they are believed to live, as fairies, still today). According to the myth, the Milesian poet Amergin (Amhairghin) succeeded in landing on the island only thanks to addressing it as a person: ”he invoked the spirit of the land of Ireland, calling out to it, praising its beauty” [Heaney 53]. Thus he defeated the magic of the Danaans that had protected the island by bad weather, for ”instantly there was a lull in the wind, the dreadful noise ceased and the sea became calm” [Heaney 54]. On their way to the seat of the kings, Tara, the Milesians met the three divine queens of the Danaans, Banbha, Fódla and Ériu, wives of the three kings of the Danaans. Granted by Amergin that the land would carry her name, Ériu (in modern Irish ”Éire”, i.e. Ireland) foretold the Sons of Mil to live on the island for all time.

As Proinsias Mac Cana points out, Amergin’s invocation of Ireland, as well as the three goddesses married to human kings, express one of the leading themes of Irish tradition: ”the personification of the land as a goddess who is joined in marriage to her rightful king” [Mac Cana 63]. Ever since, Ireland as a country has been referred to as ”she” and ever since, the Irish would struggle for a rightful, Irish king in times when it was not so.

The tales and heroes that became the most influential concerning the Irish nationalist movements and especially that of the late nineteenth century are the myths of the Ulster Cycle. Its chief character, Cúchulainn, a man of short life but lasting glory, became the national hero of the Irish. The themes of his life and deeds appear throughout the Irish literature, even in the textbooks for children; he has been depicted by many works of art. He became

the symbol of the fight for the freedom of Ireland, a role model for Irish militants. Indubitably, Cúchulainn belongs to the principal symbols of Irishness.

There are more versions of how Cúchulainn was born and who his parents were. Most often it was believed that he was the son of the god Lugh and of Deichtire (Deichtine), a sister of the king of Ulster, Conchobor. Deichtire was betrothed to a man called Sualdam Mac Roich who became Cúchulainn's earthly father, yet the child was commended to Deichtire's sister, Finnchoem, and named Sétanta. When he was five years old, he left his parents to join Conchobor's boy troop at Emain Macha. Being of semi-divine origin, he soon proved to have miraculous faculties, overpowering all the other boys by his incredible strength and prowess but showing his intelligence, too, thus being initiated into the heroic life.

At the age of seven Cúchulainn got his name. A smith called Culann invited Conchobor and little Sétanta to come to his house. Sétanta came late and was attacked by Culann's savage guard dog that he killed. As the animal was Culann's only protection against raiders, Sétanta offered him to make up for the loss:

"I will find another dog of the same breed and I'll rear him up until he can give you the same protection as the one I've just killed. In the meantime, Cullan, *I* will protect your flocks and herds and lands. I will guard the whole Plain of Muirthemne, and no one will attack or rob you while I am on guard."

[Heaney 79]

Thus he became "the hound of Culann", or Cúchulainn.

One day, when Cúchulainn was still but seven years old, a druid called Cathbad made a prophecy that whoever would take up arms that particular day, would become the most famous warrior in Ireland: "though he will have a short, swift life, stories of his exploits will be told for ever" [Heaney 80]. So Cúchulainn went to Conchobor and asked him for some arms but was never satisfied

until he was given Conchobor's own set of arms. Thus equipped he set for his first exploits, fighting against the enemies of Ulster.

Cúchulainn then grew up in Emain Macha to become an admirable young man, the most popular with all the women at Conchobor's court. Other men became jealous of him and decided to find him a wife, the story of which is told in a famous tale of the Ulster Cycle, *The Wooing of Emer*, the girl being "the most beautiful and accomplished woman in Ireland" [Heaney 91]. Before Cúchulainn was able to marry Emer, her father suggested that Cúchulainn and his fellow warriors went to the Isle of Skye to be trained by the supernatural female Scathach ("the shadowy one"):

That mysterious woman warrior can train them in the special fighting skills she has learnt, and reveal to them secrets of war and weaponry that only she knows. Not only is she fierce and powerful but she can foretell what is to come. Under Scathach's tutelage they will become the best warriors in Europe.

[Heaney 93-4]

This woman was one of the Amazonians, wild and skilled female fighters, who represent the tradition of strong women superior to men in the Celtic folklore. Indeed, in her camp, Scathach taught Cúchulainn and others all the warlike art, and Emer's father's words came true.

Cúchulainn's greatest adventure is described in the central tale of the Ulster cycle, *Táin Bó Cualgne*. It is one of the most famous tales of the Irish folklore, and even though there are other *táinte* ("cattle-raids"), this is the only one that is referred to as The Táin. It is the great epic of Ireland, about which Joseph Dunn and David Nutt said in their preface to The Ancient Irish Epic Tale: Táin Bó Cúalnge that it is "the Iliad of Ireland . . . the queen of Irish epic tales, and the wildest and most fascinating saga-tale, not only of the entire Celtic world, but even of all western Europe" [as quoted in "Táin Bó Cuailnge"]. All the other stories, including those of Cúchulainn, are actually only side tales.

The Táin is set in the time of the long war between Ulster and Connacht, caused by Conchobor's leaving his wife Maeve (also called Medb), the queen of Connacht. She later married Aillil (Ailill) with whom she argued one night who the wealthier one of them was. To surpass her husband who owned the White-horned Bull, Maeve decided to steal the Brown Bull that lived in Ulster. With her army she came to Ulster where she encountered but a single warrior, Cúchulainn (the Ulstermen lay weak and helpless, just as Macha had foretold). In spite of a great loss, Maeve succeeded in bringing the Brown Bull to Connacht. But being jealous, it attacked the White-horned one, and in the fight, both the bulls were killed.

Cúchulainn's life was then endangered as he had too many enemies, and in the end the "four fifths" of Ireland rose against him and Ulster. Not paying attention to numerous warnings, Cúchulainn set out for the final battle and at the age of twenty-seven years he was killed. However, his death was as honourable as pertains such a great warrior:

 Holding the huge wound in his body together, Cúchulainn started to drag himself towards the lake. He took a drink and washed himself and turned from the lake to die. On the shore, a little distance away, he saw a pillar stone and he struggled towards it and put his back to it for support. Then he took his belt and tied himself to the pillar so that he could die standing up, for he had sworn he would meet his end "feet on the ground, face to the foe".

[Heaney 151-2]

The story of Cúchulainn's death means also the end of the Ulster Cycle, the most heroic literary piece of the Irish folklore. As Cathbad predicted, Cúchulainn has become the most fabled Irish warrior and hero ever. His figure inspired many Irish nationalists hundreds of years after his death, appearing in many works by nationalist writers, e.g. Lady Augusta Gregory, William Butler

Yeats, John Millington Synge. For his heroic deeds and personal qualities of a brave warrior, Cúchulainn also became the ideal for the militant nationalists. Declan Kiberd adds that he "provided a symbol of masculinity for Celts, who had been written of as feminine by their masters [the English]" and the myths of his life fired in the youth of Ireland the ambition to disprove this estimation [25]. But it was his heroic death in the fight against Ireland's enemies that impressed the fighters for the freedom of Ireland the most. Cúchulainn's sacrifice for the country was re-enacted by the rebels of the Easter Rising in 1916. Today, a statue of Cúchulainn is to be found in Dublin. After the Rising, the work depicting Cúchulainn's dying was erected in the building of the General Post Office in Dublin to symbolize the fighters for the Irish independence.

The Fenian Cycle also has its central hero, Finn Mac Cumail. The cycle is sometimes called "Ossianic" after Finn's son Oisín. The originally Irish tales of his life and deeds have been adopted also in Scotland, where Finn is called Fingal, and in both the countries they are very popular within the oral tradition still today. Consequently, the cycle contains many themes and different versions of the particular stories. After Cúchulainn, Finn is the second most influential hero of the Irish folklore, so his life must be discussed in more detail.

The necessary divine element of a mythological hero's origin is represented by Finn's grandfather, the Sun god Nuada. Another version states Manannán, the god of sea and the otherworld, as Finn's father. Originally called Demne (Deimne), meaning "young stag" or "fawn", Finn became an exceptional hunter [Clarus 139]. Thanks to his divine ancestors he also had the gift of understanding everything in the world, past, present and future (although according to some versions he gained this ability by eating the Salmon of Knowledge). He was brought up in forest by two druidic women who taught him everything about the nature, about "the changing seasons and life in the woods and hills around him", and at the same time they trained him in the warlike art. When Demne grew up, he was given the name Finn, meaning

”fair, pale”, according to the colour of his hair and skin [Heaney 156]. Like Cúchulainn, he left his home as a child to become famous as a great warrior. The most important event in Finn’s life was joining the Fianna and being appointed its captain by the king, who thus rewarded Finn for killing an evil goblin.

The Fianna was a legendary cohort of warriors and hunters, independent from the king. They were mostly of aristocratic descent and joined the Fianna voluntarily, to defend the country, especially from the northern invaders, and to hunt in the summer season. Membership in the cohort became very prestigious, as the entrance requirements were very hard and so only the bravest and most skilful but at the same time educated men, able to compose poetry in Gaelic, were accepted. The Fianna also followed a special code of high-mindedness that was similar to the middle-ages ideal of knightliness. The rules forbade a member of the Fianna for example to rap his wife gratuitously, to beat his dogs, to start affrays, to behave dishonestly towards common people, to boast, to inform on other people and it obligated them to be devoted to his lord and generous to his family and friends [Clarus 152]. In the nineteenth century, the Fianna became the ideal for the Irish nationalists who founded the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Not only adopted the IRB the name, calling themselves the Fenians, but they obviously admired also the ideals of the ancient noble warriors as well as their warlike abilities.

When hunting one day, Finn found a strange doe and took it to his castle. There he found out that it was a beautiful fairy called Sadb (Saeve) that had been enchanted by the Dark Druid--but the curse ended thanks to Finn’s love. For seven years, Finn would do nothing else but stay with his wife, but then he had to leave to defend the country from the northern invaders. When he came back, his wife was gone. Immediately, Finn left in search for her:

For seven years . . . he was scouring the country, exploring the remotest corners of the land in search of his beloved Sadb. For seven more years he mourned the beautiful woman who had made him so happy . . .

[Heaney 177]

Then one day, he found a boy who told him that he was brought up by a doe; Finn recognized him as his and Sadb’s son, and called him Oisín, ”little deer” [Smyth 138].

Oisín (or Ossian) became a legendary Celtic poet and is traditionally considered to be the author of most of the tales of the Fenian Cycle [Rolleston 75]. He participates in many stories of the cycle, among others also in one of

the best-known and most popular Irish myths that inspired many later authors: *The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne*. In this story, Finn is already very old and depressed after the death of his last wife, so Oisín suggests that he should marry the king's beautiful daughter, Grainne. Oisín visits the king to ask about this proposal, and Grainne, thinking that she is to marry Oisín, agrees. When she finds out the truth only during the betrothal, she drags everybody except Oisín and his fellow, charming Diarmuid (Diarmaid). She offers herself to Oisín but he (adhering to the ideals of the Fianna) refuses her: "For I wouldn't come between Finn and his promised wife." [Heaney 183]. Grainne turns to Diarmuid: "'And what about you, Diarmuid O'Duibhne? Will you accept a proposal from me?'" but he refuses her as well: "For I wouldn't take a woman who had been offered to Oisín, never mind one who had been promised to Finn!" [Heaney 183]. So Grainne lays a geis³ on Diarmuid (a popular and feared threat in the Irish mythology) to kidnap her and be her lover, warning him: "If you deny this solemn injunction, it will bring destruction and disgrace on your head." [Heaney 183]. Unwillingly, he obeys her and the whole story recounts Finn's hunt for the lovers around Ireland, at the end of which Finn dies and Grainne becomes Finn's wife. Daragh Smyth notes that "the impact of the romantic associations of the tale is testified by the number of so-called 'beds of Diarmuid and Grainne'" all over Ireland, these being various caves, hills and other places [84]. What is noticeable in this story, is again the independence and power of a woman that dominates men.

The Fianna was later destroyed in a battle of Gabhra (Gawra) brought about by the band's becoming too independent and demanding too bold privileges from the king. Finn left to the otherworld, and it is believed that in times of the greatest need, Finn and the Fianna will return to defend Ireland.

Oisín's fate was different. When Finn and the Fianna were still in the prime, they once met a beautiful woman with golden hair on a white horse. It was Niamh, a princess of the Land of Youth, who came for Oisín, whom she chose to become her husband. She enticed him: "'Come back with me to the Land of Youth. It is the most beautiful country under the sun. You will never fall ill or grow old there. In my country you will never die.'" [Heaney 216]. In spite of his father's sorrows, he left with Niamh and they lived happily together. However, Oisín soon began to feel homesick for Ireland and longed to see his father and friends again. He asked his wife to let him go, promising

³ *Geis* (pl. *geasa*) is "an ancient injunction, prohibition or taboo against performing an act, or an obligation to do an act" [Smyth 77].

that he would take the white horse and come back to her. "So Niamh consented, but she gave Oisín a most solemn warning. . . . 'If you dismount from the horse you will not be able to return to this happy country.'" [Heaney 220]. When he arrived in Ireland, everything had been changed and Oisín realized that what had seemed to him as several years in the Land of Youth, had been several hundreds of years in Ireland, and that his father and the Fianna were all dead. On the way back he saw some people struggling to pull a heavy stone:

Oisín looked down in disbelief at the crowd of men beneath him who were so puny and weak that they were unable to lift the flagstone. He leaned out of the saddle and, taking the marble slab in his hands, he raised it with all his strength and flung it away and the men underneath it were freed.

[Heaney 221]

But because of the weight, he fell off the horse and suddenly, he became a shrivelled and feeble, blind old man. It is believed that he was then brought to Saint Patrick whom he told his own story as well as all the other stories of the Fianna. Patrick wrote them down and thus the tales were preserved.

The story of Oisín contains a strong nationalist element. Although he lived with a beautiful woman in a country of affluence, Oisín's love of his homeland and his compatriots was so strong that he decided to leave his happy life, under the risk that he would never enjoy it again. He sacrificed eternal life and bliss for the sake of his country and its people. No wonder that Oisín's story influenced many Irish writers who felt the same passion for their motherland, for example William Butler Yeats (*The Wanderings of Oisín*).

Irish legends

The name of Saint Patrick is necessarily associated with the greatest hero of the Irish legends, a hero in many ways much more influential than any of the greatest mythological figures.

As it has been suggested, legends differ from myths primarily in the type of heroes they deal with, in case of legends these heroes being Christian saints. Naturally, these tales must be much younger than the Celtic myths because Christianity came to Ireland centuries after the old pagan tradition, and it took afterwards some time before the legends of the Irish saints were written down, mostly by Christian monks. Yet even these stories belong to the oldest literary

heritage of the Irish nation. The explanation of this truth is simple: Ireland became converted to Christianity as early as no other European country--already in the fifth century AD. Besides, Christian faith spread with a surprising ease. Although there had lived some scattered Christians before, the real onset of Christianity in Ireland is traditionally connected with Saint Patrick.

Legends enjoy a considerable respect in Ireland. D. R. McAnally claims that one of the typical features of the Irish deeply religious nature can be observed in the "profound reverence for the memory of the saints" [52]. Although his statement is more than a hundred years old, it is still accurate today, and the number of saints, estimated by McAnally to be more than seventy-five thousand at the end of the nineteenth century, has no doubt risen [52]. There is at least one or more legends of each the saint, yet those of Saint Patrick are the most famous ones and so will be discussed here.

Paradoxically, Patrick who became the patron saint of Ireland, was not of Irish origin. Although his original name was Celtic--Succath, it is believed that he was born around the year 390⁴ AD in a family of a Roman town councillor on the west coast of Britain [Stokes 32]. There are arguments about where exactly Patrick was born but for sure it was not in Ireland. When he was sixteen, he was abducted and enslaved by Irish pirates. Believing that thus he was punished by God for not keeping the Commandments, Patrick turned a conscious Christian, "every day frequent in prayer", and during the six years that he spent tending cattle, he also learnt "the language, the manners, and customs of the Irish" [Stokes 44-45]. Then one night he had a dream that a ship would take him away, so he fled and eventually got to Western Europe. There he studied for the priesthood, and after a few years returned to Britain, receiving the name Patricius which was a Roman title for aristocratic dignity [Stokes 97]. There an angel called Victorious revealed himself to Patrick, telling him that the "Voice of Ireland" was calling him back to the country where he was redeemed. About the year 432, Patrick landed in Ireland for the second time, now as a bishop. Travelling around the island, he was spreading the Christian faith, and some of the places where he stopped are still called after Patrick.

Patrick's mission was extremely successful, very likely because he knew the Irish language and environment, and probably also thanks to the fact that although he introduced the Bible to the Irish, he let them keep some of

⁴ Some sources state the year 385 as the year of Patrick's birth.

their pagan rites and ceremonies, or rather he integrated them into the Christian ones. Thus for example the bonfires with which the Irish used to honour the sun in the springtime became the paschal fires lit at Easter (although the legendary version of this fact is more colourful); the colour green that is typically associated with Saint Patrick was originally a pagan symbol of spring. Lady Wilde attributes Patrick's success chiefly to the peculiarity of the Irish nature: "The pathetic tale of the beautiful young Virgin-Mother and the Child-God, for central objects, touched all the deepest chords of feeling in the tender, loving, and sympathetic Irish heart." [7]. Doubtless, the natural mysticism of the Irish that was previously shown in the myths must have greatly facilitated Patrick's converting the country.

Patrick also established the ecclesiastic system, its centre being in Armagh, and started to found monasteries in Ireland. He is believed to have died on the seventeenth of March, 461 AD [Metford 192]. This day became a religious holiday, a day of worshipping Saint Patrick by fasting and praying. Today it is a feast day celebrated both in Ireland and the United States of America.

Some of the information that is known about Saint Patrick's life comes from his Confession, an autobiographical book that he wrote at the end of his life, and so it can be regarded relatively authentic. Yet the legends about his most famous deeds are to be attributed to the various folk narrators of Patrick's life. These legends have been largely shaped by fantasy and time, still they are dear to the Irish heart.

Probably the best-known legendary item associated with Saint Patrick is the shamrock. This small three-leafed clover is very common in Ireland, where the mild wet climate keeps it green throughout the whole year. The legend says that Patrick used it to illustrate the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Thus the plant has become a symbol of both the Saint and the country. However, George T. Stokes states that "this legend has no foundation in history" [78]. Shamrock was held sacred already by the pagan Irish, and to Christianize the emblem, a legend developed about Saint Patrick's utilization of it [Stokes 78]. Still, the important thing is that the Irish regard the shamrock as a symbol of Irishness, no

matter to whom its use is attributed. During the nineteenth century, it became an emblem of the rebellion against the English government; its wearing was outlawed and made punishable by death by Queen Victoria, and in spite of being the Irish national symbol, some people still refuse to wear it because of the unpleasant reminder [”Shamrock”].

Besides the thousands of ordinary people, Patrick is believed to have converted many significant figures of the pagan world, including Aengus who had previously been a feared magician of the Tuatha De Danaan, or the daughters of the king of Meath. Patrick also freed the country from the beastly creature An Chaorthanach. Eight times he repelled the monster but each time it returned to its lake, even bigger and more dreadful. In the end Patrick killed the beast with the help of his blessed bell, simply peeling it in the lake water until it froze and An Chaorthanach turned into stone. Thus the bell and its case that grateful craftsmen made for it became also revered objects associated with Saint Patrick.

The bell takes part in another legend of this saint. After the example of Moses, Patrick spent forty days and nights by fasting on the mountain of Croagh-Patrick, formerly Croach-Aigli [Stokes 89]. During that time he was assaulted by demons in the shape of large flocks of big black birds. They tormented him so much that he threw his bell at them and it smashed into pieces.

The spot is famous for another legendary event. When Patrick came there to fast, he brought there all the serpents of Ireland that embodied the evil demons and with the God’s help he drove them into the sea. ”There is a deep hollow on the northern face of the mountain looking down on Clew Bay”, even today called Lugna-demon, into which they all departed [Stokes 90]. It is true that there live no snakes in Ireland today but this fact should be attributed--more likely--to the cold and damp Irish climate. Stokes observes that in this case a legend was produced to explain the fact [90]. In

this sense, the legend corresponds with one of the definitions of myth (as stated above) as "explaining aspects of the natural world" [The American Heritage Dictionary 1164]. Yet the rational roots of the legend can be found in the fact that for their occult knowledge, the druids were sometimes called "serpents" ["The True Legend"]. Introducing the Christian faith, Patrick broke their power, and so they practically disappeared. Either way, the mountain has become a popular place for Christians who make pilgrimages there on Saint Patrick's Day.

It is clear now why Patrick is usually depicted with a shamrock and a snake. He typically holds a club, a necessary property of all itinerants, and often he stands by a great fire. The reason for this image is explained in the following legend.

On his journey around Ireland, spreading Christianity, Patrick arrived near to Tara, the seat of pagan kings. It was the eve of Easter but also the eve of Bealtaine (Belteine, Beltane), the pagan feast celebrated on the first of May. It was held sacred to the sun and on this eve all the fires were extinguished and no fire could be lit until the chief druid had kindled the sacred fire in Tara the following day. On that morning the king Laoghaire (Loegaire) and the druids gathered on the hill of Tara to light the bonfire with the first rays of the sun. But, to their astonishment, they saw a fire already lit on the hill of Slane, close to Tara. It was Patrick's paschal fire to celebrate the Easter. The king got angry and asked the druids what this meant.

"We see the fire," the druids answered, "and though we don't know who lit it, we know that unless it is put out immediately it will *never* be put out. It will put out our sacred fires and the man who lit it will have power over us all, over the High King himself."

[Heaney 228]

And so it happened. Patrick was brought to the king, and although the king was not converted by Patrick's exposition of the Christian faith, he set him free to preach the gospel around Ireland.

Patrick's contribution to the development of Irish society is undisputed, as well as the contribution of the legends concerning his

life and deeds to the Irish culture. One of the legends is reflected even in the cheerful toast pronounced on Saint Patrick's Day:

Saint Patrick was a gentleman,
Who through strategy and stealth,
Drove all the snakes from Ireland,
Here's a toasting to his health.
But not too many toasting
Lest you lose yourself and then
Forget the good Saint Patrick
And see all those snakes again.
"Beannachtam na Feile Padraig!"
Happy St. Patrick's Day!

["Irish Toasts"]

This day became an important event concerning the Irish national identity, especially for the Irish immigrants in the United States.

Yet not only the myths and legends have influenced the Irish national identity. As an important part of the Irish folklore, also the fairy tales have greatly contributed to the notion of Irishness.

Irish fairy tales

As it has been stated before, fairy tales are generally not of a great relevance concerning national identity. They are more or less international, the plots and places of action are general, they do not usually relate to a certain country. Yet in the Irish fairy tales some specific characters can be encountered that distinguish them from fairy tales of other nations, even though they might not make them absolutely original. These characters who all belong to the race of fairies are for example the *leprechaun*, *banshee*, *dullaghan*, *grogoch*, *merrow*, or *pooka*. The names of these creatures and frequently the places where they live and act are positively Irish.

The different opinions of the Irish on who the fairies are can be seen as one of the typical features of Irishness: the commitment to both the pagan and Christian traditions, the blending of which is encountered throughout the Irish folklore. Thus, it is believed that they are either the Tuatha De Danaan or fallen angels, or a strange fusion of both. One way or another, the stories about fairies are still

very popular in Ireland and many people still do not doubt their existence. Even Joseph Falaky Nagy, a Celtic studies professor in the USA, believes that "if you disturb or plow up the ground and displease the fairy folk, you get punished by being stolen off into their world" [as quoted in Tay]. No wonder that Lady Wilde called the Irish a "childlike race" [7]. Although this statement is more than a hundred years old, the number of contemporary books or Internet pages dealing not only with the Irish fairy tales but also with the Irish superstitions, charms and omens, proves how topical it still is.

As well as other folk stories, Irish fairy tales first existed only in the oral form. They were written down much later than the myths or legends, mostly in the nineteenth century, during the great national literary revival. Yet the oral tradition seems to be the prevailing medium as concerns handing the stories on. Consequently, unlike the myths and legends, the versions of which became more or less fixed already in the Middle Ages, the Irish fairy stories vary widely, differing from county to county and often from village to village.

The supernatural beings of the Irish fairy tales mentioned above are so specific that it is necessary to devote them some more space. Although professor Nagy argues that it is not an important figure in the Irish folk culture, the *leprechaun* (also known as *lurachmain*, *lurican* or *lurgadhan*) is the creature best known of the Irish fairies, and is even considered to be the national fairy of Ireland [Tay]. Leprechauns are tiny, aged-looking men, often found drunk by poteen (Irish home-brew whiskey), and they are solitary. Nevertheless, the name, originating from the Irish *leath bhrogan* that means "shoemaker", suggests that they are skilful workers [Yeats, Tales 85]. They are also guardians of ancient treasure and if they get caught by humans, on the promise that they will be let free, they guide them to spots where pots of gold are buried. The *cluricaun* belongs to the leprechaun family, too, but unlike leprechaun, he bothers people by visiting their houses at night and stealing and borrowing things. Sometimes he harnesses domestic animals and rides them throughout the country. If he wears a red cap and coat, he is called Far Darrig (fear dearg, i.e. the "red man" [Yeats, Tales 85]).

The *grogoch* reminds the leprechaun in size, but he wears no dress and his body is covered by thick hair or fur full of twigs and dirt from his travels. He usually lives in a cave or a cleft in a large stone: in the north of Ireland, many such stones are called "grogochs' houses" ["Grogoch"]. For a cup of cream, these creatures like to help people with planting or harvesting, or in the household; however, they rather get in the way than help.

The *banshee*, or *bean-sidhe* meaning "the woman of the fairy race", appears in one of three guises: a pretty young woman, a stately matron or an ugly old hag, and is usually dressed in a grey, hooded cloak [Wilde 135]. She is the spirit of death as she forewarns members of certain ancient Irish families of their time of death. She approaches the house where someone is about to die and there she is wailing until death comes, but occasionally her lamenting has a form of a pleasant song. She is also known under the name of *bean-nighe* ("washing woman"), for sometimes she appears as a washerwoman washing bloodstained clothes ["Banshee"].

Another Irish dark fairy is associated with death: the *dullahan* (dullaghan, dallahan or far dorocha, "black man" ["The Dullahan"]). He is a headless phantom, carrying his decaying head in his hand, dressed in black and riding a black horse or a black coach around the Irish countryside. Wherever he stops, someone dies, especially during Irish festivals or feast days.

The word *merrow*, or *moruadh*, comes from the Irish *muir*, "sea", and *oigh*, "maid" [Yeats, Tales 65]. There are also males of this species, described as extremely ugly, scaled and having green pointed teeth, green hair and pig-like eyes and noses; but the maids are extremely beautiful and like to choose human lovers. Nevertheless, fishermen do not like to see them because they bring very bad weather, and in some parts of Ireland they are, like the banshees, regarded as messengers of death. In the sea they wear a small red cap which they take off when they come ashore. A human who finds it, overpowers the merrow, and can even persuade her to marry him, which always brings him great wealth. It is said that some of the famous Irish families are descended from such marriages.

The *pooka* (phouca, puca) is the fairy most feared by the Irish country people. Its name may come from the Scandinavian *pook* or

puke which means "natural spirit" ["The Pooka"]. Others derive it from the Early Irish word for he-goat, *poc*; and it is sometimes considered the ancestor of Shakespeare's character Puck [Yeats, Tales 100]. The pooka can take on different forms, usually of various animals; it mostly appears as a wild dark horse with shining yellow eyes. It lives in the mountains: in the Wicklow mountains, there is a waterfall called the Poula Phouk, "the pooka's hole" ["The Pooka"]. At night it roves around remote farms, tearing down gates and fences, scattering cattle and trampling crops, or throws travellers into muddy ditches. Nevertheless, in some parts of the country it is believed that on the first of November, which is held sacred to it, the pooka can foretell people's future until the next November day, if it is asked to.

These specific fairy beings that cause mortals more trouble than pleasure represent a minority in the fairy race. Most Irish fairies are bright, happy, lovely beings that like beauty, splendour and grace. They love music, singing, dance and merriment. They always help those who suffer and reward those who treat them kind, and vice versa, they harm and punish those who deserve it. It is surely for this reason that they are called "the Good People".

Irish folk tales and nationalism

Considering the social norms and values expressed in the heroic myths, the spiritual strength of the legends, and the beauty of the fairy world, it is obvious why the Irish folk tales attracted Irish nationalists, especially those of the nineteenth century, so much. These nationalists who focused primarily on the cultural features of the Irish national identity (the folklore, the language) were *cultural* nationalists. John Hutchinson claims that unlike *political* nationalism that strives to achieve "an autonomous state of equal citizens", *cultural* nationalism perceives the nation above all as "a historical and cultural individuality which must be preserved or revived . . . statehood is a secondary feature of the nation" [17].

Rather than the awareness of the Irish to be forming a *nation* (with its attributes described earlier), these cultural nationalists sought to rise the awareness of forming, by Smith's term, an "ethnic community" or "ethnie" [21]. Smith lists six main characteristics of ethnic community, these being "a collective proper name", "a myth of common ancestry", "shared historical memories", at least one differentiating element of common culture (e.g. religion, customs or language), "an association with a specific 'homeland'", and "a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population" [20-21]. It was the Irish folklore and the ancient tales that provided the myths of common descent, shared historical memories in the form of myths (as Smith points out, for the ancient people "the line between myth and history was often blurred or even non-existent" [22]), and elements of common culture.

Consequently, at the end of the 1880s, a young Irish poet who was to become the central figure of the Gaelic literary revival, William Butler Yeats, could observe that "a true literary consciousness--national to the centre--seems gradually to be forming" [as quoted in Kee 427]. By these words he referred to a number of books, that had started to appear at that time, which dealt with the mostly forgotten richness of the Irish folk tales. The earliest of these books, which Kee considers also the most important, was the History of Ireland: Heroic Period published in 1878 [427]. Its author, Standish O'Grady, was one of the first translators of the texts of Cúchulainn into English, thus introducing the Irish mythology to the general public. In the preface to his book he stated that this was his aim: he wished "to make this period once again a portion of the imagination of the country, and its chief characters as familiar in the minds of our people as they once were" [Kiberd 196]. O'Grady's versions of the myths were often inventions rather than translations of an "original Ireland", yet Kiberd points out that thanks to this fact he was regarded the

”father of modern Irish literature”: by translating Ireland, he brought it into being [624].

Also Lady Wilde’s collection of folk tales published in 1888 was written in English; however, in her later book, The Legends of the Celts, she admitted that ”the tales and legends told by the peasants in the Irish vernacular are much more weird and strange, and have much more of the old-world colouring” than those narrated in English (or English-Irish) [10]. The mother of Oscar Wilde, an active contributor to nationalist journals and in her youth a ”fierce poet” of The Nation newspaper, she turned ”nostalgic for an Irish culture that seemed, with the language itself, to be dying away” [Kee 427]. The Legends are full of expressions revealing her devoted love towards the Irish nation, declaring how special and unique a nation they are. Fascinated by the Irish folklore, she introduced a novelty in the notion of Irishness by comparing the Irish to the fairies. Like them, also the Irish like music and dance, and humour, for the sense of which they have become fabled; but above all, Lady Wilde stresses, they prefer ”to be let alone and not to be interfered with” as regards their ”peculiar fairy customs, habits, and pastimes” [6]. In this statement, there is a clear allusion to the contemptuous English attitude towards the Irish culture, which was openly displayed in the statutes of Kilkenny and bitterly experienced by the Irish people ever since. Like the fairies, Lady Wilde continues, the Irish people have ”a fine sense of the right and just, and a warm love for the liberal hand and kindly word” [6]. But she points out the artistic talent and religious nature of the Irish, too:

And they are also a nation of poets; the presence of God is ever near them, and the saints and angels, and the shadowy beings of earth and air are perpetually drawing their minds, through mingled love and fear, to the infinite and invisible world.

[Wilde 8]

Imagination was one of the key words of the movement that ascribed folk culture the principal importance in the liberation of the nation, which is illustrated by McAnally's words:

The Irish imagination is . . . so lively as to endow the legends of the Emerald Isle with an individuality not possessed by those of most other nations, while the Irish command of language presents the creatures of Hibernian fancy in a garb so vividly real and yet so fantastically original as to make an impression sometimes exceedingly startling.

[109]

Many nationalists regarded the literary revival only as the means of preparing conditions for a strong political or even military movement that would bring the complete independence of the Irish nation. However, the nationalism of Lady Wilde, McAnally or Yeats, who in 1888 published also a collection of folk stories, was almost entirely spiritual. In County Sligo, where he spent a great deal of his childhood, Yeats first encountered the "ancient outlook of the common people" with their relationship to the world of ghosts and fairies [Kee 427]. Later he became more and more absorbed in the "Celtic phantasmagoria whose meaning no man has discovered and no angel revealed" [as quoted in Kee 427]. Soon other Irish cultural nationalists followed his endeavour, and other things besides the fairy world were discovered in the Irish folklore. In 1893 Yeats published another collection of folk tales, which were largely based on the narration of a folk teller Paddy Flynn, under the title The Celtic Twilight. Yeats hoped that by this book, the Irish imagination would be resurrected--and indeed he succeeded in reaching this goal [Yeats, Twilight 4-6].

Another significant aspect of the nationalist interest in the folklore was that the Irish peasantry in general became a subject of attention and started to be treated seriously. Yeats and others, who presented the Irish common people as special, having different traditions and habits inherited from the ancient Gaelic world, helped

to weaken the stereotype of the stage Irishman of the nineteenth century (as presented mostly in England) that showed the Irish only as work-shy drunkards. Thanks to these nationalists, Kee emphasises, a feeling of "new self-respect for being Irish" was awakened in the Irish peasant soul [428].

In spite of the sincere effort of the folklore collectors to invigorate the Irish consciousness, still none of them seemed to be interested in the language corresponding to the culture, the Irish vernacular. The change came with another collector, Douglas Hyde, who not only spoke it, but even wrote songs and poems in Irish. In 1892, Hyde together with Yeats founded the National Literary Society. However, Hyde's struggle for the Irish emancipation went far beyond literature: he preached for the Irish tradition in all the fields of life, including clothing, names, music, etc. He criticized those Irishmen who were indifferent to the fact that the Irish was being spoken less and less: he attacked the Nationalist Party for "attempting to create a nation on one hand and allowing to be destroyed the very thing that would best differentiate and define the nation" [as quoted in Kee 430]. As already Thomas Davis, one of the founders of The Nation, put it, "a people without a language of its own is only half a nation. A nation should guard its language more than its territories . . ." [as quoted in O'Cobhthaigh 21].

Although the Irish remained the first language spoken in Ireland until the 1840s, the consequences of the Great Famine, death and vast emigration, almost halved the Gaelic speaking population and the use of Irish had been quickly declining [Storry 252]. The language began to be associated with poverty and even backwardness, and so, as Kee points out, even in areas where it was still remembered and could be spoken, the Irish people themselves refused to use it, for they felt it something embarrassing [430]. Hyde who preached that Irish should be spoken with pride, himself encountered prejudiced statements, like that he could not be a real gentleman because he spoke Irish [Kiberd 138]. In spite of frequent cynicism against his enthusiasm for reviving the language, Hyde's famous lecture titled *The Necessity for Deanglicizing Ireland*, given in 1892, won over many Irishmen. Consequently, it led to the foundation of the Gaelic League by Hyde and others, a movement that proclaimed its cause to be "preserving the national language of Ireland and extending its use as a spoken language" [Kee 431]. Like the Young Irelanders, the League was dedicated to the revival of Irishness in a non-sectarian fashion, joining people of various origin and creed, yet of the same passion for the language and ancient Irish traditions and values as expressed

in the folklore. It succeeded in spreading and intensifying the Irish national consciousness, especially among the middle-class Irishmen, by teaching that Irishness, represented by not only the language, was something to be proud of rather than ashamed of [Kee 431].

Although the key word of Hyde's gospel was "deanglicization", the League promoted Irishness to be a self-constructed identity, and not a mere hatred against England, defining the things Irish only as non-English, which frequently happened. A nationalist journalist D. P. Moran also shared this view; he celebrated the ancient Gaelic civilization as described in the myths, for it "had once been the only true meaning of nationality in Ireland" [Kee 433]. After a few years of the League's existence, he could observe that--in accordance with his opinion that "the genius of our country is far more prone to love than hate"--"The prospect of . . . a new Ireland rising up out of the foundations of the old, with love and not hate as its inspiration, has already sent a great thrill through the land." [as quoted in Kee 435].

Another step towards the reviving of the Irish national self on an apolitical basis was the foundation of the Irish National Theatre, called the Abbey Theatre, in Dublin in 1897. Besides Yeats and Edward Martyn, one of the chief founders was Lady Augusta Gregory, another central figure of the Gaelic revival. Like Yeats, she was disclosing the treasures of the folk tales among the peasantry of Sligo, where she found a "living tradition not only of ghosts and fairies but of the ancient Gaelic heroes" [Kee 433]. Listening to the narratives of an old folk teller, she was greatly impressed by the values of the ancient Irish world, and her feelings towards her homeland grew so deep that she wrote: "Love of country is, I think, the real passion." [Kee 434]. She popularized the legends of Cúchulainn and other heroes of the Irish mythology, reminding of their admirable qualities and great deeds, thus awakening in the nation a "new Gaelic warrior pride" [Kee 434].

Lady Gregory also wrote a play inspired by the Irish heroic tales, for the Irish National Theatre (which was however never staged during her lifetime). Called Grania and Diarmuid, the play was obviously based on the famous love tale of the Fenian Cycle, *The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne*. Although Christian symbolism and autobiographical elements are to be found in the play, the author also stressed the strong, independent character of the women of the Irish mythology.

There appeared other plays inspired by the Irish mythology, e.g. Yeats's The Death of Cuchulain; the folk stories are reflected in his poetry and essays. Many other authors were influenced by the Irish heroic tales, for example Synge or Joyce.

In spite of achieving partial independence in 1922, the importance of the Irish folklore, i.e. also the folk tales, was felt in Ireland, as regards the strengthening of the sense of Irishness. In 1926, the Folklore of Ireland Society was founded by the Irish government, which later became the Irish Folklore Institute, and finally, in 1936, the Irish Folklore Commission, which was established to collect and preserve the Irish folk tales [Harvey 2]. Thus the second wave of folklore collecting started, motivated by the sense of cultural loss that was caused by "the conscious suppression of Gaelic social institutions and traditions in the foregoing centuries--willfully imposed from without through the political domination of Great Britain" [Harvey 2]. This cultural loss was mainly felt to be manifested by the decline of the Irish language, for in spite of the endeavour of the Gaelic League to foster it, the number of the Irish speakers was getting smaller all the time. As one of the collectors observed: "the steady loss of the Gaelic language resulted in the loss of a great deal of information on local and regional life and a vast store of oral literature in which the lore of an ancient civilization was enshrined" [as quoted in Harvey 2]. For this reason, the folklore collectors concentrated mainly on gathering material in the Gaelic-speaking areas of Ireland (Gaeltachtaí) [Harvey 2].

It was this material that later served as the basis for numerous commercial magazines and periodicals that appeared throughout the first half of the twentieth century and that included Irish fairy tales, as well as the tales of the important heroes of the Irish mythology, especially Cúchulainn and Finn Mac Cumail [Harvey 13]. These stories were also read and recited at school:

The themes, images, and characters of the early myths and sagas were among the vehicles used in textbooks and other printed sources to reinforce in children and young adults a sense of cultural identity and a respect for the achievements of the old Gaelic culture.

[Harvey 13-14]

Still today, such stories are included in Irish children's textbooks for the same reason.

Folk tales and Irishness outside Ireland

Around the time of the national revival in Ireland, the necessity of keeping the national identity, the Irish consciousness, was felt outside the country, among Irish emigrants, especially in the United States of America.

Although emigration from Ireland is generally associated with the second half of the nineteenth century, it has a much longer tradition in the country. As Graeme Kirkham put it, "the vast outflow of population during the Famine period marked a change in scale, not the advent of something new in Irish society" [81]. Early emigration from Ireland--in the sixteenth century--was, as Bottigheimer declares, "scholarly in nature" [244].⁵ After the establishment of the Church of England, many young Irishmen went to Europe, to be educated in the Catholic doctrine. During the seventeenth century, a great number of the poor Irish Catholics were carried to the West Indies and Middle American colonies, to work on English plantations, and many of the dispossessed Catholic Irishmen left for Europe, where they--known as the "Wild Geese"--fought for various armies [Bottigheimer 245-6]. In the eighteenth century, emigration caused by economic and social strain continued, mainly from Ulster [Kirkham 85]. Yet indeed, the largest number of emigrants left Ireland during the nineteenth century, especially after the Great Famine.

Many of the Irish emigrants went to England, but as it was the country of their most hated historical enemy, many more left for other parts of the world, especially for the United States. This country was a perfect destination for them because it had a reputation as a land of religious freedom and of prosperity. The USA became "the largest recipient of Irish immigration", and, gradually, the Irish population there grew larger than that in Ireland [Bottigheimer 255].

The Irish brought their language, customs and traditions with them, and although under the influence of the different, American culture, being far from their homeland, they felt great sentiment for Ireland and everything associated with it. Thus they also kept the tradition of folk tales that influenced the nationalist movement in their motherland so much. Possibly because of the fact that the majority of the Irish immigrants in the United States were Catholics, while the environment was generally Protestant, the legends of Saint Patrick became the most influential, most remembered.

It was the memory of the patron saint of Ireland that gave rise to the tradition of Saint Patrick's Day with its celebrations and parades. This day, falling on the seventeenth of April, a supposed day of Patrick's death, has become one of the most important feasts in the USA. Professor Nagy claims that the earliest records of celebrating Saint Patrick's Day date back to around

⁵ There were emigrants before: already in the sixth and seventh centuries, Irish monks were leaving for Europe, to spread the Christian faith there. However, this was not a large-scale emigration, and, unlike the later waves, it was not caused by oppression or necessity.

the year 1000 when people made pilgrimages to Croagh-Patrick (see above), "to worship Saint Patrick by fasting and praying" [Tay]. However, Nagy confirms that it was the nineteenth-century Irish American immigrants who elevated Saint Patrick's Day to its current symbol of Irishness: "It was the homesick, nostalgic Irishmen who looked to the celebration of Saint Patrick's Day as a way to exercise their connection with the old country," he says [Tay].

Already in the 1840s the first parades were held in New York City, being political protests against the anti-Catholic attitudes that the Irish encountered, as well as presentation of their traditional culture [Tay]. In the words of Jim McDonough, owner and publisher of the Irish News, "it was the one day that they could shine and say they were Irish" [Tay]. Also in other cities of the United States the parades started to take place, helping to spread tolerance towards Irish immigrants among American citizens, as well as encouraging the Irish themselves to be proud of their origin. For example, when the first parade was organized in New Haven, it was very successful and well received by the local press that exalted the well-mannered ordering of the march and controverted the popular speculation that the Irish were strident and disorderly [Sepulveda]. The Palladium newspaper wrote:

Those jealous persons who have been taught to associate Irish character naught but the elements of ignorance and vice, would have looked in vain in their sedate procession for any marks other than belonging to well ordered and respectable citizens . . .

[as quoted in Sepulveda]

The festivities of Saint Patrick's Day have greatly contributed to the arousing of the nationalist feelings among the Irish abroad. They served as platforms to present the Gaelic history, language and music, but in the course of various conflicts also as platforms "to express sorrow for Ireland and its people, and hope for peace on the emerald isle" [Sepulveda]. In times when the Irish green flag could not be raised in Ireland as the country was still under the British rule, it would be hoisted in American cities, together with banners carrying the Irish symbols that grew out of the mythology.

Today, there are parades held both in the United States and in Ireland, as well as in other countries in which the Irish have settled. It is often criticized that originally a religious event, and then an expression of Irish pride and nationalism, especially in the United States the celebration has developed in nothing but a big party associated mostly with getting drunk. Many Irish Americans find it offensive as "here is so much more to Ireland

than its beer and whiskey” [Tay]. Fortunately, ”the majority of Irish Americans, including many of the clergy, regard the day as important for the perpetuation of the cult of remembrance for the land of their origin” [Tay]. In Ireland, the celebration has kept its solemn religious atmosphere, a day of remembering the man who brought Christianity to their country.

Conclusion

It has been stated that the Irish represented once a very specific, isolated culture. At that time, the ancient myths of the settlement of Ireland and of the great Celtic warriors originated, creating the ideal of a brave and noble Irishman as well as a strong and independent Irishwoman. Later the country was christianized and became the centre of Christian faith and of scholarship in the medieval Europe.

During the several hundred years lasting suppression by various invaders, the Irish fought for independence, striving to keep their characteristic identity. Although they have suffered the influence of other cultures, they managed to keep some of the typical traits of the Irish nature, such as the famous Irish imagination that has been preserved in the Irish fairy tales, or the phenomenon of the rich oral tradition itself.

The ideals embraced in the Irish folk tales impressed not only the Irish cultural nationalists but by them popularized versions also the ordinary people of Ireland. Realizing that it was their ancestors, their race, who the heroic myths and Christian legends are about, the Irish started to associate their rediscovered national identity with the values expressed in the tales, and this association spread worldwide. Also the Irish emigrants invigorated the ties with their motherland through the folk tales.

It has been shown that all the symbols of Ireland, symbols of Irishness, can be traced in the Irish folk tales: the harp, the club, the shamrock, Saint Patrick, the leprechaun, and all the other ones mentioned in the work.

The tales of the ancient Celtic heroes, namely Cúchulainn and Finn, have been many times recalled by the Irish warriors of the modern age; the legends of Saint Patrick are popular not only among the Irish Christians; the fairy tales are a favourite genre not only among the Irish children.

For all these facts, the connection between the Irish folk tales and the notion of Irishness is undisputed. Without the rediscovery and popularization of the Irish myths and legends, and the appreciation of the glamour of the Irish fairy tales, the Irish would not be what they are today.

Resumé

Irové 20. století představují spletitý národ, jehož příslušníci žijí nejen v Irsku, ale také v mnoha dalších zemích. Původní Irové byli Keltové, lidé osobité kultury. Po mnoho století pak byli vystaveni vlivům cizích kultur okupantů, byli utlačováni – zejména za anglické nadvlády. Nebyli však zlomeni a dokázali si zachovat svou osobitost a národní svébytnost, své “irství”.

Byli to zejména irští kulturní nacionalisté konce 19. století, kdo postavil národní cítění na dávných irských příbězích. Postupem času vedl původně kulturní nacionalismus k politické nezávislosti Irska a k vytvoření samostatného Irského státu.

Tato práce tedy popisuje vliv irských lidových příběhů na pojetí “irství” a spojitost mezi Irskými legendami, pohádkami a především mýty a některými symboly a rysy přičítanými irskému národu.

Ačkoli se práce zabývá náboženským vyznáním irského lidu, zejména

v souvislosti s legendami o sv. Patrikovi, nepojednává se v ní o rozdělení Irska ani o nepokojích v Severním Irsku.

Jedním z klíčových termínů této práce je už zmíněný pojem “irství”. Jednoduše řečeno představuje “irství” irskou národní identitu, ale definovat tento termín jednoznačně je velmi komplikované, ne-li nemožné. Problematické je totiž i stanovit, kdo je to Ir jako takový. Tradičně se kořeny irského národa a jeho charakteru spojují s Kelty, kteří do Irska přišli během prvního tisíciletí př. n. l., nicméně během následujících století docházelo k míšení původního obyvatelstva s příchozími Nory a zejména pak Angličany.

Existují ovšem i jiné rysy, než “čistota původu” příslušníků irského národa, které charakterizují národní identitu. Podle A. D. Smitha, který hovoří o západní a ne-západní koncepci národa, jsou těmito rysy sdílené historické území (vlast), společné mýty a historické vzpomínky, společná kultura, společná práva a povinnosti a společná ekonomika. Přestože všechny uvedené znaky Irové vykazují, pro pojetí irství je důležité především to, jak oni sami i lidé vně Irska pojem irství chápou a jak se toto v průběhu století projevovalo a projevuje dnes.

Pro odhalení potřeby definovat irskou národní identitu je nezbytné seznámit se s irskou historií.

Původní keltská kultura zůstala díky izolované poloze Irska relativně dlouho nedotčená cizími vlivy a irský lid tak nepochybně získal specifický charakter. Ten byl dále umocněn příchodem sv. Patrika a rozšířením křesťanství. Kulturní a duchovní rozvoj stejně jako kulturní původnost Irska byly narušeny příchodem Vikingů během 8.-10. století. Mnohem více ale do života i vývoje v Irsku zasáhli Normané, jejichž vliv se projevil v architektuře, umění i jazyce. Během 12.-14. století došlo k potlačení Normanů a k opětovnému rozvoji keltské kultury. Tehdy vznikly mnohé ze skvostů irského literárního dědictví obsahujících irské mýty.

Přetrvávající vliv anglické monarchie, která Iry otevřeně pohrdala, se nejmórazněji projevil ustanoveními z Kilkenny z roku 1366, která zakazovala Anglo-Normanům jakýkoli styk s Iry. Rozhodující ránu irskému životu a kultuře však zasadil příchod Tudorovců na anglický trůn. Irsko bylo naprosto podmaněno, původnímu katolickému obyvatelstvu bylo vnucováno protestantství. Jakékoliv projevy odporu byly tvrdě potlačovány, půda rebelů byla konfiskována a přidělována anglickým přistěhovalcům.

I během následujících století byli Irové Angličany utlačováni a stali se

ve své vlastní zemi druhořadým národem. Pochopitelná je tedy nejen averze Irů vůči Angličanům, ale také jejich snaha o nezávislost, o obnovení své kultury, svých tradic, svého jazyka. Paradoxně myšlenku osamostatnění začali prosazovat zejména irští protestanti, nespokojení s ekonomickou situací v Irsku (především po velkém hladomoru ve 40. letech 19. století), kteří zdůrazňovali potřebu jednoty irského lidu bez ohledu na náboženské vyznání.

Na konci 19. století se objevily v irském nacionalismu nové, apolitické tendence. Projevily se vznikem nových hnutí, která usilovala o obnovu irské kultury. Nejvýznamnější z nich pak bylo Gaelské literární obrození, které postavilo svůj nacionalismus na bohaté irské ústní tradici, na síle lidových příběhů. Vyprávění příběhů má v Irsku skutečně dlouhou historii a představuje významný rys irství, neboť je stále velmi populární.

Hlavními formami irských lidových příběhů jsou pohádka, mýtus a legenda. Pohádky jsou nadnárodní a nehrají většinou významnou roli ve formování národní identity; mezi Iry jsou ovšem velmi oblíbené a bytosti v nich vystupující jsou typicky irské, např. *leprechaun* /leprekón/ nebo *banshee* /banší/. Co se týče množství a vlivu na irství, jsou nejvýznamnějšími irskými lidovými příběhy mýty – tradiční příběhy pojednávající o nadpřirozených bytostech, předcích nebo hrdinech, které utvářejí pohled určitého národa na svět nebo vysvětlují jeho zvyky či vytyčují kulturní ideály.

Nejstarší irské mýty vznikly údajně už ve 3. století př. n. l., zapisovat je začali křesťanští mniši asi v 7. století n. l. Tyto příběhy byly přibližně chronologicky uspořádány do čtyř cyklů. Mytologický cyklus vypráví o bájném osídlování Irska, které proběhlo v šesti vlnách, jeho účastnících (Cessair, Partholon, Nemed, Fir Bolgové, Tuatha De Danaaové, Milesiané) a jejich bozích. Tito přistěhovalci dali zemi nejen její současnou geografickou podobu, ale i řadu místních názvů.

Mýty následujícího, Ulsterského cyklu jsou bezpochyby nejznámější, především díky příběhům o Cuchulainnovi (Kukulín). Ten se stal díky svým hrdinským činům a oddanosti své zemi irským národním hrdinou a rovněž jedním z typických symbolů Irska. Jeho osudy inspirovaly četné irské autory, zejména irské nacionalisty konce 19. století. Ústředním příběhem celého cyklu je ovšem *The Táin*, jistě nejproslulejší příběh celé irské mytologie, zatímco vyprávění o Cuchulainnově dětství, o tom, jak získal své jméno, o namlouvání Emer či o jeho hrdinské smrti jsou vlastně jen vedlejší příběhy.

Třetí, Feniánský (Osiánský) cyklus pojednává hlavně o dalším významném irském hrdinovi Finnovi a také o družině lovců a bojovníků Fianně nebo o podivuhodném osudu Finnova syna, Oisína. Jiným známým vyprávěním tohoto cyklu, který se stal inspirací pro mnoho pozdějších autorů, je milostný

příběh o pronásledování Diarmaida a Gráinne.

Příběhy posledního, Historického cyklu jsou již historicky podložené a vyprávějí o činech významných králů.

Všechny zmiňované a některé další významné mýty jsou v práci podrobněji převyprávěny.

Irské legendy se váží především k patronovi Irska, sv. Patrikovi. Symboly, se kterými je tradičně zobrazován, např. trojlístek jetele, a které se stejně jako světec sám staly irskými národními symboly, mají svůj původ právě v těchto příbězích. Den předpokládané smrti sv. Patrika, 17. března, se stal jedním z nejvýznamnějších svátků nejen v Irsku, ale také ve Spojených státech amerických. Tam je dnes díky masové imigraci Irů, která byla nejintenzivnější během 19. století, jejich populace početnější než v samotném Irsku. Práce představuje nejen některé legendy o sv. Patrikovi, ale zmiňuje se také o příčinách irské emigrace a o národním cítění irských imigrantů v USA.

Hodnoty vyjádřené v mýtech, duchovní síla legend i krása pohádkového světa naprosto uchvátily kulturní nacionalisty konce 19. století. Začaly se objevovat knihy s tematikou irských lidových příběhů či přímo sbírky těchto vyprávění, jejichž autory byli např. Standish O'Grady, Lady Francesca Speranza Wilde, William Butler Yeats. Tito oslavovali nejen irskou lidovou tvorbu, ale irského prostého člověka jako takového, podporující tak irské národní sebevědomí. Objevily se rovněž snahy o oživení irského jazyka, kterým se zejména v důsledku hladomoru (snížení počtu irsky hovořícího obyvatelstva a rozsáhlá emigrace) hovořilo stále méně. Největším obhájcem irštiny, stejně jako irských zvyků a tradic, se stal Douglas Hyde, jeden z hlavních zakladatelů Gaelské ligy, společnosti pro zachování a rozšíření irského jazyka. Dalším krokem v podporování irské národní identity bylo založení Irského národního divadla, kde se hrály také hry inspirované irským folklórem.

I přes dosažení částečné nezávislosti Irska v roce 1922 byla irským lidovým příběhům i nadále přičítána důležitá role v posilování irství. Rozběhla se druhá vlna sbírání irského folklóru; nasbíraný materiál se pak objevil v mnoha komerčních časopisech, ale také ve školních učebnicích, jejichž součástí je dodnes.

Souvislost mezi irskými mýty, legendami a pohádkami a pojetím irství je nepochybná. Je zřejmé, že irské lidové příběhy měly rozhodující vliv na rozvíjení irského národního cítění nejen v Irsku, ale i u Irů žijících v emigraci. Kdyby tyto příběhy nebyly znovuobjeveny a nebyla oceněna jejich hodnota a důležitost ve vztahu k formování irské národní identity, nebyli by

Irové tím, čím jsou dnes.

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