

Cú Chulainn (or Cuchulain – lit. ‘the Hound of Culann’)

Cú Chulainn, hero of the *Ulster cycle and the central figure of **Tain Bó Cuailnge*, where his heroic deeds and supernatural powers play a dominant part in the narrative, he is also a figure of recurrent interest for later Irish and Anglo-Irish writers, the latter often spelling his name in an Anglicized form. The story of his origin as given in *Compert Chon Chulainn* [*Birth of Cú Chulainn*] relates that he was fathered by the god Lug [see *mythology] on Deichtine, the daughter or perhaps sister of *Conchobor, king of the Ulaid (Ulstermen), but was brought up as Setantae, son of Sualtaim. His boyhood deeds (macgnímartha), narrated by Fergus in *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, mark him out as destined to become a famous if short-lived warrior. According to Fergus he received his name when Setantae, being late for a feast at the house of Culann the smith, is attacked by the hound guarding the enclosure and kills it. The smith complains of his loss, and Setantae undertakes to act as his guard-dog, at which the *druid Cathbad re-names him Cú Chulainn [the hound of Culann], linking him with the magic skills of smiths and with animals. As Cú Chulainn, he kills the three sons of Nechtan Scéne who had been attacking the Ulaid, thereby establishing his status as champion and defender of Ulster. Taking their heads with him, he returns home, having tied two stags and a flock of swans to his chariot on the way. Best of fighters and lord of the animals, he enters *Emain Macha in a heroic rage, and is calmed by women who go out bare-breasted to meet him.

In **Tochmarc Emire* he courts and wins Emer despite the opposition of her father, Forgall Manach. This tale also recounts his training in arms in Scotland by the amazon Scáthach, and his coupling with her opponent Aífe, after he has defeated her in combat. **Aided Oenfhir Aífe* relates how their son Connle later comes to Ireland, where he is unwittingly slain by his father. In **Fledh Bricrenn* Cú Chulainn takes the hero's portion, surpassing *Conall Cernach, another hero of the Ulaid. **Serglige Chulainn* tells how he is torn between his earthly love for Emer (or Eithne in Gubai, according to another version) and Fand from the otherworld. In **Aided Chon Chulainn*, Cú Chulainn's death tale, Lugaid, the son of Cú Roí whom he has slain, comes against him with other enemies. He breaks a *geis by eating the flesh of a dog, and at the end, while dying of his wounds, straps himself to a pillarstone so that he can fight to the last. As Cú Chulainn dies, the Morrígan [see *mythology] settles on his shoulder in the shape of a crow.

Stories of Cú Chulainn survived in *manuscript tradition up to the nineteenth century and in *folklore into the twentieth. James *Macpherson's Ossianic forgeries included stories of a 'Cuthullin'; and he is mentioned in Joseph Cooper *Walker's *Historical Memoirs of the Irish*

Bards (1786), as well as in Charlotte *Brooke's **Reliques of Irish Poetry*. Eugene *O'Curry outlined the contents of the *Ulster cycle in *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History* (1861). Less popular in Irish writing in English in the nineteenth century than the more romantic tales of *Fionn, his presence in *Anglo-Irish literature was consolidated by Standish James *O'Grady's two volume **History of Ireland: The Heroic Period and Cuculain and his Contemporaries* (1878 and 1880), and a trilogy of novels about him: *The Coming of Cuculain* (1894), *In the Gates of the North* (1901), and *The Triumph and Passing of Cuculain* (1920). Aubrey *de Vere's *The Foray of Queen Maeve* (1882) versified the *Táin* narrative, while Lady *Gregory's *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902), with an introduction by Yeats, assembled various tales about him into a coherent narrative using Kiltartan dialect. Patrick *Pearse was inspired by his heroism, while Yeats imagined him as a symbol of Irish indomitability and courage in the plays of the *Cuchulain Cycle and many poems. A bronze statue of 'The Death of Cúchulain' by Oliver Sheppard (1865-1941), made in 1911-12 and later installed in the GPO, Dublin, is the subject of satirical allusion in *Beckett's novel **Murphy* (1938). Cú Chulainn has remained a potent figure for writers and poets in Irish and English, among them Seán *Ó Tuama, Thomas *Kinsella, and Nuala *Ní Dhomhnaill. See also Eleanor *Hull, *The Cuchulain Saga in Irish Literature* (1898).