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Cuchulainn compared with other folk epic heroes

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*The University of Montana*

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CUCHULAINN COMPARED WITH OTHER FOLK EPIC HEROES

by

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B. J. F.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. <strong>EPIC HEROES OF OTHER NATIONS</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of the term &quot;folk epic&quot;</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of folk heroes</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of epic characteristics shown</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. <strong>CUCHULAINN AS A FOLK HERO</strong></td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antiquity of Irish material</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of Cuchulainn's activities</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuchulainn's fulfillment of requirements</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Cuchulainn, hero of the Ulster Cycle of Irish tales, has long been recognized by the Irish people and Celtic scholars as an epic hero. His exploits come down to us, however, in fragments from the past and there has been, as yet, no Homer to render them into lasting form. Many students, writers and editors have, therefore, been unaware of the tremendous saga of the Irish hero, and a seat in Valhalla is not always reserved for him by those who survey folk-epics.

To appraise the suitability of the title "Epic Hero" as it applies to Cuchulainn, it has been necessary to proceed along two lines of investigation. First, a definition of the title was needed. Toward that goal, the characteristics and adventures of several heroes from recognized folk-epics have been examined as have the opinions of scholars of epic literature. Second, the ancient stories concerning Cuchulainn, translated by such bi-linguists and Celtic scholars as Lady Augusta Gregory, Standish Hayes O'Grady, Kuno Meyer, A. H. Leahy, George Henderson, Whitley Stokes, and Joseph Dunn have been studied to discover points of similarity or difference between the Irish hero and the other heroes who support the definition.
The terms indigenous to analysis of folk literature have been used in this study with their generally accepted connotations. "Legend", for example, is used to refer to a short, anonymous tale or tradition grown up over a period of years concerning a single incident which might have historical basis. The term "myth" denotes a more elaborate, ostensibly historical story of ancient and unknown authorship involving several adventures of a hero or a god and containing supernatural elements. "Saga" gives reference to an even longer story which might recount the adventures of a whole life and which seems historical in nature.
CHAPTER I

The origins of a folk epic are often traceable to an actual historical event around which legends have grown up. Other folk epics seem to have originated with little or no factual beginning. However they began, the distinguishing marks of this type of literature are that they proceed from the popular imagination and are handed down orally for varying lengths of time before being written. One person may have gathered the different stories which compose such an epic and have put them into final form, but those who have originally conceived of the adventures, whether professional balladeer or imaginative peasant, are always numerous and nameless. Some parts of epics are passed from father to son for many generations before being written down; in other instances the story finds its final form within a few hundred years.

Epics which have thus come down from the oral traditions of a people and may, therefore, be termed folk epics, tend to personify in the hero the idealization of qualities admired by the race as a whole. The characteristics of each hero are individual as they reflect the ambitions, desires and attributes of his people, yet all heroes have some traits in common, just as most races have similar basic ideals. The central character of folk epics then takes a doubly significant
role as a representative of his people as well as of his
time. His exploits are interesting, not only from the dra­
matic and literary point of view, but because they reveal the
ambitions and dreams of generations who passed on the oral
traditions. As a corollary, by means of these ancient tales
the bards and story tellers might be said to have edited or
rewritten their own history as they would have wished it to
have happened rather than as it occurred. Several epics or
parts of epics might have been first begun in answer to a
question about the origins of a race. Beowulf, the Cid,
Roland, even Suhrab and Rustam, could fill in gaps or be an
explanation of history. The heroes of these stories are the
noble kings or adventurous warriors the people may have
served or dreamed of serving.

In this epic literature the hero is set apart from the
others by his superior abilities, both mental and physical,
and his exceptional traits of character. His contemporaries
usually recognize and respect his accomplishments whether
they are his enemies or his friends because he excels at
doing what they themselves attempt. He exists, performs and
reacts always in the superlative degree.

The general excellence of a hero is sometimes supple­
mented by supernatural or magical powers. Frequently he is
under the particular patronage of some higher being who in
some way shapes his destiny or the outcome of a particular
event. Athene, for example, aids Odysseus while Poseidon, because the adventurer blinded his son, causes Odysseus to be thwarted in his journeys. Siegfried is the possessor of a magic "cloud-cloak" which gives him the strength of twelve men and makes him invisible. Wainamoinen, in Finland's Kalevala, is a magician who is able to best a rival because he "sings him into deeps of quicksand." This same hero is able to change his form into that of a serpent, split a hair with an edgeless knife, snare an egg with an invisible snare, peel a sandstone and cut a whip-stick from the ice.

Wainamoinen is gifted with magic powers because he is the child of a young goddess, Ilmatar, and the Sea. Other heroes are favored because they are directly related to a god-like being. Karna, hero of the Maha-bharata, is the son of Surya the Sun and Achilles is the son of the goddess

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2 Ibid., p. 236.
3 Ibid., p. 100.
4 Ibid., p. 5.
5 Ibid., p. 2.
6 Ibid., p. 5.
7 Ibid., p. 2.
Thetis and is the fosterling of Zeus. 10

Many heroes are born with royal, or at least noble, blood. Olaf, in The Laxdaela Saga, is the son of a king of Iceland and a princess of Ireland. Siegfried and Roland each have royal parents, and Odysseus is a king in his own right. Rustam, in the Persian Shahnama, is one of the foremost leaders in the army of the king. Though the details of his birth are not given, Beowulf is reared in the home of a king, 11 and the Cid bears unmistakable signs of noble rearing and was born "in hour propitious." 12

The heroic pattern becomes apparent almost as soon as the hero is born. Suhrab, son of the hero Rustam and a hero in his own right, "looked a year old in a month, ... at three he exercised in arms, at five he had a lion heart, at ten none dared encounter him in fight." 13 Later it is said, "None ever saw one of his tender years so brave and lion-like." 14 Olaf matures quickly also. "When the boy was two

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10Ibid., p. 6.


14Ibid., p. 166.
years old he had got full speech, and ran about like children of four years old.\textsuperscript{15} and when he is twelve, Olaf attends the "Thing" council meeting for law making "and men in other country-sides looked upon it as a great errand to go."\textsuperscript{16} Siegfried becomes renowned early because "before this noble champion grew up to man's estate his hand had mighty wonders achiev'd in war's debate."\textsuperscript{17} Beowulf relates that in his youth he had "essay'd many deeds of prowess."\textsuperscript{18}

Early in the career of many a hero there comes a prophesy pertaining to his future. The angel Gabriel appears to the Cid in a dream and says, "throughout thy life shall all thy deeds be well."\textsuperscript{19} The Spanish hero also is assured that he has assumed arms "in hour propitious."\textsuperscript{20} Achilles is promised by Athene that "hereafter shall goodly gifts come to thee, yea in threefold measure."\textsuperscript{21} Olaf is told that for a long time his name will be remembered\textsuperscript{22} and Odysseus is comforted in his journey because "it is not ordained that he

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{17} Lettsom, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{18} Child, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{19} Huntington, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 25
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{21} Lang, Leaf and Myers, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{22} Press, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 76.
die away from his friends."\textsuperscript{23} Sometimes the heroes are advised by the soothsayer as to the dangers that lie ahead. Wainamoinen is told by the witch Louhi to go home but "if thine eyes be lifted upward, while the day-star lights thy pathway dire misfortune will befall thee, some sad fate will overtake thee."\textsuperscript{24} and the prophesy comes true. Odysseus is often warned by the gods or by immortals; Circe tells him how to escape the Sirens, Scylla and Charybdis, and warns him not to harm the cows of Helios,\textsuperscript{25} Hermes has put him on guard against Circe,\textsuperscript{26} and Theban Teiresias explains that because he has angered Poseidon, there will be many dangers before Odysseus reaches home.\textsuperscript{27}

By the time heroes are ready to begin their mature adventures, their very appearance suggests their rank above other men. Siegfried is conscious of the fact that "they view'd him all with favor" for "now had he strength and stature that weapons well he bore."\textsuperscript{28} Olaf is called "the handsomest of all men that people ever set eyes on. He arrayed himself always well, both as to clothes and weapons."\textsuperscript{29}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{}\textsuperscript{23}Butcher and Lang, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 74.
\bibitem{}\textsuperscript{24}Crawford, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 96.
\bibitem{}\textsuperscript{25}Butcher and Lang, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 171-72.
\bibitem{}\textsuperscript{26}Ibid., p. 144.
\bibitem{}\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., p. 155.
\bibitem{}\textsuperscript{28}Lettsom, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 5.
\bibitem{}\textsuperscript{29}Press, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 53.
\end{thebibliography}
and it is clearly seen "that he is a high-born man." Because of his bearing, clothes and weapons he is "easily distinguished from all other men" and appropriately if not subtly he is nicknamed Peacock. Karna is "lofty," "like a moving cliff," and "like a tusker in his fury, like a lion in his ire, like the sun in noontide radiance, like the all-consuming fire, lion-like in build and muscle, stately as a golden palm, blessed with every manly virtue, peerless warrior proud and calm" with a "voice of pealing thunder." The dignity, strength and grandeur of a hero of the Persian folk epic is summed up in the question of those who see him as he comes—"Can this be Rustam or the rising sun." Others point out that Rustam has "the grace, the neck, and shoulders of a hero" and that he is "like a lofty cypress, to whom there was no peer among the troops." Suhrab, Rustam's son, inherits these physical qualities and seems "a verdant cypress. His arms were like a camel's thighs" and in battle he has the heart of a lion. Achilles also rushes into battle "like a

30Ibid., p. 63.
31Ibid., p. 41.
32Dutt, op. cit., p. 8.
34Ibid., p. 154.
35Ibid., p. 150.
36Ibid., p. 149.
37Ibid., p. 139.
lion" and in the fury of battle is given a halo of fire. When he is beheld in his wrath "there and then perished twelve men of their best by their own chariot wheels and spears." Not all the heroes are possessors of handsome features, but the drive and vitalizing power they possess is apparent in their bearing, their gestures and their glances as well as in their deeds.

This tremendous force and tenacious will of an epic hero does more, of course, than make his appearance distinctive. That inward urge and singleness of purpose in spite of any opposition becomes the hallmark of the hero although physical strength and skill are essential to heroic accomplishment, and it is usually because of his ability in that direction that the hero first comes to the attention of others. Before Beowulf reaches Hrothgar's court, the news comes that he has in his handgrip the strength of thirty. Later, Beowulf himself says that he swam in the ocean in battle dress for five nights. In his encounters with the monster, the mother, and later with the dragon, he shows such prodigious strength that he is able to wrest the monster's arm from

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38Lang, Leaf and Myers, op. cit., p. 404.
39Ibid., p. 373.
40Child, op. cit., p. 11.
41Ibid., p. 16.
its socket, slice the mother in half with one blow and is unable to hurt the dragon with a sword because both the dragon's skin and Beowulf's stroke are stronger than mere metal and the blade is bent. Odysseus is able to best his opponents in hand-to-hand combat, hurl large weights beyond previous marks in the Phaeacians' contest, and use his own bow to kill the suitors who could not themselves bend it. Less detail is given concerning the personal strength of The Cid, although his skill in battle is proved by the numbers he and his men slay. He is, however, able to subdue a runaway lion by placing his hands on the beast's neck. Karna, who is called "mightiest warrior on the earth," is anointed monarch of Anga because of his war-like valor. He is able to duplicate and surpass the feats of the best Indian warriors and to string a bow that the other princes could
not. His likeness to the sun is also mentioned as well as the fact that he bore "the stamp of hero." The bravery of the Icelandic hero, Olaf, is apparent in his encounter with a ghost. Other warriors have been frightened away, but Olaf confronts the specter and drives his spear point into the disappearing shade. The impact of the supernatural element is strengthened when the remains of the spirit's mortal body are exhumed and Olaf's spear point is found in the body. Rustam is another hero whose battle rage gives him increased power. In the heat of conflict "no elephant on earth is match for him . . . and when he rageth . . . what is a lion, elephant or man within his grasp?" He also knows how to use his power scientifically, for when a soldier tries to question him "a sudden buffet from the fist of Rustam fell on his neck; he yielded up the ghost." There can be no doubt as to Siegfried's general excellence, for he not only wins the contests with Brunhild but "whatever he attempted, he went the best before." Giants and dwarfs alike lose

52 Ibid., p. 22.
53 Ibid., p. 159.
54 Press, op. cit., p. 78.
56 Ibid., p. 150.
57 Lettsom, op. cit., p. 150.
to the Germanic hero who is "gladdened at the sight" of more than forty thousand enemy warriors with whom he and his small army can battle. His reputation is such that the leader of the opposing forces surrenders to him as soon as Siegfried's identity is known. The list of this warrior's accomplishments is long, but some of the glory is dimmed at the realization that he has bathed in the blood of a poison-spitting dragon "and now no weapons harm him." Roland, having no such protection, bravely meets the four hundred Paynims who charge him and the Bishop and acquits himself admirably using a sword stroke so powerful that on at least five occasions he splits his opponent in two, from helmet to horse's back. Achilles is another hero whose reputation is a psychological weapon in his favor. In the camp of his Trojan enemies "fear was fallen upon all because Achilles was come forth." Indeed, the river itself rises in wrath because of "the many dead who lay thick in him, slain by

58Ibid., p. 30.
59Ibid., p. 35.
60Ibid., p. 17.
62Ibid., pp. 46-79, et passim.
63Lang, Leaf and Myers, op. cit., p. 373.
Achilles\textsuperscript{64} and the Greek warrior is generally acknowledged the "greatest of all."\textsuperscript{65} The Finnish hero, Wainamoinen, uses magic usually, but "cuts and conquers as the housemaids slice the turnips\textsuperscript{66} and warrants the title "miracle of strength and wisdom\textsuperscript{67} when he is called upon to use force.

Each hero is endowed with strength and skill superior to that of his companions, and not only do they recognize his prowess, but he himself feels a confidence in his own ability which is reflected in his manner and actions. Not infrequently the hero issues a challenge, makes a vow or gives claim to a mighty deed and thereby informs his contemporaries of his cognizance of his superiority. Karna, having witnessed a show of battle feats by the acknowledged leader of the Indian warriors, announces "these and greater I accomplish."\textsuperscript{68} When Rustam becomes angry at a slight from his Shah, the Persian hero boldly pronounces: "I conquer lions and distribute crowns, and who is Shah Kaus when I am angry? . . . my might and my successes are from God . . . Earth is my slave . . . I lighten night with my sword and scatter heads in battle."\textsuperscript{69} The

\textsuperscript{64}Ibid., p. 422.
\textsuperscript{65}Ibid., p. 45.
\textsuperscript{66}Crawford, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 709.
\textsuperscript{67}Ibid., p. 599.
\textsuperscript{68}Dutt, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 8
\textsuperscript{69}Warner and Warner, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 143.
exit of Charlemagne from Spain is protected by a confident Roland who vows "the gateway safe shalt thou pass, nor while I live for any shalt thou fear." 70 Beowulf's positive declaration is "I shall win fame for myself with Hrunting or death shall take me." 71 Siegfried's self-confidence manifests itself in several speeches; the first two he utters when he is told that it might prove dangerous to woo Kriemhild because of her brother's objections. "What can ill befall us?" he asks. "If that misproud Burgundian my friendly suit deny, be sure, as much and more, too, I'll seize by strength of hand" 72 and "'twould my honor stain if I should need assistance." 73 Later, when his friend's kingdom is about to be invaded, Siegfried assures the King that if thirty thousand came to make war "'I'll stand against them all with but a single thousand" 74 and when threatened by a repeat attack by these enemies, he says "I'll do unto those boasters e'en as I did before. Ere I end, o'er castles, o'er land, o'er all I'll spread wide waste and desolation, or forfeit else my head." 75

In significant contrast are the words of the Finnish hero

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70 Bacon, op. cit., p. 31.
71 Child, op. cit., p. 41.
72 Lettsom, op. cit., p. 8.
73 Ibid., p. 10.
75 Ibid., p. 142.
whose magic power of song enables him repeatedly to accomplish and to triumph. After singing beautifully at a wedding feast, Wainamoinen says, "I have little worth or power, am a bard of little value, little consequence my singing, mine abilities as nothing" and asks the blessing of Ukko, the supreme being, on all there. Wainamoinen has humility and modesty, but there is no hint of weakness or of lack of self-confidence in his character. The heroic figure seems invariably aware of his position as an outstanding member of his race.

The superior physical endowments of a hero are frequently coupled with a keen mind and the two characteristics enable him to provide leadership of the most excellent sort. His ingenuity, cunning and judgment are usually respected by both the contemporaries of the hero and those who read the epics. Odysseus is, perhaps, the strongest example of a hero who can employ strategy to gain his goal. His method of freeing himself and his men from the Cyclops' cave bespeaks the hero's inventive power and resourcefulness under trying conditions. A second example of Odysseus' wiles is his plan for the defeat of his wife's suitors. Heroic strength and daring are necessary for the completion of these

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76 Crawford, op. cit., p. 331.
77 Butcher and Lang, op. cit., p. 132.
78 Ibid., p. 231.
plans, but their inception is in bold mental action. Sometimes the hero might be termed wise rather than ingenious. In such cases his advice is sought or mention is made of his reputation even if no example of his wisdom is given. Beowulf is revealed as this kind of thinker when Prothgar asks him to give counsel to the young princes and when the King says of him, "Never heard I man so young in years council more wisely." In the instance of Olaf, the Icelandic hero, there are examples of both reputation and advice. He is "the most beloved of men, for whatever he had to do with affairs of men, he did so that all were well contented with their lot." The judgment that warrants this kind of praise is shown when he was only eighteen years of age and already called "of exceeding worth." He is asked to decide the direction his ship will sail when his men cannot agree. He says, "I think we should follow the counsel of the wisest; for the councils of foolish men I think will be of all the worse service for us in the greater number they gather together." On another occasion, the King of Ireland offers to make Olaf, his grandson, his heir because the boy shows prowess and courage superior to that of the king's sons. "Olaf thanked

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79 Child, op. cit., p. 33.
80 Ibid., p. 50.
81 Press, op. cit., p. 76.
82 Ibid., p. 59.
him for this offer with many graceful and fair words, and said he would not run the risk as to how his [the king's] sons might behave when Myrkjarten was no more; said it was better to gain swift honour than lasting shame." Later in Olaf's life his half brother becomes violently jealous of him, and Olaf becomes foster-father to his half brother's son in order that the breech between them may be healed. There are even more examples of the cleverness of Wainamoinen, and, in his case, it is not always easy to differentiate between his wisdom and his cunning. When the hero's enemy, Lowyatar, gives birth to Colic, Pleurisy, Fever, Ulcer, Plague, Consumption, Gout, Sterility and Cancer, she sends them to destroy the people in Wainamoinen's country. The hero urges his people to use the sauna (steam-bath), calls forth the rain and asks his god for help. The combination unites to drive away the diseases. Another enemy sends Otso, the honey-eating bear, to overcome the people. The hero tracks the bear but instead of fighting, Wainamoinen persuades Otso that there can be peace between them, and the bear is given a great feast in celebration. Part of the agreement is that if the bear will not hunt people when he is awake, they will not hunt him

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83Ibid., p. 65.  
84Ibid., p. 84.  
85Crawford, op. cit., p. 654.
when he sleeps. Several of Wainamoinen's skills are shown in the adventure with the giant, Wipunen. The hero asks the giant for certain magic words but is swallowed whole instead of being answered. Wainamoinen makes a boat of his poniard handle and rows around inside the giant's body. Later the hero makes a forge and, using his knees for an anvil and forearm for a hammer, pounds until Wipunen asks him to leave. Then Wainamoinen refuses to go until he is told the magic words. The hero's wisdom is shown in his words of advice to his older, then his younger countrymen: "Old men must not go a-wooing, must not swim the sea of anger, must not row upon a wager, must not run a race for glory, with the younger sons of Northland" and "Every child of Northland, listen: if thou wishest joy eternal, never disobey thy parents, never evil treat the guiltless, never wrong the feeble-minded, never harm thy weakest fellow, never stain thy lips with falsehood, never cheat thy trusting neighbor, never injure thy companions, lest thou surely payest penance." Sometime after delivering this counsel, the ruler of Suomi calls on Wainamoinen to judge an infant and decide if it should be killed or allowed to live. The hero says the child should die and

86 Ibid., p. 661.
87 Ibid., pp. 242-55.
88 Ibid., p. 299.
89 Ibid., pp. 237-38.
is quickly reminded that he should have shown mercy, since he himself had been forgiven many things. It is this error in judgment which causes the people to turn away from the hero. A very different attitude toward his own wisdom is shown by Achilles who is considered by Agamennon to show both craftiness and wit\footnote{Lang, Leaf and Myers, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 5.} but says of himself "in council are others better."\footnote{Ibid., p. 369.}

Along with strength of mind and body, the hero created by a people from their need and desire often has a firm moral fiber and high ideals. Often his reasons for fighting are presented as a definite part of his character. The underlying causes, whether emphasised or not, are always most laudable. Beowulf fights first to free a people from the fear of sudden death at the hands of a monster and by his last great fight with the dragon he wishes to restore to his own people their rightful wealth. It is Beowulf's boast as he dies that he has guarded well his own people.\footnote{Child, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 74.} Odysseus struggles to return home and to regain his wife and his rightful position. Karna leads his people in a brother-against-brother combat because his relations dispute about which of them should rule.\footnote{Dutt, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 86.} Karna seeks no personal gain but is
bound by honor to fight for those who have befriended him. The Cid wishes to drive the invader Mohammedans from his country. There is also a motivating hope that he might win back the favor of the king, but the means he chooses reflect a praiseworthy person. The parents of Siegfried "full little reck'd their offspring the royal crown to wear. He only would be master and exercise command, 'gainst those whose pride o'erweening disturb'd the peaceful land." The Germanic hero says himself that he would "fain bring all men per-force of me to say that I both land and liegemen have nobly merited." Roland fights to protect his king's withdrawal and refuses to summon help because "I should be as a fool forlorn; in France should I lose mine honor." Achilles is even more forthright about the standard he sets for himself. "If I abide here and besiege the Trojan's city . . . my fame shall be imperishable," he says, but his immediate reason for fighting is to revenge the death of a friend.

No less noble than the hero's reasons for going into battle are the weapons and other furnishings he uses. Some heroes, Odysseus for example, own a weapon no other man is capable of using. Achilles has a spear which no other

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94 Lettsom, op. cit., p. 7.
95 Ibid., p. 18.
96 Bacon, op. cit., p. 41.
97 Lang, Leaf and Myers, op. cit., p. 173.
Achaian can wield as well as "divine arms . . . which to his dear father the gods who inhabit heaven gave." Often the most highly favored weapon is named, and thus has a distinction indicating its particular worthiness and accomplishment. Roland's sword is named Durendal and the hero tries unsuccessfully to break it when defeat is inevitable in order that no one else own the sword that conquered Brittany, Anjou, Poitou, Maine, Normandy, Provence, Aquitain, the Roman March, Lombardy, Bavaria, the Flemish land, Bulgaria, Poland, Saxony, Ireland, Wales and Scotland. The French hero also is given Charlemagne's own bow. Karna's bow "famed vijaya is by Par'su-Rama given" and the Indian hero goes to battle in his "swift and conquering car." Beowulf is an exception in that his sword, Naeling, is not equal to his strength even though it was "wondrous hard, no whit was he the better for it." Attention is given to the selection of an appropriate mount for the young hero, Suhrab. A worthy steed is not found and all are rejected by the boy until one colt is found "in strength a lion and as fleet as wind . . . his leap is like the lightning; on the mountains he goeth like a raven, on

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98 Ibid., p. 318.
99 Ibid., p. 348.
100 Bacon, op. cit., p. 97.
101 Ibid., p. 30.
103 Child, op. cit., p. 73.
the water like fish and water fowl; upon the desert like shaft from bow, pursuing and o'er taking the enemy."104

Another essential part of the heroic pattern is that the hero uses his skills and arms to fight a worthy enemy. Roland bests many paynims and The Cid slaughters hundreds of Mohammedans who are formidable adversaries because of their number more than their individual skill or power. Karna fights warriors of whom there is little detail given, but who are mighty. In some epics there is a more vivid picture of the individual enemies. Odysseus meets the "sea-sucking Charybdis," the Scylla who has twelve feet and six necks topped by hideous heads with three rows of teeth,105 the Sirens, the goddess Circe and the Cyclops as well as other superhuman and human enemies. Wainamoinen struggles with a toothless witch106 who is aided by a three-fingered wicked wizard.107 Beowulf bests Grendel, a "fiend" with an unholy flame in his eye,108 and Grendel's mother, a monster wife109 whose blood is so hot and so poisonous that it eats the blade of a sword.110

104 Warner and Warner, op. cit., p. 128.
105 Butcher and Lang, op. cit., p. 175.
106 Crawford, op. cit., p. 713.
107 Ibid., p. 236.
108 Child, op. cit., p. 23.
109 Ibid., p. 34.
110 Ibid., p. 44.
The skills and knowledge that heroes have in order to defeat such enemies are highly developed, and there is a hint of the preparation the warrior might have had in at least two instances. The aged Phoinix says that he has taught Achilles "to be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds"\textsuperscript{111} and Siegfried "uptrained was he by sages, who what was honor knew."\textsuperscript{112}

The hero's life is not usually completely taken up by combat or preparation for combat. The more tranquil time is often spent among those of equally noble position—his family, his friends, and those he serves. The relationships between a hero and those he loves can reveal much of his basic character. Especially revealing are his feelings toward his king and his family. Roland is the nephew of Charlemagne, and the completeness of his devotion to his king is recognized by foe as well as friend. Ganelon, Roland's treacherous step-father, declares that "there is not such a vassal from here to the rising sun" and that Charlemagne will not be conquered as long as Roland lives.\textsuperscript{113} The king praises the hero and asks for his judgment in matters of importance.\textsuperscript{114}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{111}Lang, Leaf and Myers,\textit{ op. cit.}, p. 174.
\item \textsuperscript{112}Lettsom,\textit{ op. cit.}, p. 5.
\item \textsuperscript{113}Bacon,\textit{ op. cit.}, p. 22.
\item \textsuperscript{114}Ibid., p. 8.
\end{itemize}
troops: "Well now should every man of us bestir him for our King. That for his overlord a man should suffer much is meet. He should risk for him both life and limb and bear both cold and heat." King Gunther asks for Siegfried's advice in the wooing of Brunhild and in matters of war and the hero proves ready in both matters and advises the king to "count on true service ever from Siegfried's faithful hand." Such good relations are not always the case, however, for heroes sometimes have a sensitive pride that makes it hard for them to obey others. Achilles tells Agamemnon, for example, "to others give now thine orders, not to me ... I shall no more obey." This hero is so angered that he is prevented from doing violence to his king only because Athene interferes. Finally it is Agamemnon who makes the conciliatory gesture and sends word that he will give many gifts if Achilles will return. In the Shahnama there are bitter feelings between Rustam and his Shah because "The monarch

115 Ibid., p. 39.
117 Ibid., p. 51.
118 Ibid., p. 27.
119 Lang, Leaf and Myers, op. cit., p. 10.
120 Ibid., p. 7.
121 Ibid., p. 164.
scorned me,"¹²² but in this instance the hero returns and makes an avowal of devotion saying "The world is thine. We are thy subjects, thine is to command. I am a liege, if worthy of the name, before thy gate to do thy will. Thou art the Shah, the lord of earth; I am thy slave."¹²³

When the time comes for a hero to take a wife, he sometimes encounters difficulties in winning the lady of his choice. His method of wooing and his efforts to overcome obstacles provide further insight into his character as well as his abilities. Wainamoinen competes with a younger warrior for the hand of the Maid of Beauty. He performs several remarkable tasks which she assigns him, but she still chooses the younger man. Wainamoinen sings at their wedding feast and says then that older men should not seek wives. The reputation of Kriemhild leads Siegfried to travel a long distance to woo her. When he first sees the maiden he wonders at his own presumptuousness and "wax'd he ever white and red."¹²⁴ When he recovers his poise "the vows of other suitors to his were light as air" and Kriemhild, who has refused to choose a husband until she could see Siegfried, quickly falls in love.¹²⁵

When the hero has won permission to marry her by helping her

¹²²Warner and Warner, op. cit., p. 147.
¹²³Ibid., p. 147.
¹²⁴Lettsom, op. cit., p. 47.
¹²⁵Ibid., p. 8
brother win a wife, the two are married. Siegfried has rather stern ideas about his rights as a husband; and, when Kriemhild tells a secret he has entrusted to her she says, "He beat me black and blue; such mischief-making tattle his patience could not brook, and for it ample vengeance on my poor limbs he took." Later Kriemhild, in a burst of misplaced confidence, reveals the one vulnerable spot where Siegfried may be pierced and is, therefore, directly responsible for her husband's death. Her sorrow when he dies is so great that she is unable to walk and "insensible she lay." The Icelandic hero, Olaf, is more reluctant to marry and at first says, "Little have I set my mind on that sort of thing hitherto; besides, I do not know where that woman lives whom to marry would mean any great good luck to me." His opinion is changed, however, when he meets Thorgerd. She seems uninterested in meeting a young man whose mother is a bondswoman, but Olaf dresses himself in his finery and goes to see her. "Then they began to talk together, and they talked all day. But nobody heard their conversation" and at the end of the talk, Thorgerd had consented to marry Olaf. There are two wives of heroes whom we know only because of their grief when their

126 Ibid., p. 144.
127 Ibid., p. 171.
128 Press, op. cit., p. 69.
129 Ibid., p. 72.
husbands are killed. The widowed queen of Karna "gave oblations to her hero, wept her loved and slaughtered spouse."\(^{130}\) The wife of Beowulf "in deepest grief, her hair close bound, made her song of mourning again and yet again."\(^{131}\)

Another particularly dramatic family relationship is that of Suhrab and Rustam. The son is born and reared away from his father and, when he grows to maturity, rides out to find his parent. The one person who can identify the father for the son is killed, and Rustam is asked by his Shah to defeat the nameless youth who invades the land. After the death blow is struck, the father sees the armlet which the mother was to place on his legitimate heir\(^{132}\) and realizes that he has slain his own son. Although this episode is distinctive in the epics, the "sign of recognition" is used in the *Laxdaela Saga* when Olaf's mother gives him a gold finger ring which will be proof to her father that the boy is her son,\(^{133}\) and Odysseus is recognized upon his return home by certain scars which he bore on his body.

If the adventures and accomplishments of a hero's life are exciting and memorable, the circumstances of his death are equally so. Often he dies in combat and always in a way

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\(^{130}\)Dutt, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

\(^{131}\)Child, *op. cit.*, p. 85.


\(^{133}\)Press, *op. cit.*, pp. 55-6.
befitting a brave leader of men. The drama of the situation is heightened if he has received a warning that his death is imminent as had Achilles. This Greek hero is told that death awaits him after he has slain his enemy, Hector, yet his fury is so great he desires Hector’s death without regard to his own subsequent fate. A later addition to the story tells how Achilles fell before Troy “wounded by an arrow from the bow of Paris which pierced his vulnerable heel.” Karna is also killed in the midst of battle. Arjun, the hero’s half-brother and rival, slays him when his chariot wheel becomes sunk in soft earth and he is unable to meet his opponent on equal terms. Roland dies from his battle-wounds, also; but his last fight has been a rear-guard action, protecting his king and holding off a vast army with his small band. The dying French hero turns his face toward the country of the enemy and “God His angels to him flew down out of the sky” to bear him to Paradise. According to one legend, when The Cid was “killed in battle against the invading King Bucar of Morocco, he was bound in full armor upon his horse and his spectral presence dismayed the Moor into precipitate rout.”

134Lang, Leaf and Myers, op. cit., pp. 369, 398.
136Dutt, op. cit., p. 146.
137Bacon, op. cit., p. 99.
Odysseus' death is not described, nor is that of Olaf, the Icelandic hero, except that Olaf died three years after his son was slain. Wainamoinen does not die, for when he realizes his powers are waning, he sings himself a boat of copper and sails away, promising his people to return when they need him. Some heroes are able to know, before they die, that their last endeavor has been successful, or that they have avenged their own murder. Beowulf dies of wounds inflicted by a poisonous dragon, but he lives long enough to know that the dragon is dead and that the treasure it guarded belongs once more to his people. Siegfried is struck from behind by a man he trusted. The death wound is inflicted as Siegfried bends to take a drink from a stream, and though the spear is driven between his shoulders in his one vulnerable spot, the German hero has strength enough to turn on his murderer and knock him down with a blow from his shield. The tragic death of Suhrab by his father's hand is the focal point of a whole Persian episode. Rustam, the father, later is betrayed by his own brother and is mortally wounded when he falls into a pit filled with sword and spear points, but before he

138 Walsh, op. cit., p. 79.
139 Press, op. cit., p. 185.
140 Crawford, op. cit., p. 731.
141 Child, op. cit., p. 74.
142 Lettson, op. cit., p. 158.
expires is able to avenge himself by killing his murderer. In each case, death is met as bravely and confidently as was life and in a manner which can best be described as heroic.

In any overall consideration of these figures the unusual characteristics of each become clearly apparent. Part of their lasting fascination, however, comes from their similarities to, rather than their differences from, ordinary men. Had they been completely supernatural, their accomplishments and powers might have had less impact upon the imaginations of the people who preserved their memory. Defects and shortcomings in the heroes also lend credulity to the stories and give verisimilitude to those originated as a supplement to history. Wainamoinen, perhaps the most magical of the heroes, is completely appealing when he tries to find himself a wife and discovers that he has waited too long to be attractive to those of his choice. His quick condemnation of the illegitimate child makes him more natural and his abiding love for his people gives his character warmth. Both Odysseus and Achilles are favored or opposed by supernatural beings, but each has qualities which underline his realism. Odysseus is only too susceptible to the traps and dangers calculated to be the downfall of a mere mortal, and to those who heard his story, his deep-rooted desire to return to his home must have seemed a forceful longing. The proud, almost petulant anger

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143 James Atkinson, translator, Persian Literature, (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1900), 1.313.
of Achilles at Agememnon and his surging sorrow and mighty wrath at the death of his friend make him understandable; his vulnerability, if only in one spot, makes him vivid. Karna, Suhrab and Rustam are each completely human in their aspirations and actions. Each wants recognition and fights to maintain or achieve a high place in society. Siegfried and Beowulf, though encountering or using the supernatural, are remarkable only in their general confidence and extraordinary strength and skill; their actions otherwise are much like those of ordinary men. Olaf, Roland, and The Cid find their beginnings in historical events and are, perhaps, the most authentic in actuality, though not always in impression.

A degree of humanness enhances the makeup of a hero, but his other qualities are the ones which make him eligible for the title. In order to formulate an inclusive definition of a heroic figure, the major traits of these generally accepted heroes must be compiled. While each has a personality and attitude differing as the peoples who created them differ, there seems to be a general pattern to which they subscribe.

The origins of these heroes qualify them for the nobility in mortal realms and often for membership in a supernatural hierarchy. Growth and mental development are usually extremely pronounced at an early age. With maturity, physical beauty, strength and mental processes exceed in varying
degrees the contemporary standards. A social consciousness is developed along with an awareness of social position and pride in accomplishment. There is usually a strict ethical code subscribed to and a form of behavior through which such standards are expressed. Adventures are undertaken with confidence and enemies are met with a consciousness of reputation to uphold as well as of justice to administer. The best possible equipment is acquired and superior persons are chosen as associates. The respect of both friends and enemies is gained, as is the admiration and love of those defended. Death often comes in battle, and the same courage is shown then that is revealed throughout life.
CHAPTER II

The stories of the Ulster Cycle in ancient Irish literature probably were told for the first time in the century before Christ.\(^1\) They remained in the oral form, passed on and embellished by the bards, until they were reduced to writing in about the eighth century. Although none of the earliest texts remain, there is evidence that the extant twelfth century versions of the stories are copies, compilations or revisions of the tales composed in pre-Christian times. The traditional date of the first formulation of the tales is substantiated by the state of the civilization they present.\(^2\) Their extant form, with the main narrative in prose and passages of emotion in verse, has also been presented as proof of antiquity.\(^3\)

Because of the nature of folk epics, it is impossible to ascertain the exact date upon which any of them were first told. It is possible, however, to discover with a fair degree of accuracy the date of the first written versions of the epics as they are known today. The Iliad and the Odyssey were gathered in their present form in about the second century before Christ.\(^4\) Other epics discussed were written in the

\(^3\)Dillon, op. cit., p. 2.
following approximate order, anno Domini: The Mahabharata, fourth century; 5 Beowulf, eighth century; 6 The Shahnama 7 and The Song of Roland, eleventh century; 8 The Poem of the Cid, twelfth century; 9 The Laxdæla Saga 10 and The Nibelungenlied, thirteenth century; 11 and The Kalevala, nineteenth century. 12 The extant manuscript of Beowulf dates from about the tenth century. 13 With that exception, the extant copies of the others come from approximately the same century in which they were first written. The Irish material, therefore, may be said to ante-date many of the epics both in the times which they portray and in their first written form. For this reason it is obvious that the hero whose character is


7Atkinson, op. cit., p. vi.


10Press, op. cit., end papers.


13Kennedy, loc. cit.
delineated in the Ulster Cycle is a true product of the minds and imaginations of the Irish people and is indigenous to them alone.

The central figure of these ancient Irish tales is the child of the god Lugh of the Long Hand, and of Dichtire, sister of the King of Ulster.\(^1\) He was called Setanta, and while he was yet a baby, a soothsayer pronounced to the King of Ulster: "This child will be praised by all, by chariot drivers and fighters, by kings and by wise men; he shall be loved by many men; he will avenge all your wrongs; he will defend your fords; he will fight all your battles.\(^1\)\(^5\) Thus is a heroic future prophesied, and before seven years have passed, the boy sets forth to fulfill this destiny.

Setanta, at his foster father's home, hearing tales of his uncle's court and of the sons of kings and nobles who engage in sports there, leaves home immediately to join them. It is significant that even at this early age he was skillful enough to make his journey seem short by knocking his ball ahead of him, throwing his stick, and then throwing a dart. Then he would run ahead and catch them all before they had reached the ground.\(^1\)\(^6\) The pride and self-confidence of

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\(^{15}\)Ibid., p. 6.

\(^{16}\)Ibid., p. 7.
the boy manifest themselves as he arrives at the court and enters unbidden into the boys' games and shows a skill far superior to theirs. When he learns that the custom of the place is that he give himself under the protection of the boy troop, he complies with tradition, but insists that the boys come under his protection also. Setanta remained in the king's house "and all the chief men of Ulster had a hand in bringing him up."  

Early evidence of his courage, strength and sense of fair play comes when the boy is invited by the king to follow the court to a feast at the home of Culann, the smith. The boy comes later, but the king has forgotten his invitation and allowed the smith to release a ferocious watch-dog whom no man had been able to approach and live. Setanta is unarmed except for his toys, and when the bark of the watchdog is heard, the king remembers his young nephew and runs outside to come to his aid. The dog is found "in scraps and pieces" the boy having driven his playing ball down the beast's throat and then having destroyed him. Culann, the smith, is upset that his valuable and useful dog has been killed, and the boy volunteers to serve as watch-dog until an animal of equal ability to the original can be found and trained. At this, Cathbad the druid suggests that the boy

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18 *Cross and Slover, op. cit.*, p. 141.
be afterwards called Cuchulainn, "Culann's Hound," adding that "all the men in the world shall have their mouths full of that name."^{19}

Although there are other boyhood deeds recounted or merely hinted at in the different accounts of Cuchulainn's story, they serve mainly to emphasize his skill and almost unconscious bravery.\(^{20}\) The events, however, of the day he assumed arms are worthy of special notice. When he hears the prophesy that the youth who takes arms on that day will surpass all Ireland's young men, but will have a very short life, Cuchulainn takes the inevitable step. He appears before the king and asks for arms. His wish is granted, but none of the available weapons are strong enough to be suitable. Finally, Cuchulainn bears the weapons of King Conchubar himself as he begins his mature career.

The appearance of the young hero is remarkable. He is "comeliest of the men of Erin" with a ray of love burning in his look, pearl-like teeth, and eyebrows like charred beams.\(^{21}\) Cuchulainn's physical measurements change on occasion; for, having magical powers, he is able to make himself small enough to perch on the boss of his opponent's shield or swell himself "until he made a dreadful, many-colored, wonderful

\(^{19}\)Ibid., p. 142.

\(^{20}\)Gregory, op. cit., p. 195.

\(^{21}\)Cross and Slover, op. cit., p. 156.
bow of himself, so that as big as a giant or a sea-man was the hugely-brave warrior."22 The bards who told of him used symbolism and exaggeration to convey his outstanding beauty and said that he had seven toes and fingers and "his eyes were bright with seven pupils apiece, each one glittered with seven gem-like sparkles. On either cheek he had four moles: a blue, a crimson, a green, and a yellow one. Between one ear and the other he had fifty clear-yellow long tresses that were as the yellow wax of bees, or like a brooch of white gold as it glints in the sun unobscured."23 During battle "the semblance of three heads of hair he has, namely, brown hair next to the skin of his head, blood-red hair in the middle, a crown of gold is the third head of hair."24 When he has this "hero-light" he is even more powerful than usual, and the first of his many gifts is that he has prudence until his warrior's flame appears. The heat that his anger radiates is so great that on one occasion he is so hot that three vats of water do not completely cool him and the water itself boils as it touches him.

His strength is great enough to enable him to lift houses from the ground and to leap remarkable distances. On the first day he bears the arms of a man, he is able to

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22Ibid., p. 315.
23Ibid., pp. 151-52.
24Ibid., p. 303.
wrest a stone pillar from the ground and pitch it into a nearby stream. Not only is he able to slay hundreds of warriors, but he can perform all the feats of skill known to the chiefs of Ulster and to surpass them all at those feats "for quickness and deftness." Among those whom he is able to conquer in battle are the warriors of a supernatural army, and the best of the fighters from the four provinces of Ireland. Cuchulainn's stamina and wiles so far surpass those of ordinary men that he is able to withstand single-handedly the army of the four provinces "from Monday before Samain (Hallowe'en) to Wednesday after Spring-beginning." Indeed, his ability as a warrior is so well known that on several nights "a hundred warriors died of fright at the sound of Cuchulainn's weapons." 

His mental power is as outstanding as his physical strength. Before entering into combat with Aife, the woman warrior, he finds the things she most prizes and uses the knowledge to throw her off guard and conquer her. He demoralizes the army invading Ulster by killing those who wandered in any direction from the main body of troops and sometimes by sending their bodies or heads to their comrades.

25 Ibid., p. 154.
26 Ibid., p. 287.
27 Dillon, op. cit., p. 7.
28 Cross and Slover, op. cit., p. 167.
as a warning.

One young woman is offered by her father to Cuchulainn in marriage, but the hero, finding the girl wounded with a small stone, quickly sucks the blood and stone from the wound, thus both helping the girl and diplomatically avoiding marriage by becoming the girl's blood-relation. Such strategical use of events is one of the outstanding characteristics of Cuchulainn. He possesses, however, other kinds of mental ability. Among his other talents he has "the gift of calculating, the gift of sooth-saying and the gift of discernment" and is known "for the excellence of his wisdom."

When Lugaid of the Red Stripes is chosen High King of Ulster, Cuchulainn advises him, "Be strong towards your enemies; do not give evil for evil in your battle. Do not be given to too much talking. Do not speak any harm of others" and Lugaid, when he has heard all the counseling, replies, "I will keep to your words, and everyone will know that there is nothing wanting in me."

Of his extraordinary ability Cuchulainn himself is, of course, aware. He has the confidence that makes him able to attempt any enterprise which he feels worthwhile. It is significant that while he fights for his own reputation and

\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 170}\]
\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. 154}\]
\[\text{Gregory, op. cit.}, \text{p. 296}\]
honor, his first battle was against three warriors who had killed Ulstermen and not been punished; during his last fight he imperiled himself so that no one would revile his country or his race, and his greatest struggle was to defend Ulster singlehandedly against those who would pillage his people. Even if Cuchulainn boasts to the girl he wishes to marry "when my strength in fight is weakest, I fight off twenty. A third part of my strength is sufficient for thirty. . . . From dread of me, warriors avoid fords and battlefields. Hosts and multitudes and many armed men flee before the terror of my face" there is a certain noblesse oblige revealed when he says "I am a shelter for every poorman, I am a rampart of fight for every wealthy man; I give comfort to him who is wretched, I deal out mischief to him who is strong." 

During this same episode, the young Ulsterman mentions the training that he has received which enables him to perform and behave as he does and says that "among chariot-chiefs and champions, among jesters and druids, among poets and learned men, among the nobles and landlords of Ulster have I

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32Cross and Slover, op. cit., p. 150.
33Ibid., p. 337.
34Ibid., p. 158
35Ibid., p. 159.
been reared, so that I have all their manners and gifts."\textsuperscript{36} When Cuchulainn learns that Scathach can teach him feats which will enable him to become the foremost warrior in all Europe, he makes the long and dangerous journey to her home and goes in training there. When he returned to Ulster he could perform "the apple feat, the thunder feat, . . . the salmon-feat of a chariot chief, the throw of the staff, . . . the breath feat, the hero's whoop . . . running up a lance and righting the body on its point, the scythe-chariot, and the hero's twisting round spear points."\textsuperscript{37} among others. Cuchulainn alone of Scathach's pupils was taught the feat of the "gae bulga" or bag spear, which would enter the body it struck and then divide, "till every joint and every limb was filled with its barbs."\textsuperscript{38}

The chariot used by the Irish hero is the best to be had, and it is driven by "the king of the charioteers of Erin . . . Loeg mac Riangabra."\textsuperscript{39} The horses which pull his chariot are the Grey of Macha, king of Erin's steeds, and the Black Steed of the Glen. The Grey rose from the waters of Grey Lake and Cuchulainn rode him all night "with the swiftness of the wind three times round all the provinces of

\textsuperscript{36}Loc. cit.
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid., p. 168.
\textsuperscript{38}Ibid., p. 320.
\textsuperscript{39}Ibid., p. 336.
Ireland, before the Black rose from the ocean waves and joined them and the hero felt that they were obedient to his will.

Thus armed and aided, Cuchulainn is able to meet and best a wide range of formidable adversaries. The sons of Nechtan, Fomorians, the hundred men who guarded Emer, thirty-five spirit warriors, hundreds of men and champions from the army of Medb—all and more are defeated by his hand. Perhaps the challenge that reveals most about the Irish hero's bravery, comes from the "backlash," immortal giant. Cuchulainn defends himself against three magic cats which could not be killed, tears out the heart of the Spirit of the Lake which had risen to swallow him, and performs feats which gave him the right to the "Champion's Portion." His rivals, however, still contest the victory. Then there appeared a giant with "ravenous yellow eyes ... protruding from his head, each of the twain the size of an ox-vat. Each finger was as thick as a person's wrist. ... In his right hand was an axe ... its sharpness such that it would lop off hairs, the wind blowing them against its edge." The giant asks a boon of the Ulstermen, that with the exception of Conchobar, the king, and Fergus, the former king, any who would might cut off his head one night, if they would allow

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41 Cross and Slover, op. cit., p. 277.
him to cut off theirs the next. Cuchulainn's rivals in turn accept the challenge; but the backlach, when beheaded, rises and takes his head and leaves, and the rivals are each absent on the nights they are to be beheaded. When Cuchulainn is challenged, he decapitates the giant, who again appears, and Cuchulainn, faithful to his promise, leans over the block. The giant raises his powerful sword and brings it down—its blunt side below. Then the giant bids Cuchulainn rise and says that "of the warriors of Ulster and Erin, no matter their mettle, none is found to compare with thee in valor, bravery, and truthfulness. The sovereignty of the heroes of Erin to thee from this hour forth and the Champion's Portion undisputed."\(^{42}\)

The men of Ulster had decided that such a warrior must have a wife, "for their women and maidens loved him greatly . . . and they wished to give him a wife that he might have an heir."\(^{43}\) Cuchulainn says "that no maiden should go with him but she who was his equal in age and form and race, in skill and deftness"\(^{44}\) and discovers such a maid in Emer, daughter of Forgall the Wily. Knowing that her father would be adverse to the match, the hero and the maid talk to each other in riddles so that only they will know the import of the conversation.

\(^{42}\)Ibid., p. 280.
\(^{43}\)Ibid., p. 155.
\(^{44}\)Loc. cit.
Such a wife is not easily won, and the Hound of Culann has to perform three mighty tasks to get her consent. After the deeds are done, Emer becomes a fitting wife for the Champion and such is her love for him that she goes forth to fight a mighty princess of the spirit world who tries to win Cuchulainn's love.

The warrior is very conscious of his obligation to his king. Even as a young boy he addresses his leader with respect and as he wooed Emer he says, "I yield thanks to none, save Conchobar the Battle Victorious." Cuchulainn's obligation, however, is more to truth and honesty than to any man; for when the king asks the hero to go as a peaceful emissary and bring back to Ulster the sons of Usnach, Cuchulainn says, "I am not going . . . you think to kill them when they come" as, indeed, the king does.

Cuchulainn's regard for honor is so great that it causes the death of his son, his best friend, and himself. The Ulster hero leaves Aife, the woman warrior, with child. He tells her that she will bear his son and gives her a golden ring which is to identify the boy when he is sent to Ulster seven years hence. Before the boy, skilled as was his father, journeys to Ulster, taboos are put upon him not to tell his name or to give way to any man. The boy is challenged by

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\(^45\)Ibid., p. 159.

\(^46\)Gregory, op. cit., p. 116.
the warriors of Ulster, and when he refuses to reveal his name, is engaged in battle. The boy defeats the warriors and Cuchulainn is called upon to avenge the honor of Ulster. After a violent struggle, the enraged father mortally wounds his son with the "gae bulga." As the boy is dying, he shows his father the token ring. Cuchulainn is then so maddened by sorrow that he walked to the ocean and "fought with the waves three days and three nights, till he fell from hunger and weakness." 47

As the hero defends his people against the armies of Medb, she sends into single combat with him the warrior Ferdiad who had also been trained by Scathach and is as a brother to Cuchulainn. Again, because he puts honor above personal feeling, the hero fights one he loves. This battle is also won with the "gae bulga," but not until they fight bitterly for three days. In spite of repeated warnings and ill omens, Cuchulainn goes forth to his last battle "for I will not turn back from my vengeance on the men of Ireland that are come to burn and to destroy my house and my country." 48 Those whom the evil forces send against the hero are druids who have the power to call down curses on men or nations. Cuchulainn is armed with three spears. A druid demands one of the spears and says he will revile the hero if it is not given.

48 Ibid., p. 335.
Cuchulainn throws the spear, killing the druid and two others, but the spear is caught and used to kill Cuchulainn's charioteer. Cuchulainn throws the second spear when a druid threatens to revile Ulster, and that one is thrown back, killing the Grey of Macha. A third druid threatens to revile the people of Ulster if a spear is not thrown, and the hero throws it, again killing the druid and two others. Lugaid uses the last weapon to pierce Cuchulainn's body. The hero, with death upon him, refuses to die lying down and fastens himself to a stone pillar. The hero light is still shining "out of his forehead" until the mightiest of Erin's warriors is at last dead. Lugaid severs the famous head, and, as he does so, the sword falls from Cuchulainn's hand, cutting off the hand of his murderer.

In the life and death of the hero of the Ulster Cycle can be seen a close resemblance to the pattern of a heroic existence as discovered in the folk epics of other countries. Cuchulainn has, as have the others, human weaknesses. His ambition, pride, and stubbornness would be major defects in a lesser man. But, as in the stories of the other heroes, Cuchulainn possesses the extraordinary abilities which exceed his faults and give him heroic proportions. His supernatural and noble parentage, his exceptional growth and precocity, his fabulous strength and manly beauty—all are part of the heroic tradition. Cuchulainn is almost naively unconscious of the possibility of

49Cross and Slover, op. cit., p. 338.
his own failure, and a just, honorable behavior is the only one he can imagine. The weapons he bears, the skills he acquires, the friends he makes are all superlative. Thus his accomplishments and attitudes are comparable to those of the other heroes, and his stature among his friends and enemies are proof of a heroic reputation.

Not only does the Irish hero meet the standards of heroism as suggested in other folk epics, but his development and effect are those demanded by scholars of epic literature. He is the spontaneous creation of the Irish people as evidenced by the antiquity of the material. He embodies their ambitions and ideals as a true folk-hero must. He emerges from the stories not as a symbol of mankind or of a race, although many of his characteristics could be said to represent a typical human quality, but as an individual personality who captures and holds interest. As the center of the Ulster Cycle, he exhibits the dramatic strength and magnitude which are basic to heroism. He is three-dimensional—not perfect, but vivid, fallible, and fascinating as a folk-hero should be, conveying a sense of reality and excitement crossing the obstacles

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52 Ibid.
of time and place. Cuchlann once said, "Little care I nor though I were but one day or one night in being, so long as after me the history of myself and doings may endure." Not all epic heroes were willing to pay this price. It was prophesied that he would die young and his story fulfills the prophecy and the wish for enduring fame.

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54 Cross and Slover, op. cit., p. 144.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


