

Poem by Thomas Moore (28 May 1779 – 25 February 1852 / Dublin)



### **The Song of Fionnuala (Nuala)**

Silent, oh Moyle, be the roar of thy water,  
Break not, ye breezes, your chain of repose,  
While, murmuring mournfully, Lir's lonely daughter  
Tell's to the night-star her tale of woes.  
When shall the swan, her death-note singing,  
Sleep, with wings in darkness furl'd?  
When will heaven, its sweet bell ringing,  
Call my spirit from this stormy world?

Sadly, oh Moyle, to thy winter-wave weeping,  
Fate bids me languish long ages away;  
Yet still in her darkness doth Erin lie sleeping,  
Still doth the pure light its dawning delay.  
When will that day-star, mildly springing,  
Warm our isle with peace and love?  
When will heaven, its sweet bell ringing,  
Call my spirit to the fields above?

## **The Fate of the Children of Lir**

Ancient Irish Myth

As told in *More Celtic Fairy Tales*, book by Joseph Jacobs, 1894

[I added the pictures to this text. -DK]

[ from <https://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/mcft/mcft01.htm> ... with extensive author's notes and references at the end of this file]



*Children of Lir, Helen Stratton, 1915*

IT happened that the five Kings of Ireland met to determine who should have the head kingship over them, and King Lir of the Hill of the White Field expected surely he would be elected. When the nobles went into council together they chose for head king, Dearg, son of Daghdha, because his father had been so great a Druid and he was the eldest of his father's sons. But Lir left the Assembly of the Kings and went home to the Hill of the White Field. The other kings would have followed after Lir to give him wounds of spear and wounds of sword for not yielding obedience to the man to whom they had given the over-lordship. But Dearg the king would not hear of it and said: "Rather let us bind him to us by the bonds of kinship, so that peace may dwell in the land. Send over to him for wife the choice of the three maidens of the

fairest form and best repute in Erin, the three daughters of Oilell of Aran, my own three bosom-nurslings."

So the messengers brought word to Lir that Dearg the king would give him a foster-child of his foster-children. Lir thought well of it, and set out next day with fifty chariots from the Hill of the White Field. And he came to the Lake of the Red Eye near Killaloe. And when Lir saw the three daughters of Oilell, Dearg the king said to him:

"Take thy choice of the maidens, Lir." "I know not," said Lir, "which is the choicest of them all ; but the eldest of them is the noblest, it is she I had best take." "If so," said Dearg the king, "Ove is the eldest, and she shall be given to thee, if thou willest." So Lir and Ove were married and went back to the Hill of the White Field.

And after this there came to them twins, a son and a daughter, and they gave them for names Fingula and Aod. And two more sons came to them, Fiachra and Conn. When they came Ove died, and Lir mourned bitterly for her, and but for his great love for his children he would have died of his grief. And Dearg the king grieved for Lir and sent to him and said: "We grieve for Ove for thy sake; but, that our friendship may not be rent asunder, I will give unto thee her sister, Oifa, for a wife." So Lir agreed, and they were united, and he took her with him to his own house. And at first Oifa felt affection and honour for the children of Lir and her sister, and indeed every one who saw the four children could not help giving them the love of his soul. Lir doted upon the children, and they always slept in beds in front of their father, who used to rise at early dawn every morning and lie down among his children. But thereupon the dart of jealousy passed into Oifa on account of this and she came to regard the children with hatred and enmity. One day her chariot was yoked for her and she took with her the four children of Lir in it. Fingula was not willing to go with her on the journey, for she had dreamed a dream in the night warning her against Oifa : but she was not to avoid her fate. And when the chariot came to the Lake of the Oaks, Oifa said to the people : "Kill the four children of Lir and I will give you your own reward of every kind in the world." But they refused and told her it was an evil thought she had. Then she would have raised a sword herself to kill and destroy the children, but her own womanhood and her weakness prevented her; so she drove the children of Lir into the lake to bathe, and they did as Oifa told them. As soon as they

were upon the lake she struck them with a Druid's wand of spells and wizardry and put them into the forms of four beautiful, perfectly white swans, and she sang this song over them:

"Out with you upon the wild waves, children of the king!  
Henceforth your cries shall be with the flocks of birds."



***The Children of Lir, John Duncan, 1914***

*It seems one of the three brothers is missing, but I think that the painting shows the children in transition to swans from left to right, one of them already fully changed. Fionnuala's shoulder and head have begun to change. Throughout the story, right to the moment of their death, the brothers are under Fionnuala's constant care.*

And Fingula [*Fionnuala*] answered:

"Thou witch ! we know thee by thy right name !  
Thou mayest drive us from wave to wave,  
But sometimes we shall rest on the headlands  
We shall receive relief, but thou punishment.  
Though our bodies may be upon the lake,  
Our minds at least shall fly homewards."

And again she spoke : "Assign an end for the ruin and woe which thou hast brought upon us."

Oifa laughed and said " Never shall ye be free until the woman from the south be united to the man from the north, until Lairgnen of Connaught wed Deoch of Munster; nor shall any have power to bring you out of these forms.

Nine hundred years shall you wander over the lakes and streams of Erin. This only I will grant unto you: that you retain your own speech, and there shall be no music in the world equal to yours, the plaintive music you shall sing." This she said because repentance seized her for the evil she had done.

And then she spake this lay:

"Away from me, ye children of Lir,  
Henceforth the sport of the wild winds  
Until Lairgnen and Deoch come together,  
Until ye are on the north-west of Red Erin.

"A sword of treachery is through the heart of Lir,  
Of Lir the mighty champion,  
Yet though I have driven a sword.  
My victory cuts me to the heart."

Then she turned her steeds and went on to the Hall of Dearg the king. The nobles of the court asked her where were the children of Lir, and Oifa said : " Lir will not trust them to Dearg the king." But Dearg thought in his own mind

that the woman had played some treachery upon them, and he accordingly sent messengers to the Hall of the White Field.



*Children of Lir sculpture in Dublin, Oisín Kelly, c. 1966*

Lir asked the messengers "Wherefore are ye come? "

"To fetch thy children, Lir," said they.

"Have they not reached you with Oifa ?" said Lir.

They have not," said the messengers; "and Oifa said it was you would not let the children go with her."

Then was Lir melancholy and sad at heart, hearing these things, for he knew that Oifa had done wrong upon his children, and he set out towards the Lake of the Red Eye. And when the children of Lir saw him coming Fingula sang the lay :

"Welcome the cavalcade of steeds  
Approaching 'the Lake of the Red Eye,  
A company dread and magical  
Surely seek after us.



"Let us move to the shore, O Aod,  
Fiachra and comely Conn,  
No host under heaven can those  
horsemen be  
But King Lir with his mighty  
household."

*Ler (Lir) and the Swans, John H Bacon, 1905*

Now as she said this King Lir had come to the shores of the lake and heard the swans speaking with human voices. And he spake to the swans and asked them who they were. Fingula answered and said : "We are thy own children, ruined by thy wife, sister of our own mother, through her ill mind and her jealousy." "For how long is the spell to be upon you?" said Lir. "None can relieve us till the woman from the

south and the man from the north come together, till Lairnén of Connaught wed Deoch of Munster."

Then Lir and his people raised their shouts of grief, crying, and lamentation, and they stayed by the shore of the lake listening to the wild music of the swans until the swans flew away, and King Lir went on to the Hall of Dearg the king. He told Dearg the king what Oifa had done to his children. And Dearg put his power upon Oifa and bade her say what shape on earth she would think the worst of all. She said it would be in the form of an air-demon. "It is into that form I shall put you," said Dearg the king, and he struck her with a Druid's wand of spells and wizardry and put her into the form of an air-demon. And she flew away at once, and she is still an air-demon, and shall be so for ever.

But the children of Lir continued to delight the Milesian clans with the very sweet fairy music of their songs, so that no delight was ever heard in Erin to compare with their music until the time came appointed for the leaving the Lake of the Red Eye.

Then Fingula sang this parting lay

"Farewell to thee, Dearg the king,  
Master of all Druids lore  
Farewell to thee, our father dear,  
Lir of the Hill of the White Field

"We go to pass the appointed time  
Away and apart from the haunts of men  
In the current of the Moyle,  
Our garb shall be bitter and briny,

"Until Deoch come to Lairnén.  
So come, ye brothers of once ruddy cheeks  
Let us depart from this Lake of the Red Eye,  
Let us separate in sorrow from the tribe that has loved us."

And after they took to flight, flying highly, lightly, aerially till they reached the Moyle, between Erin and Albain.





***Danann Folk Listen to Lir Children Swan Music, Stephen Reid, 1909***

The men of Erin were grieved at their leaving, and it was proclaimed throughout Erin that henceforth no swan should be killed. Then they stayed all solitary, all alone, filled with cold and grief and regret, until a thick tempest came upon them and Fingula said: "Brothers, let us appoint a place to meet again if the power of the winds separate us." And they said: "Let us appoint to meet, O sister, at the Rock of the Seals." Then the waves rose up and the thunder roared, the lightning's flashed, the sweeping tempest passed over the sea, so that the children of Lir were scattered from each other over the great

sea. There came, however, a placid calm after the great tempest and Fingula found herself alone, and she said this lay:

"Woe upon me that I am alive  
My wings are frozen to my sides.  
O beloved three, O beloved three,  
Who hid under the shelter of my feathers,  
Until the dead come back to the living  
I and the three shall never meet again ! "

And she flew to the Lake of the Seals and soon saw Conn coming towards her with heavy step and drenched feathers, and Fiachra also, cold and wet and faint, and no word could they tell, so cold and faint were they: but she nestled them under her wings and said: "If Aod could come to us now our happiness would be complete" But soon they saw Aod coming towards them with dry head and preened feathers : Fingula put him under the feathers of her breast, and Fiachra under her right wing, and Conn under her left: and they made this lay:

"Bad was our stepmother with us,  
She played her magic on us,  
Sending us north on the sea  
In the shapes of magical swans.

"Our bath upon the shore's ridge  
Is the foam of the brine-crested tide,  
Our share of the ale feast  
Is the brine of the blue-crested sea."

One day they saw a splendid cavalcade of pure white steeds coming towards them, and when they came near they were the two sons of Dearg the king who had been seeking for them to give them news of Dearg the king and Lir their father. "They are well," they said, "and live together happy in all except that ye are not with them, and for not knowing where ye have gone since the day ye left the Lake of the Red Eye." "Happy are not we," said Fingula, and she sang this song:

Irish postage using painting of Lir children (never put into service):



The original art for the postage:



*Flying Children of Lir, PJ Lynch, 2008*

"Happy this night the household of Lir,  
Abundant their meat and their wine.  
But the children of Lir - what is their lot?  
For bed-clothes we have our feathers,

And as for our food and our wine -  
The white sand and the bitter brine,  
Fiachra's bed and Conn's place  
Under the cover of my wings on the Moyle,  
Aod has the shelter of my breast,  
And so side by side we rest."

So the sons of Dearg the king came to the Hall of Lir and told the king the condition of his children.

Then the time came for the children of Lir to fulfil their lot, and they flew in the current of the Moyle to the Bay of Erris, and remained there till the time of their fate, and then they flew to the Hill of the White Field and found all desolate and empty, with nothing but unroofed green raths and forests of nettles-no house, no fire, no dwelling-place. The four came close together, and they raised three shouts of lamentation aloud, and Fingula sang this lay:

Uchone ! it is bitterness to my heart  
To see my father's place forlorn -  
No hounds, no packs of dogs,  
No women, and no valiant kings

"No drinking-horns, no cups of wood,  
No drinking in its lightsome halls.  
Uchone ! I see the state of this house  
That its lord our father lives no more.

"Much have we suffered in our wandering years,  
By winds buffeted, by cold frozen;  
Now has come the greatest of our pain -  
There lives no man who knoweth us in the house where we were born."

So the children of Lir flew away to the Glory Isle of Brandan the saint, and they settled upon the Lake of the Birds until the holy Patrick came to Erin and the holy Mac Howg came to Glory Isle.

And the first night he came to the island the children of Lir heard the voice of his bell ringing for matins, so that they started and leaped about in terror at hearing it; and her brothers left Fingula alone. "What is it, beloved brothers?"

said she. "We know not what faint, fearful voice it is we have heard." Then Fingula recited this lay:

Listen to the Cleric's bell,  
Poise your wings and raise  
Thanks to God for his coming,  
Be grateful that you hear him,

"He shall free you from pain,  
And bring you from the rocks and stones.  
Ye comely children of Lir  
Listen to the bell of the Cleric."

And Mac Howg came down to the brink of the shore and said to them "Are ye the children of Lir?" "We are indeed," said they. "Thanks be to God!" said the saint; "it is for your sakes I have come to this Isle beyond every other island in Erin. Come ye to land now and put your trust in me." So they came to land, and he made for them chains of bright white silver, and put a chain between Aod and Fingula and a chain between Conn and Fiachra.

It happened at this time that Lairgnen was prince of Connaught and he was to wed Deoch the daughter of the king of Munster. She had heard the account of the birds and she became filled with love and affection for them, and she said she would not wed till she had the wondrous birds of Glory Isle. Lairgnen sent for them to the Saint Mac Howg. But the Saint would not give them, and both Lairgnen and Deoch went to Glory Isle. And Lairgnen went to seize the birds from the altar: but as soon as he had laid hands on them their feathery coats fell off, and the three sons of Lir became three withered bony old men, and Fingula, a lean withered old woman without blood or flesh. Lairgnen started at this and left the place hastily, but Fingula chanted this lay:

Come and baptise us, O Cleric,  
Clear away our stains  
This day I see our grave -  
Fiachra and Conn on each side,  
And in my lap, between my two arms,  
Place Aod, my beauteous brother."

After this lay, the children of Lir were baptised. And they died, and were buried as Fingula had said, Fiachra and Conn on either side, and Aod before her face. A cairn was raised for them, and on it their names were written in runes. And that is the fate of the children of Lir.



*Dying Children of Lir, PJ Lynch, 2009*

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<https://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/celt/mcft/mcft21.htm>

Notes and References:

I HAVE scarcely anything to add to the general account of the collection of Celtic Fairy Tales which I gave in the predecessor to this volume. Since the appearance of that volume in 1891, the publication of such tales has gone on apace. Mr. Curtin has published in the New York Sun no less than fifty more Irish fairy tales, one of which he has been good enough to place at my disposal for the present volume. Mr. Larminie has published with Mr. E. Stock a volume of West Irish Fairy Tales, of which I have also the privilege of presenting a specimen. A slight volume of Welsh Fairy Tales, published by Mr. Nutt, and a few fairy anecdotes contained in the Prize Essay on Welsh Folk-lore by the Rev. Mr. Evans, sum up Cambria's contribution to our subject during the past three years. The fifth volume of the Waifs and Strays of Celtic Tradition, just about to appear at the moment of writing, is the sole addition to Celtic Fairy Tales from the country of J. F. Campbell. Taken altogether, something like a hundred previously unpublished tales from Celtdom have been rendered accessible to the world since I last wrote, a by no means insignificant outcome in three years. It is at any rate clear, that the only considerable addition to our folk-lore knowledge in these isles must come from the Gaelic area. The time of harvest can be but short ; may the workers be many, willing, and capable.

## XXVII. THE FATE OF THE CHILDREN OF LIR.

Sources.- Abridged from the text and translation published by the Society for the Preservation of the Irish Language in 1883. This merely follows the text and version given by Professor O'Curry in *Atlantis*, iv. He used three Dublin MSS., none of them, however, of earlier date than the eighteenth century. Dr. Joyce gives a free paraphrase in his *Old Celtic Romances*.

Parallels. - For "Jealous Stepmother," see the bibliographical references in the list of incidents at the end of my paper on the Science of Folk.tales" in the Transactions of the Folk-lore Congress, sub voce. Add Miss Roalfe Cox in Folk-lore Journal vii. app. 37 also the same list sub voce "Swan Maiden Transformation." In modern Irish literature Griffin has included the tale in his Tales of the Jury-room', and Tom Moore's "Song of Fiounala" beginning "Silent, O Moyle" is founded upon it.

Remarks.-The " Fate of the Children of Lir" is always referred to along with "The Story of Deirdre " (cf the Celtic Fairy Tales, ix.), and the "Children of Tuireann" as one of the Three Sorrowful Tales of Erin. But there is no evidence of equal antiquity to the other two stories, of which one is as old as the eleventh century. From the interspersed verse O'Curry concluded, however, that the story was at least of considerable antiquity, and the references to the unknown Saint Mochaomhog confirm his impression. The Hill of the White Field is near Newton Hannton, in the county of Armagh. The Lake of the Red Eye is Lough Derg, in the Shannon above Killaloe.

Fingula is Fair Shoulder. The tradition that swans are inviolable is still extant in Ireland. A man named Connor Griffin killed eleven swans: he had previously been a prosperous man, and shortly after wards his son was drowned in the Shannon, his goods were lost, and his wife died (Children of Lir, Dublin edit., note, p. 87). In County Mayo it is believed that the souls of pure virgins are after death enshrined in the forms of swans ; if anybody injures them, it is thought he will die within a year (Walter's Natural History of the Birds of Ireland, pp.94-5). Mr. Gomme concludes from this that the swan was at one time a British totem (Arch. Rev., iii. 226-7).

At first sight the tale seems little more than an argument against the Bill for Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister, but the plaintive lays of Fingula, the touching detail of the swans flying over the desolate hill and White Field, give a touch of Celtic glamour to the whole story. There is probably also a deep religious significance implied in the fact that the wicked Aunt Stepmother's



spell is broken when the transformed Children of Lir come across the first Christian they meet.

Mr. Nutt has kindly communicated the following remarks on this tale:-

The Fate of the Children of Lir belongs formally to the so-called mythological cycle, the personages of which are the Tuatha de Danann. The Irish annalists of the 10th-11th centuries described these as members of one of the races which possessed Ireland in pre-Christian times before the coming of the Milesians. But even in the most strongly euhemerised accounts the mythic nature of these beings is apparent, and most modern scholars are agreed that they are in fact the members of a Pagan Irish Pantheon. They live on to this very day in Irish folk-belief as chiefs and rulers of the fairies.

The MS. evidence for some of the stories concerning the Tuatha de Danann is as old as that for the oldest heroic cycle (the Ultonian of Conchobar and Cuchulainn). But the Tuatha de Danann legends have retained throughout Irish literature greater plasticity and vitality than those of the Ultonian cycle, and many stories are not older in their present state than the 14th and 15th centuries. This is probably the case with the present story. The oldest known MS. only goes back to 1718, but this and the MS. of 1721, used by O'Curry for his edition, are certainly copied from much older MSS.

The interesting question for storiologists is whether the themes of the story - the swan-metamorphosis consequent upon the step-mother's jealousy, and the protecting role assigned to the sister-are of old native or of recent imported nature. In support of the first hypothesis, it may be noted that the theme of stepmotherly jealousy was current in Ireland in the 10th century at the latest, as it is woven into the saga of the Destruction of Daderga's Fort (see my article "Folk-lore," ii.). The final episode of the sudden aging of the miraculously long-lived swans is also genuinely Irish, but its true significance

is obscured in our story in a way that sufficiently demonstrates the late and secondary character of the text. The idea is that the dwellers in Faery, whether fairy-folk or mortals penetrating thither, enjoy perpetual life, forfeited by the latter the moment they return to this earth. As children of the Tuatha de Danann, Fionngula and her brothers are deathless, and the episode as it stands in our text results from a contamination of the original form of the story in which the swan-metamorphosis was annulled under certain conditions (the removal of the chains), when the original shape was resumed, and the familiar story of the mortal returning from Faery after hundreds of years, which he deems to be but a short space of time, shrinking into dust the moment he touches earth.

There is a well-known Continental folk-tale - the "Seven Swans" (or Ravens) of which we possess several medieval (12th to 13th century) versions, all connected with the romance of the "Swan Knight." M. Gaston Paris has studied the whole story group (Romania, xix. 314, &c.) with the following results The folk-tale of the seven swans had originally nothing to do with the saga of the swan-knight. The connection apparent in the 12th century texts is artificial ; the swans owe their shape-shifting capacity to the superhuman nature of their mother ; this trait has been almost effaced even in the oldest versions. The distinguishing mark of the swans in all the versions is the possession of silver or gold chains, which are what may be called metamorphosis tokens ; it follows from this that the contamination of the two story-types ("Seven Swans" and "Swan Knight") must be older than the oldest version of the first story, as these chains can only be derived from the one with which in the Swan Knight saga the swan draws the knight back.

In Romania (xxi. 62, seq.) M. Ferd. Lot examines the question in the light of our tale. He points out that it indicates clearly the super human nature of the mother, and that as the silver chains figure in the story, they cannot be due in the Continental versions to contamination with the Swan Knight saga, as M. Gaston Paris imagines. M. Lot evidently inclines to look upon them as talismans, the abandonment of which was the original cause of the metamorphosis, and the handling of which at the end brings about the change

back to human shape. He points out that these chains form an essential part of the gear of beings appearing in bird guise (especially if they belong to Faery); thus in the 10th-century 'Sickbed of Cuchulaion' the goddesses Fand and Liban appear as two swans united by a golden chain; in the 8th to 9th century Conception of Cuchulainn, Dechtire, the mother of the hero by the god Lug, appears with her companions in the guise of many-hued birds linked together by chains of silver (or red gold in one version). The MS. evidence for these tales reaches back to the early 11th century.

Curiously enough, M. Lot has not cited the closest parallel to our tale from old Irish literature, and one which is certainly connected with it in some measure, the fine story called the "Dream of Angus." A story of this title is cited in the epic catalogue of the Book of Leinster (which dates back to the early 11th century) as one of the introductory stories to the Tam bo Cuailgne. This assumed its present shape substantially between 650 and 750. The introductory stories had originally no connection with it, and were invented or re-shaped in the 8th to 10th centuries, after the Tam had taken undisputed place as the leading Irish epic. The tale may therefore be ascribed provisionally to the 9th century, if we can only be sure that the existing version, preserved in a single MS. of the 15th century, is a faithful copy of the original. There need be no doubt as to this. The text is due to a Christian scribe, and, like nearly all portions of the mythological cycle, betrays signs of Christian influence, though not of Christian remodelling. Such influence is, however, far more likely to have exerted itself in the first stage of the written existence of these tales, when the memory of organised paganism was still tenacious, than later, when the tales had become subject-matter for the play of free poetic fancy. The story, printed and translated by Dr. E. Muller, Rev. Celt. iv. 342, &c., is as follows: Angus (the chief wizard of the Tuatha de Danann) is visited in sleep by a maiden whose beauty throws him into love sickness. The whole of Ireland is scoured to find her the Dagda is appealed to in vain. At length, Bodb, fairy king of Munster, finds her at Loch bel Dracon (this is not the only trace of the impression which the story of Bel and the Dragon made upon the Irish mind). She lives there with 150 swans ; one year they are in swan shape the next in human shape. They appear as white birds with silvery chains and golden caps around their heads. Angus changes himself into a swan to be with her, and it is recorded of the music they made that "people fell

asleep for three days and three nights." The soporific power of music is that which is chiefly commended in old Irish literature.

I think it is obvious that the writer of our story was familiar with this and other legends in which swan-maids encircled with gold and silver chains appear, and that we may fairly draw the following conclusions from the preceding facts : There existed an Irish folk-tale of a king with two wives, one a water or sea fairy, whose children derive from her the capacity of shape-shifting dependent upon certain talismans ; jealousy impels the human wife to tamper with these talismans, and the children are condemned to remain in their animal form. This folk-tale was, probably at some time in the 14th or 15th century, arbitrarily fitted into the cadre of the Tuatha de Danann cycle, and entirely re-fashioned in a spirit of pious edification by a man who was in his way a great and admirable artist. The origin and nature of the story, all the elements of which are genuinely national, assured for it wide and lasting popularity. The evolution of the Irish folk-tale is in no way dependent upon that of the Continental folk-tale of the Seven Swans, but it is possible that the Celtic presentiment of the chain-girdled swans may have influenced it as well as the Swan Knight Romance.