

## FENIAN MATERIAL IN THE WORK OF JAMES STEPHENS

IT is well known that W. B. Yeats used Fenian or Ossianic material in his long poetic work, *The Wanderings of Oisín* (in several versions spelt Usheen),<sup>1</sup> in a few other poems,<sup>2</sup> and together with George Moore in their play about Diarmuid and Gráinne. Perhaps it is less well known, except to Stephens scholars and enthusiasts, that James Stephens also explored Fenian material, in two early poems, 'The Song of Ossian' (*Sinn Féin*, 3 August 1907), and 'Oisín and Niamh' (*Sinn Féin*, 26 February 1910), as well as in a number of stories in *Irish fairy tales* (1920).<sup>3</sup>

In *Ossian and the Ossianic Literature* (in *Popular Studies in Mythology Romance and Folklore* No. 3, 1910), Alfred Nutt states that 'in the post-twelfth century Irish literature the Ossianic cycle occupies an almost predominant position' (p. 106). The two longest Ossianic or Fenian texts are *Acallam na Senórach* (13th century but preserved in 15th and 17th-century MSS), and *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* (text ed. and trans. from 18th century manuscripts by Standish Hayes O'Grady in *Silva Gadelica*, I and II).<sup>4</sup> Both these tales are written in a mixture of prose and verse, the narrative form characteristic of most Irish sagas and tales.

Myles Dillon, in *Early Irish Literature* (Chicago, 1948), writes in agreement with Nutt, 'While a few of the texts relating to Finn can be dated to the Old and early Middle Irish period, it is in the late Middle Irish period that the Fenian cycle becomes prominent' (p. 34); like Nutt, he also stresses that 'The predominance of the Fenian cycle in the literature begins with the composition, ca AD 1200, of a long story called *Acallam na Senóroch* ("The Colloquy of Old Men"), which is second only to the Táin in length. . . ' (p. 36). The protagonist is not Ossian, but Caílte (or Caoilte), another of the Fenian heroes, who relates the heroic deeds of the Fianna to the willing listener, St Patrick, the meeting of these two forming a kind of frame for this long episodic story which is thought to have been influenced by Norse material, and also has many affinities with the *Dinnshenchas* ('History of Places'). The *Acallam* consists of a large number of Ossianic episodes dealing with Finn and his warriors and their relationship with the Tuatha Dé Danann, who may appear in human form and live in hills and mounds and are endowed with superhuman power in magic and shape-shifting. Love between fairies and humans is one theme, warfare another. An outstanding feature of the *Acallam* is the description of Nature, both in her softer and sterner aspects, often depicted with lyrical intensity both in prose and verse. In the story, Oisín joins his mother

<sup>1</sup> The first version of *The Wanderings of Oisín* was completed in 1887 and published in *The wanderings of Oisín and other poems*.

<sup>2</sup> In the poems 'The Hosting of the Sidhe', 'The Danaan Quicken Tree', 'Under the Moon', 'Alternative Song for the Severed Head in *The King of the Great Clock Tower*', 'News for the Delphic Oracle', and 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'. The most remarkable innovation is perhaps Yeats's calling Niamh 'man-picker' in 'News for the Delphic Oracle'. In his prose, Yeats also often refers to Ossian.

<sup>3</sup> First ed. (illustrated), London: Macmillan 1920. References in my text are to the 2nd. ed. of 1923 (without illustrations).

<sup>4</sup> Also a fragment from a 15th-century manuscript is edited and translated by K. Meyer in *Revue Celtique*, 11 (1890) 125–34, but seeing that the title *Aithed Gráinne ingine Corbmaic la Diarmait ua nDuibni* is in a tenth-century list of tales, the original story must be centuries older than the extant version.

in a fairy cave leaving Caílte to wander alone until he meets St Patrick at Druim Dearg, where their colloquy begins. Caílte tells him ‘the legends of the hills and woods and lakes to which they come, in the manner of the *Dinnshenchas*’ (Dillon, *Early Irish literature* 36). In the end, Patrick promises heaven to Caílte and the other Fenians. In later tradition, however, Patrick is turned into a bigoted old man, whose heaven with its angels Oisín would reject in favour of the company of the Fianna in hell.

There are a number of other Ossianic tales – some of which Stephens used in *Irish Fairy Tales* and which will be dealt with below – but by far the largest body of texts are the ballads, as Fenian poems are generally called. Actually, after the 11th century, particularly from the 12th century, the ballads are much more common than the prose romances or tales. One of the most important collections is *Duanaire Finn* (‘The Poem-Book of Finn’). It dates from about the same time as the *Acallam*, but although some of the poems are much earlier and actually differ in age by as much as three centuries, this collection was written down as late as the 17th century by two scribes in Ostend and Louvain for Sorley O’Donnell, one of the Wild Geese. The manuscript finally came to the Franciscan Convent in Dublin in 1872 (see Dillon, *Early Irish literature* 50). These poems deal, not so much with fairies and monsters and their relationship with the Fenian heroes as with the feuds between Finn’s Clanna Baiscne and Goll’s Clanna Morna. Goll (the ‘One-eyed One’) is generally presented as the superior warrior and Finn’s role is minimized.

A poem of great interest, not only from our point of view but also in general, is Michael Comyn’s (Micheál Coimin’s) ‘Oisín’s Lay on Tír na nÓg’ (1760), which together with the *Acallam* and a prose tale in Joyce’s *Old Celtic Romances*,<sup>5</sup> inspired Yeats’s *Wanderings of Oisín*.<sup>6</sup> Oisín’s lay also inspired Stephens’s early poem ‘Oisín and Niamh’, although he used only a small part of the legendary material. Comyn’s poem is faithful to the old tradition of the relationship between the Fenians and the fairies, dealing as it does with Oisín’s journey with his fairy bride Niamh to the happy Otherworld, and his sojourn there. By contrast, Macpherson, who wrote about the same time as Comyn, created a Scottish national epic<sup>7</sup> in which he mixes the Finn and Cuchulain cycles freely, and also introduces Norse material. Such matter had indeed influenced the Fenian cycle ever since the Norse invasions of Ireland started at the end of the 8th century. Whereas the common view was that Finn’s warriors – the *Fianna* or *Fiana* – were a third-century militia, H. Zimmer defended the view that Finn was actually the leader of a 9th-century mixed Irish/Norse band of warriors. The fairly old age of the Fenian material is testified by references to and stories about Finn in Cormac’s glossary (early 10th century). The outstanding heroes in the Cycle are Fionn and his son Ossian or

<sup>5</sup> P. W. Joyce, *Old Celtic romances*, London [1879], 2nd ed. revised and enlarged 1894). Several reprints.

<sup>6</sup> See J. J. Blake, ‘Yeats, Oisín, and Irish Gaelic Literature’, in B. Bramsbäck and M. J. Croghan (ed.), *Anglo-Irish and Irish literature: aspects of language and culture*. Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature, Held at Uppsala University, 4–7 August, 1988, vols i–ii. *Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia* 64–65, vol. i, pp. 39–48. See also B. Bramsbäck, *Folklore and W. B. Yeats*, *Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia* 51 (Uppsala 1984), pp. 15, 76, 78–81.

<sup>7</sup> Josef Bysveen, *Epic tradition and innovation in James Macpherson’s Fingal*. (Doctoral dissertation, Uppsala 1982). *Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia* 44.

Oisín, Caoilte, the son of one of Finn's sisters, Oscar, Oisín's son, and Diarmuid (the son of another sister of Finn), who has an important role in *The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Gráinne*.

In common with John (Eoin) MacNeill and Eleanor Hull, Stephens considered the Fenian cycle to be older than the Ulster Cycle, a view I do not share. True, when writing his two early Ossianic poems, he had not studied his material very closely or read as many stories as he did later for his *Irish fairy tales*. He had not even settled his spelling, for in the first poem he renders the name *Finn*, in the second *Fin* and in *Irish Fairy Tales* he spells it *Fionn*. Furthermore, he called Fionn's father Ual, and Fionn Mac Uail is the form he uses for his favourite Fionn. He intended that Fionn should rime with *tune*<sup>8</sup> and considered Mac Uail to be the older form of Mac Cumhaill.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, we find two forms of the name Oisín, which is Ossian in his first poem and Oisín in his second.

After these preliminaries, it is time to turn to Stephens's two poems 'The Song of Ossian' and 'Oisín and Niamh', which, although no masterpieces, nevertheless have some merit and deserve to be dealt with here.

Stephens's 'Song of Ossian' written in blank verse, is broken up into 15 stanzas of varying length – some very long, some short. Finn asks his son Ossian, the poet to recite 'the wonder song of Ossian'.<sup>10</sup> When the heroes have become silent, Ossian begins his poem about his father, 'Great Finn Mac Cumhaill the hero' (*JIL*, 68). Ossian refers to Finn and his warlike deeds but instead of developing into a eulogy extolling the glamorous deeds of Finn, the poem turns into a criticism of Finn's continuous killing, his 'butcher's trade'. The poem is anti-heroic in tone, being levelled against war and warfare, and Finn's greatness is questioned. Ossian sitting under an oak, a sacred tree, expresses his admiration for the beauty of nature. Moreover, his poetic foreknowledge allows him to hear what people in Erin (Stephens's spelling) would say in a thousand years time and he hears nothing but the people cursing Finn and his warriors and their 'bitter legacy of hate' (*JIL* 73). Ossian becomes the spokesman for Stephens himself. He is almost a pacifist, who will countenance war only if it is in the pursuit of a just cause or in opposition to tyranny. The poem is unique in so far as Stephens found fault with Finn for what may be seen as his senseless and incessant warring. In other words Stephens did not follow tradition and assign a heroic role to Finn, nor did he turn him into a giant or burlesque figure, as often happens in the later Fenian tradition. The anti-war and anti-heroic tone of the poem shows Stephens to be an independent explorer of his material, yet, apart from a number of really beautiful lines, the poem is much too long-winded to be particularly successful.

Stephens's second Fenian poem, 'Oisín and Niamh', which is more successful than the first, is based on Comyn's poem about Oisín's sojourn in the Land of the

<sup>8</sup> Stephens, *Irish fairy tales*, p. 34n, where Stephens remarks: 'Pronounce Fewn to rhyme with 'tune'.'

<sup>9</sup> In this he has the support of Dinneen's *Foclóir Gaedhilge agus Béarla: Irish-English dictionary* (1st ed. 1904) where, under *umhall*, it is stated that Oole occurs in Connacht place-names, and that Fionn MacUail is the original form, not F. MacCumhaill.

<sup>10</sup> R. Hogan (ed.), *The Journal of Irish Literature: A James Stephens Number (JIL)*, 4 (1975), p. 67. Contains Stephens's uncollected prose and poetry published in the *United Irishman*, *Sinn Féin*, and the *Sinn Féin Daily* edited by Patricia McFate. Comparisons with my own photocopies (acquired in the 1950s) show that her editing is careful. Some items are, however, missing.

Young in the company of his fairy bride Niamh. Unlike the original, and for that matter Yeat's use of the legend, Stephens does not deal with the journey to Tír na nÓg, or even Oisín's sojourn there, but concentrates on the moment of crisis when Oisín is about to part from Niamh after more than three hundred years. The poem is written in stanzas of varying length, most of them irregular couplets alternating with quatrains and other verse forms. Stephens's first collection of poems, *Insurrections*, had appeared in 1909 and although there are still traces of the gloom typical of that volume, this Fenian poem presages the brighter kind of poetry which is to be found in certain poems in *The Hill of vision* (1912).

'Oisín and Niamh' begins at the end of Oisín's stay in the Land of the Young when he is giving expression to his longing for Erin:

But when three hundred years and more had passed  
 There came a longing on me at the last  
 To leave the soft delights  
 And peaceful sights  
 Of Tír na nÓg, the Country of the Young:  
 To hear again the tongue  
 Of my dear fierce companions, and to see  
 Kind Erin and its men of melody  
*JLL*, 89–90

After the king had given him permission to leave, the time had come for Oisín to bid goodbye to Niamh. In a place where everyone is eternally happy, it is perhaps surprising that Niamh should shed tears. Nevertheless, for once she is utterly miserable at the thought that she might never see Oisín again, for she knows that if he as much as touches earth, he will die in the land of men, his life having been supernaturally prolonged in Faery. Stephens takes such features of the underlying legend to be generally known and understood. He further has Niamh recite a poem in which she declares that 'woman is a branch tree' and 'man a singing wind', who is wooing the tree. Woman is therefore represented as being stationary whereas man is seen as being ready to move. These metaphors are extended when Niamh adds that when the tree is withered, the singing wind may begin 'wooing another tree, another maid' – a rather conventional but beautifully phrased innovation adding to the charm of the old legend. In a revised form, he included this part of the Oisín poem in *The Hill of vision* (pp. 95–96), with the title 'Wind and Tree: To *AE*'. Standing alone, this part of the poem assumes a broader and more general significance than as part of the Oisín poem. Apart from having two of Stephens's favourite images, wind and tree, the poem also contains in embryo form, one of his most interesting themes, the conflict between the sexes or more strictly between the male and female principles, which is such a vital element in, for example, *The Crock of gold* and *The Demi-Gods*.

Although Niamh says she is a withered tree, her golden hair shows that her beauty is essentially unimpaired. Nevertheless, she dispraises herself maintaining that she no longer holds any attraction for Oisín. She also deplors the rain, the wind and the withered leaves he will meet in Erin:

Where the sky is grey as a battered shield,  
 And the rain is falling both night and day  
 On the withered leaves in the withered field,  
 And the sun beams far away.  
*JIL*, 93.

However, her complaints about the ‘sad, wet wind’ and the ‘tale of woe’ of the harpers with tales as sad as ‘the wind and the rain’ make little impression on Oisín, who conjures up a pastoral beauty of Erinn where one can hear the calls of the hounds and the stags and the peaceful song of the birds and listen to the rivers telling their tales and watch the cattle grazing among the buttercups and daisies. Above all, he is longing to see his father Fin (the spelling used in this poem) and hear the tales of the harpers and the clash of the swords. More than anything he wishes to be asked to recite a lay: ‘Oisín will make a poem, silence all’ (*JIL*, 95).

The weeping Niamh then recites five four-line stanzas also published, with a few revisions in stanzas 3 and 4, as ‘The End of the Road: To *AE*’, in *The Hill of vision* (pp. 93–94), where, removed from its original context, this poem also assumes a wider meaning, stressing even further the sadness of the parting of dear friends.

‘This is a thing is true  
 Everything comes to an end:  
 The loving of me and you,  
 The walking of friend and friend.  
*JIL*, 95

In her parting song, Niamh expresses the conviction that she and Oisín will never meet again. At the end of the poem she sits, as if paralysed, with her ‘golden cloak about her golden hair’, hiding her eyes and rocking to and fro, an image of sorrow. Oisín’s loud shout from his ship (he does not ride Manannan’s fairy horse as in the original) is left unanswered.

In a final stanza, Oisín attempts to comfort Niamh, emphasizing that he is not leaving her for another woman in Erinn but in order to get news of his father Fin and his clan and to learn if he himself is still remembered in Erinn.

The poem, although not one of Stephens’s best, has a lyric charm of its own and expresses his love for nature. It is interesting in its juxtaposition of two opposing views of Erinn, quite familiar to anyone who has spent sometime in that country: the sadness of the wind, the rain and the harpers’ tales as presented by Niamh and the vigour and beauty of its sunshine, flowers, birds, cattle, stags and hounds as presented by Oisín. Stephens shared with Ossianic literature a keen sense of nature. His descriptions have much in common with, for example, the ‘Blackbird of Derrycarn’, a fine specimen of lyric nature poetry quoted by Dillon (*Early Irish literature* 41–42). The blackbird has been brought to Derrycarn by the son of Cumhall, i.e. Finn, from ‘Norway of the blue streams’, and the song of the bird is contrasted to the (clerical) ringing of bells, a sound which ‘was not sweet’ to the Fenians.

Let us turn now to Stephens's use of Fenian material in *Irish fairy tales*. This work has its origins in 1913, when Stephens was encouraged by his friend T. W. Howe at 'Freelands, Kentucky,' to write a book of *Irish fairy tales*.<sup>11</sup> His study of the treasure-trove of Irish sagas and tales resulted not only in *Irish fairy tales* but also in two other prose works, *In the Land of Youth* (1924) and *Deirdre* (1923).

Now, let us have a brief look at the genesis of *Irish fairy tales*. A manuscript of *Irish fairy tales* preserved in the New York Public Library (Berg Collection) reveals that the stories were written between April 1915 and August 1919, in other words when Stephens lived in Paris.<sup>12</sup> 'The Little Brawl at Allen', is, however, not included in the MS, and a story, 'The Salmon of Knowledge', dated July 1919, is not among the stories in *Irish fairy tales* (although the figure of the salmon of knowledge forms a prominent part in 'The Boyhood of Fionn'). The manuscript stories supplied with dates are: 'The Childhood of Fionn', dated 28 July 1919, printed as 'The Boyhood of Fionn', in *Irish fairy tales*, 'The Birth of Bran', dated 14 April 1914, 'Oisín's Mother', dated July 1915, 'Becuma of the White Skin' (see below), dated 21 August 1919, and 'Mongan's Frenzy or Vision', dated 11 Sept. 1918. (There is also a scenario of 'Mongan's Frenzy or Vision', dated 11 Sept. 1918 but not included in *Irish fairy tales*, for obvious reasons.) The first story in *Irish fairy tales*, 'The Story of Tuan Mac Cairill', has no date, but was first published in *The Irish Statesman* (Vol. 1, 28 June, 1919). 'The Wooing of Becfolá', 'The Carl of the Drab Coat', 'The Enchanted Cave of Cesh Corran', are likewise left undated in the manuscript, but it is fair to assume that they were written between 1915 and 1919.

Stephens was very firm about the order in which the stories should appear in the printed book, both in England and in the United States. In a letter to Sir Frederick MacMillan (of MacMillan & Company, London), dated Dublin 20 February 1920, he gives instructions that the stories should appear in the following order:

The Story of Tuan Mac Cairill  
 The Boyhood of Fionn  
 The Birth of Bran  
 Oisín's Mother,  
 Becfolá,  
 The Little Brawl at Allen,  
 The Carl of the Drab Coat,  
 The Enchanted Cave of Cesh Corran,  
 Becuma of the White Skin,  
 Morgan's Frenzy

In the letter concerned Stephens also writes that 'the stories, as set out above, form a natural sequence and to alter it would be to do violence to the book.'<sup>13</sup>

Most readers familiar with the contents of the stories will perhaps recognize the pattern underlying the sequence adopted by Stephens. The two stories about

<sup>11</sup> R. J. Finneran, ed. *Letters of James Stephens* (London 1974), pp. 246–247.

<sup>12</sup> Number 79 in Birgit Bramsbäck, *James Stephens: a literary and bibliographical study* (Uppsala, Lund 1959).

<sup>13</sup> Finneran, *Letters*, p. 247.

Tuan and Mongan, one introducing the collection, the other concluding it, serve, as Patricia McFate has pointed out, 'as a frame' for the other stories.<sup>14</sup> Tuan's metamorphoses – from man to stag, boar, hawk, salmon – introduce us to a world of metamorphosis which we meet also in 'The Birth of Bran' and 'Oisín's Mother' as well as in 'The Carl of the Drab Coat'. In the Mongan story the underlying idea is that Mongan was really a reincarnation of Fionn. Like 'The Birth of Bran' and 'Oisín's Mother', 'The Boyhood of Fionn', the second story in the collection, has a serious tone, whereas the remaining three Fenian stories, 'The Little Brawl at Allen', 'The Carl of the Drab Coat', and 'The Enchanted Cave of Cesh Corran' are written in an exuberant mock-epic manner which stresses the grotesque features of the originals. The Becfola story separates the three serious Fionn stories from the three comic ones, which in their turn are followed by another story about an evil-minded woman, Becuma of the White Skin, a story which was first entitled 'Art the Son of Conn', since it derives from the Irish story, 'The Adventure of Art Son of Conn' (*Echtrae Airt Meic Cuinn*).<sup>15</sup>

Neither the Becfola nor the Becuma (also written Bé Cuma) story is Fenian, but they both have a strong theme of jealousy, as has 'Mongan's Frenzy', as pointed out by Stephens in the letter to Harold Macmillan already quoted; 'there is no story of passion or jealousy until Becfola is reached, the only story of the same tone would be Becuma and Mongan's Frenzy' (*Letters*, p 247). The first three of the Ossianic stories are the same as those found in Lady Gregory's *God's and fighting men* (1904), whereas the last three are retelling of stories in *Silva Gadelica*, a source first pointed out by Norreys Jephson O'Connor in *Changing Ireland*,<sup>16</sup> who also indicates which of the stories are Fenian. The Becuma story is, however, linked to the Finn cycle by a short reference to Finn and his Fianna giving protection to the boy Segda, who left his father for a while to help Conn (*Irish fairy tales*, 266, where on this point Stephens follows the original story). In the Mongan story, as Saul has pointed out, Stephens has convincingly tied in 'the oldest tradition with late stories of Fionn's reincarnation as Mongan, son of the sea-god, Manannan Mac Lir!'.<sup>17</sup>

One might wonder why Stephens let *Irish fairy tales* begin with the Tuan Mac Cairill story. One reason may of course be, as has been pointed out, its world of metamorphosis which is found also in Fenian material, but it seems to me that above all he wanted his book to begin with a story dealing with the first man in Ireland, the only survivor of Partholon's family, providing an appropriate background for the six stories dealing with the Fenian cycle, which, as mentioned, Stephens,

<sup>14</sup> P. McFate, *The Writings of James Stephens: Variations on a Theme of Love* (London 1979), p. 71. For her notes on sources, see especially notes to chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup> Translated as 'The Adventures of Art son of Conn, and the Courtship of Delbchaem daughter of Morgan' by R. I. Best in *Ériu* 3 (1907) 149–173. It is found in K. Meyer, *The Voyage of Bran* i, (London: David Nutt), pp. 56–84.

<sup>16</sup> N. Jephson O'Connor, *Changing Ireland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), the first to point to *Silva Gadelica* as a source used by Stephens.

<sup>17</sup> G. P. Saul, 'Withdrawn in Gold', in *Arizona Quarterly* 9/2 (1953), 115–131, esp. 128. The Mongan story was inspired especially by volume 2 of K. Meyer and A. Nutt's *The Voyage of Bran* (1897), in which Nutt in 'The Celtic Doctrine of Rebirth' deals with the Mongan legend and its relationship with Arthur and Finn. The name Mongan is explained as being originally *Mong-find*, i.e. 'the white mane', with a reference to the sea-god's son.

like MacNeill and Eleanor Hull, considered to be in origin older than the Ulster cycle. The Becfolá story serves as a suitable tale of love and jealousy to separate the two sets of Fenian stories, and the Becuma story, again finds its place between the last Fionn tale and the Mongan tale.

One cannot but agree with G. B. Saul when he exclaims; 'Alas for the other major tales untold: of the bewitched hunt as Slieve Cuillin, the great *dord fiansa* – or war-cry – which raised the epic fighting at the House of the Quicken Trees, the pursuit of the giant into the 'Country-under-Wave' and the 'Land of Promise', the sorry tragedy of Diarmuid and Grainne, the sojourn of Oisín in the '*Land of the Young*'! (Saul, 'Withdrawn in Gold', 128).

Our major concern now will be the six Fionn stories proper in *Irish fairy tales*, first 'The Boyhood of Fionn', (in the Irish original called *Macgnímartha Finn*, the 'Boyhood Deeds of Finn'), the delightful and masterly rendering of the youthful exploits of Fionn, whose name was first Deimne, Ual Mac Baiscne's son by the beautiful Muirne, who, when her husband was killed by Goll Mac Morna, married the King of Kerry and left her son in the charge of two druid women, Bovmall (Finn's father's sister, in other words Deimne's aunt) and Lia Luachra. The boy had to be hidden from the Clan of Morna, Goll's clan, and in the woods of Slieve Bloom he was given all the knowledge of his guardians, who also told him all they knew about his father. The story could be called an educational tale or a story of development, for we are all the time concerned with the education of Fionn. One day he left his guardians and spent some time with a group of poets in the Galtee Mountains. Here he learnt to write poetry as he had earlier learnt the art of running, leaping and swimming. The two guardians found him in a robber's den, the robber being Bovmall's husband, and brought him back to Slieve Bloom. Again the boy went away and came to Moy Lifé, where he joined a group of swimming boys, who gave him his new name Fionn, or the Fair One, for they found him 'fair and well shaped' (*Irish fairy tales*, p. 62). When leaving the boys, who were jealous of him, he took service with the King of Finntraigh at Loch Léin. The King guessed that the boy was Ual's son and again Fionn had to leave, and this time he came to the King of Kerry, his mother's husband, and from there he went to the poet Finegas, the man who told him about the Salmon of Knowledge, who got his wisdom from eating the nuts of a hazel tree falling into a secret pool (also called Conla's well). In the Tuan story, the Salmon of Knowledge also plays an important role for when Tuan has lived his life for some time as the King of the Fish, he is caught by the King of Ulster's fisherman and eaten by the queen, who then gives birth to Tuan, who thus can boast a double pedigree. Stephens also introduces the Wise Salmon in *The Crock of gold* where he is the source of the wisdom of the two Philosophers (especially the surviving one).

Fionn himself is always associated with the Salmon of Knowledge, for it had been foretold that it would be caught by Finegas and eaten by Fionn, who, however, did not eat it until he knew that it was meant for him and not for Finegas. He had, however, burnt his thumb while roasting the fish for Finegas and happened to lick it and suck up some of the wisdom of the salmon – the thumb-of-knowledge motif of Fenian tradition. Finegas then asked him to eat the whole fish and thus the education of Fionn was completed and perfected. From now on he dropped

his double identity Deimne/Fionn and set out for Tara and the High King. There he made Goll submit to him and then young Finn took command of the Fianna of Ireland. Before he got to Tara, he had also killed the Dagda's grandson Aillen with Aillen's own sword. He brought Aillen's head to the king of Tara, who knew then who the newcomer really was. When eating the salmon, Fionn learnt the 'three things which make a poet sacred', the original story says, '*teinm laeda, imbas forosndai* and *dichetal di chennaib*', that is, three means of divination (quoted by Dillon, *Early Irish literature* 36 and 36n). At the time Fionn is supposed to have made the poem 'Song of Summer' which begins:

Summer-time, season supreme,  
Splendid is colour then.  
Blackbirds sing a full lay  
If there be a slender shift of day  
(Dillon, *Early Irish literature* 158–160).

Stephens divides this long and interesting narrative into 14 chapters. (All the fairy tales in *Irish fairy tales* are divided into chapters.) In his presentation of these Fenian stories, Stephens 'seems as one to whom everything has become luminously simple' (Saul, 'Withdrawn in Gold', 128).

Whatever Stephens may have said to the contrary (see above), jealousy plays a conspicuous part both in 'The Birth of Bran' and in 'Oisín's Mother'. In the former story, Uct Dealv (Fair Beast) a woman of the Shí, turns, in jealousy, against Tuiren, Muirne's sister, because her lover Iollan has deserted her for Tuiren. Therefore she transforms Tuiren into a hound, whom she gives away to a hater of dogs, Fergus Fionnliath, who, however, comes to love the little hound. Fionn, angry with Iollan because his wife is no longer with him, threatens to behead him if Tuiren (who is Fionn's aunt) does not return. Iollan has to pledge himself for the rest of his life to his former fairy lover, Uct Dealv, who, pacified, gives Tuiren back her human shape but is unable to give human shape to the two whelps (and in some versions three) Tuiren has given birth to. They remain in the form of hounds and these canine cousins of his become Fionn's favourite hounds and companions on his hunting expeditions. He calls them Bran and Sceólan. Tuiren is then married to Lughaid, who has to prove that no woman has a claim on him. This story shows the close relations there are between the real world and Faery, and how love and jealousy may influence their lives.

In 'Oisín's Mother', Fear Doirche, the Dark Man of the Shí, turns his jealousy and anger against Saeve (Middle Irish Sadb), Fionn's fairy wife, whom he transforms into a fawn, loved from the first by Bran and Sceólan. Saeve initially appears in the shape of a fawn that Bran and Sceólan had come across in the forest. Then she appears in the shape of a beautiful woman, asking for protection against a ruthless pursuer, the Fear Doirche. Fionn marries her and loves her more than anything else, but loses her when he is on a fighting expedition against the men of Lochlann. In the meantime Saeve has been lured away by her fairy lover, who has assumed Fionn's shape in order to get her to come with him to Faery. More than seven years later, when out hunting, Fionn finds a seven-year-old boy under a tree in the woods. The boy who proves to be his son by Saeve is given the name

Oisín, the Little Fawn, in memory of his fairy wife. Oisín, half fairy, half human, becomes the chief poet of the Fianna, and it is to him that most of the Fenian ballads are attributed.

Stylistically, *Irish fairy tales* is a masterpiece and a delight to read. Let us hear the last two sentences of 'Oisín's Mother' ingeniously linking Oisín's birth in Faery with the ballad relating his sojourn with Niamh in the Land of the Young:

But he was not yet finished with the Shí. He was to go back into Faery when the time came and to come thence again to tell these tales, for it was by him these tales were told.

*Irish fairy tales*, 148

As an example of Stephens's descriptive narrative, let me quote a passage from 'Oisín's Mother':

They were pacing so, through the golden-shafted, tender-coloured eve, when a fawn leaped suddenly from covert, and, with that leap, all quietness vanished: the men shouted, the dogs gave tongue, and a furious chase commenced.

*Irish fairy tales*, 22.

With sudden changes in tone Stephens varies both the setting and the speed of the narrative. He also develops the characters in his stories: Fionn, the warrior and hunter, is pictured as being a man of a meditative and philosophical mind, for 'even in his wildest moment Fionn was thoughtful and now, running hard, he was thoughtful' (*Irish fairy tales*, 123).

The sudden strange behaviour and speed of his two favourite hounds have set him thinking. The hounds find a beautiful fawn whom they start licking and playing with instead of killing. Being themselves born in Faery, they recognise this fawn as being no ordinary animal. It is of course Saeve in her fawn shape, and Stephens's describes Fionn's love for Saeve as follows:

Indeed, Fionn loved Saeve as he had not loved a woman before and indeed would never love again. He loved her as he had never loved anything before. He could not bear to be away from her. When he saw her he did not see her and when he saw the world without her it was as though he saw nothing or as if he looked on a prospect that was bleak and depressing. . . .

She filled him with wonder and surprise. There was magic in the tips of her fingers. Her thin palm ravished him. Her slender foot set his heart beating; and whatever way her head moved there came a new shape of beauty to her face.

He attended no more to the Fianna. He ceased to hunt. He did not listen to the songs of poets or the curious sayings of magicians, for all these were in his wife and something that was beyond these was in her also. *Irish fairy tales*, pp. 132–133.

It is hardly surprising that Stephens's retellings are superior in style to O'Grady's literal and consequently somewhat stilted translations, but it may also be said that he surpasses the original Fenian stories themselves. I would also go so far as to say that Lady Gregory, Stephens's second major source, is not always a match for Stephens himself. Take, for example, her description of Finn's love for Sadb:

Then Finn gave her his love, and took her as his wife, and she stopped in Almhuin. And so great was his love for her, he gave up his hunting and all the things he used to take pleasure in, and gave his mind to no other thing but herself.<sup>18</sup>

It now remains for me to consider the three comic stories in *Irish fairy tales*. In these stories Stephens concentrates on grotesque and antiheroic features and he loses no opportunity of deriving fun from the narrative. They reflect the versatility with which Stephens approached his material.

The three stories concerned are, two *bruidhen* (Classical Irish *bruidhen*, plural *bruidhne*) stories, 'The Little Brawl at Allen' (*Bruidhen bheg na hAlmhain*) 'The Enchanted Cave of Cesh Corran' (*Bruidhen chéise Chorainn*) and, inserted between them, the hilarious adventure story, 'The Carl of the Drab Coat' (*Bodach an chóta lachtna*).<sup>19</sup>

In spite of its underlying comic and grotesque tone, 'The Little Brawl at Allen', the Irish text of which is preserved in a 19th-century manuscript in the British Museum, is far from being a children's story. In the two *bruidhen* stories, *bruidhen* has two different meanings. It should perhaps first be mentioned that in *Scéla Mucce Meic Da Thó* ('The Story of Mac Dathó's Pig'), we are told of five *bruidne* in Ireland, those of Da Derga, Thorgall, Mac Da Réo, Da Choca and Da Thó. In Edmund Hogan's *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (Dublin 1910), a sixth *bruiden*, 'Bruiden Blai Brugad or Brudaig Forgaill Manach' is mentioned (p. 130). The word originally means a banqueting-hall, and T. F. O'Rahilly maintains that it often refers to 'the Otherworld festive Hall, the Celtic Valhalla'.<sup>20</sup>

In 'The Little Brawl at Allen', S. H. O'Grady, rejecting the older meaning 'fort', took *bruidhen* to mean 'brawl', thus adopting the modern sense of the word, i.e. brawl, quarrel, dissension. In his argumentation, he referred to the word *beg*, 'small' being used 'playfully' and to the fact that there is no small fort of Allen, only 'the bountiful great Hall of Almhuin', which 'is notorious in Ossianic lore' (*Silva Gadelica* I, p. xvii). But O'Grady is wrong in claiming that 'not a sword was drawn nor spear thrown: the affair began with a buffet, and never proceeded to anything worse than sledge-hammers' (*Silva Gadelica* I, xvii). Swords and spears made 'gashes deep and incurable' (*Silva Gadelica* II, p. 382). True, Ossian alone, to defend his son Oscar and other kinsmen, 'never bared his sword', but used 'in either hand a sledge-hammer' (*ibid.*). As for the use of the word *beg*, it seems to me that the author of this literary tale was a person with a sardonic sense of humour, who may have used the adjective not simply 'playfully', but ironically.

Stephens, in his retelling of the tale, concentrates on three plot elements, 1. the banquet, 2. the quarrel between Fionn and Goll arising from Fionn's anger with Goll for having killed mac Uail, Fionn's father, and for having for a long time

<sup>18</sup> *Gods and fighting men* (1904); The Coole Edition (Colin Smythe: Gerrards Cross, 1970), p. 150.

<sup>19</sup> *Eachtra Bhodaig an chóta lachtna* was edited by John O'Daly in *The Nation*, n.s. 10 (1858), pp. 171, 186, 203, 219; in *Silva Gadelica* I-II, Irish text and trans. by S. H. O'Grady, from Egerton 154, fol. 7b; a trans. by E. O'Curry, 'Bodach an Chóta-lachtach, or 'the Clown with the Grey Coat, A Fenian Tale' in *Irish Penny Journal* 1 (1840); and in book form by P. H. Pearse, in Irish script, with notes and vocabulary (Dublin 1906).

<sup>20</sup> T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish history and mythology* (Dublin [1946] repr. 1984), 121-122.

exacted heavy tributes from the Danes, 3. the King's judgement or verdict as to the damages to be paid. As is often the case in *Irish fairy tales*, the writer himself steps in to comment, in this case, remarking on the verdict given by the king that none of the parties should pay any damages, Fionn because he had lost 11,000 men and women as compared with Goll's 11 men and 50 women (who died of fright), and Goll because Fionn was the aggressor. The authorial intrusion points out that Goll should have paid damages for having transgressed the laws of chivalry and hospitality by giving greater gifts than his host Fionn. He should not have taken 'the position of greatest gift-giver of the Fianna, for there was never in the world one greater at giving gifts, or giving battle, or making poems than Fionn was' (*Irish fairy tales*, pp. 193–194). Stephens is apparently eager to give Fionn his rightful status, that of the greatest and most generous champion of the Fianna.

A juxtaposition of a passage from O'Grady's translation and a corresponding one from Stephens's version will show how the two differ, but will also reveal how Stephens selected words from O'Grady's translations.

O'Grady:

Then rose that hardfighting pillar of battle, Goll mac Morna, and took on him his vesture of battle. . . in his pink-nailed fist, his sharp-pointed sword, solid, well-balanced for the stroke; his ample bossy shield on his left arm. Irresistibly he burst into the fray, and neither flaming taper nor flaring all-illuminating torch in the great hall he left unextinguished, nor a single table but he made small disintegrated fragments of it.

Triumphantly now Fionn vented his battle-cry or 'forest-shout', and on all Ireland's Fianna enjoined to utterly quench and unsparingly to kill the sons of Morna (i.e. all clan-Morna). . . Plentiful there the blood was, a-flowing in streams. . . An ill place it had been for feeble invalid, or delicate taper-fingered women, or aged senior of long date, to be in: the little brawl at Almhain on that night, a-listening to groans of young and old, of high and low, as they lay maimed, faint and infirm, or were stricken down and cut-up. . .

*Silva Gadelica* II, 382–383

Stephens:

'Your people are using their weapons', said he [Goll].

'Are they?' Fionn inquired as calmly, and as though addressing the air.

'In the manner of weapons – !' said Goll.

And the hard-fighting pillar of battle turned to where his arms hung on the wall behind him. He took his solid, well-balanced sword in his fist, over his left arm his ample, bossy shield, and, with another side-look at Fionn, he left the hall and charged irresistibly into the fray.

Fionn then arose. He took his accoutrements from the wall also and strode out. Then he raised the triumphant Fenian shout and went into combat.

That was no place for a sick person to be. It was not the corner which a slender-fingered woman would choose to do up her hair; nor was it the spot an ancient man would select to think quietly in, for the tumult of sword on sword, of axe on shield, the roar of contending parties, the crying of wounded

men, and the screaming of frightened women destroyed the peace, and over all was the rallying cry of Goll Mac Morna and the great shout of Fionn.

*Irish fairy tales*, 187–188

On the whole it is true to say that Stephens uses much more dialogue and direct speech than the original, and this provides insights into the minds of the characters concerned. Stephens takes special delight in inventing dialogue which creates character and carries the action forward. As an example we might choose this conversation between Fionn, Goll and the King in the judgement scene, a conversation which helps to show the interaction between Goll and Fionn when they are confronted with the King's verdict:

'I object to Fionn giving evidence', said he [Goll].

'Why so?' the King asked.

'Because in any matter that concerns me Fionn will turn a lie into truth and the truth into a lie.'

'I do not think that is so,' said Fionn.

'You see, he has already commenced it,' cried Goll.

'If you object to the testimony of the chief person present, in what way are we to obtain evidence?' the King demanded.

'I', said Goll, 'will trust to the evidence of Fergus True-Lips. He is Fionn's poet and will tell no lie against his master; he is a poet and will tell no lie against anyone.'

'I agree to that', said Fionn.

*Irish fairy tales*, pp. 190–191

And so it goes on, Goll further requiring that the poet Fergus True-Lips swear an oath to tell the truth. The King is very surprised to hear of Goll's small losses as compared to the colossal loss of Fionn's 11,000 men and women. The mention of Goll's loss of only 11 men and 50 women who had died of fright makes Fionn blush, and it is revealed that Goll had protected his party with his shield (in the original he had turned himself into a shield, having apparently greater magic power than Finn). However, the parties abide by the King's judgement. Only Stephens, in his comments (already referred to), objected that everything had not been taken into consideration and that Goll should have paid damages for having shamed his host Fionn by giving greater gifts to the poets than Fionn himself.

In the second *bruidhen* story, the action takes place in an evil otherworld cave, the fort of 'Conaran son of Imidel, a chief of Tuatha Dé Danann' (*SG II*, p. 343). As in the old *bruiden* stories, the action takes place in the Otherworld. (According to Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (p. 172), the cave was once the cave of Corann, the harper, *Céis Corainn Cruitire*.) There is no doubt that in 'The Enchanted Cave of Cesh Corran', we have to do with the word in its older meaning, 'fort', the cave of Conaran and his four hideous-looking daughters, Caevóg, Cuillen, Iaran and Iarnach (the fourth name does not occur in the original), who, with their distaffs ready for evil work, are sitting waiting for Fionn and his men to turn up. Curiosity at seeing these horrid, bearded monsters drives them on and as soon as they approach the opening of the cave, they are struck by weakness,

paralysed and bundled into ‘mysterious black holes’ – most likely to be eaten later at the witches’ magic banquet. Fortunately their hounds had been too wise to go into the cave, and their furious barking attracts the attention of Goll, who comes and decapitates two of the monsters, cleaves them in two equal parts (in the original there is actually a reference to blows struck by Fergus Mac Rosa and Conall Cearnach, two of the champions in the *Táin* [SG I, p. 308]), and wrestles with the third daughter until she promises to release Fionn and all his men. At that stage the fourth hag, even more hideous-looking than the first three, appears, but Goll, the great champion, cuts her head off and swings ‘it on high before Fionn’ (*Irish fairy tales*, p. 243). Having incited his daughters, Conaran does not himself take part in the fight.

Conaran’s four daughters – although without tails – are more like Scandinavian ‘trolls’ than any other beings. This is how they appear in Stephens’s tale (based of course on the original description):

Their hair was black as ink and tough as wire: it stuck up and poked out and hung down about their heads in bushes and spikes and tangles. Their eyes were bleary and red. Their mouths were black and twisted, and in each of these mouths there was a hedge of curved yellow fangs. . . . Their arms were long and skinny and muscular, and at the end of each finger they had a spiked nail. . . . Their bodies were covered with a bristle of hair and fur and fluff so that they looked like dogs in some parts and cats in others, and in other parts again they looked like chickens. They had moustaches poking under their noses. . . .  
*Irish fairy tales*, pp. 228–229

As a reward for having killed the monsters and helped to release Fionn and his men, Goll receives Fionn’s daughter in marriage, and the story ends on this happy note. (In the original, Goll also robs the cave of all its treasures and sets fire to it, a feature omitted by Stephens.)

Certainly, apart from the reference in the original to heroes in the *Cattle Raid of Cooley*, Goll’s single fight against the four monstrous-looking daughters of Conaran, also echoes Beowulf’s fight against Grendel and his mother. In chapter three of his epoch-making *Studies in Irish literature and history*, Carney deals with ‘The Irish Elements in Beowulf’.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps a study of Anglo-Saxon and relevant early and late Irish material delights in different kinds of monsters. According to Carney, who refers to Isidore of Seville, the giants (or *fomoraig*) ultimately derive from the *gigantae* of *Genesis*, ‘the result of the union of the descendants of Seth with those of Cain’ (Carney, *Studies*, 105), and in our next story we meet a similar type of giant.

The huge giant in the wild adventure story, ‘The Carl of the Drab Coat’ (*Bodach an chóta lachtna*) – kind to all except his rival, Cael of the Iron, the King of Thessaly’s son – proves to be a fairy king. The story focuses on the uneven race between the Carl and Cael, who has come to claim the lordship and tribute of Ireland, a claim he will give up only on condition that Fionn find a runner good

<sup>21</sup> J. Carney, *Studies in Irish literature and history* (Dublin 1955) 77–128.

enough to out-distance him. When in search of his fastest runner, Fionn meets the Carl, described as follows in Stephens's story:

. . . a horrible evil-visaged being; a wild, monstrous yellow-skinned, big-boned giant, dressed in nothing but an ill-made, mud-plastered, drab-coloured coat, which swaggled and clapped against the calves of his big bare legs. On his stamping feet there were great brogues of boots that were shaped like, but were bigger than a boat. . .

*Irish fairy tales*, p. 202

If the monstrous harridans in the enchanted cave remind us of Grendel and his mother, the giant of this story may call to mind 'Puss in Boots' (made familiar by Charles Perrault's *Histoires a contes du temps passé*), and such stories. Besides, 'The Carl of the Drab Coat' certainly also has features in common with 'Bricriu's Feast', one of the Ulster tales, which Yeats drew on for his *Green Helmet* (1910) (first called *The Golden Helmet*, published in 1908).<sup>22</sup> In this tale, a huge and frightening giant, a 'bachlach', appears to claim the head of the greatest Ulster champion, but the only one who dares offer his head when he arrives to exact a head is Cú Chulainn, to whom the stranger, who now appears as the semi-supernatural Cú Roí Mac Dáiri, gives the Champion's Portion and the status of foremost Champion in Ulster.

Both the original story and Stephens's version reveal in all the delays (among them building a house, going back for his coat-tails which have been torn off during his race, even sewing them on, etc.) made by the Carl during the running-match in order to make Cael believe that he will win against such a stupid rival. The last stop made by the Carl is to pick blackberries, and then he rushes towards the goal screaming for meal. He mixes the berries and the meal, and as Cael comes running in, he throws the mixture at him and knocks his head off. The head is then picked up by the Carl and thrown back but lands on Cael's body facing the wrong way round. For once, in this particular episode, the original, as Joyce might have said, 'takes the biscuit', and you can almost hear the story-teller's chuckling laughter when he says, '*acht is amlaid do bí a agaid ar a dhruim ocus a chúil ar a bhrollach*' (SG I, p. 295), meaning 'but it is thus his face was to his back and the back of his head upon his chest'. With his head thus, the miserable Cael is put back onto his ship and sent back to Thessaly, whereas Fionn throws a banquet for his otherworld helper, who turns out to be a fairy king showing himself in all his splendour.

The banquet is a great feature in Irish story-telling, and in the three Fenian tales just dealt with there are three kinds of banquet, the banquet in the Hall of Allen, deteriorating into a brawl, but resumed when the hall has been cleansed of blood and dead bodies, the abortive banquet in the enchanted cave, and the happy banquet celebrating the Carl's victory over the aggressor, Cael of the Iron.

<sup>22</sup> For a translation see G. Henderson (ed.), *Fled Bricrend: The feast of Bricriu* (Irish Texts Society II) (London 1899), and T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, *Ancient Irish tales* (London n.d.), pp. 254–280. As for Yeats's play and its relations with 'Bricriu's Feast', see B. Pjersby (Bramsäck). *The Interpretation of the Cuchulain legend in the works of W. B. Yeats*, ([doctrinal dissertation] Upsala Irish Studies I, 1950), pp. 22–23, 31–35, 56, 62, 79, 82–86, 98, 120.

All the various metamorphoses are also part and parcel of these stories as are the hyperbolic descriptions of ugly and hideous otherworld creatures, and the delightful appearance of beautiful animals and women in the first three Finn stories. The rivalry between Fionn and Goll is also traditional, but Stephens himself sides with Fionn, who is normally the greater champion of the two, although in 'The Enchanted Cave of Cesh Corran' Goll is obviously thought as the super-champion of the Fianna.

The stories as told by Stephens speak to our imagination and our sense of humour, creating delight and wonder. True, Stephens did not invent the stories or change the plots of the originals. What did he achieve, it might be asked?

His versions of the tales, which he chose to call fairy tales, create suspense, mystery and surprise, even admiration at the manner in which he eliminates any obscure elements providing a simple and ingenious explanation. It can certainly be said that Stephens uses the English language well. His stories are in several ways generally more enjoyable than the original themselves. His vivid style, his selection of words, his creation of tone and moods, of magic suspense, of freshness and joy, his narrative descriptions and his dialogues can be said to surpass the original stories. To quote George B. Saul:

In these retellings Stephens writes as a master of masters, he has all the audacity and imaginative exuberance of the aristocratic ancient *filid* – the princely order of poet-scholars – together with an aristocratic control and an instinct for selectiveness and integration which, so far as apparent evidence reveals, they never paralleled. . . .He is the wise innocent who has walked in Faery. . . .(Saul, 'Withdrawn in Gold'), 127–128

James Stephens is a born story-teller, a worthy rival of Jean de La Fontaine and Charles Perrault, two writers he read with pleasure, one of La Fontaine's fables being the last story he and his wife Cynthia read together on the eve of his death, 26 December, 1950.

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