

Remembering the Past: How the Legend of Cuchullain is Remembered in Ireland

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ABSTRACT

Ireland is a country with a long history that is rich in myth, legend, and folklore; a fact that its population takes great pride in. This project addresses the how the memory of one particular legendary hero, Cuchullain (pronounced “Coo-Hullin” or “Coo-Cullin”— various spellings used) has been preserved throughout Ireland and within Northern Ireland as well. Research included travel in Ireland and Northern Ireland in the summer of 2004, which provided the author with the opportunity to converse with and interview the Irish themselves about the importance, preservation, and place of Cuchullain’s memory in their history. In addition, the author was able to see Ireland at large (which included visits to museums, libraries, and bookstores) in order to discover how, where, and to what degree this legendary figure is remembered. Through this research it became clear that the Irish memory of Cuchullain is collective; he is remembered in a variety of different ways. His name and story are easily found, and ever present, he has stood as a symbol of nationalism, existed as an integral part of Irish history for school children, and is simply a strong figure in the legend and lore of a country in which legend and lore seem to overflow. The example of Cuchullain demonstrates how simple it is to remember the past; all you have to do is take pride in it.

INTRODUCTION

Memory, Maurice Halbwachs proposes, is not just an individual possession or act. Rather, our memories are collective. They do not just come from our independent experiences, but can include accounts from other people, pictures from a book, descriptions written in an advertising campaign, and the history one has read, among other things.¹ For example, if I were to go and see Big Ben in London, my memory of Big Ben would not solely involve my experience of standing in front of it. It would be linked with what I had read about Big Ben in travel guide books, what I had learned about the clock’s significance in history class, and what my acquaintance who had been there last year told me about his experience. All these things would come together in my brain and combine with my experience seeing the clock for myself to create my memory of Big Ben.

If memory is collective, or in other words, it pulls from a variety of sources, it is not necessary for the person with the memory to be one of those sources. Thus, if the person possessing the memory doesn’t have to be a source for it, that makes it possible for memories to transfer over time. By time I do not mean a few minutes or hours, or even days. I mean over thousands of years; generations on top of generations. On a small scale, it is like an individual remembering his own birth. It is impossible for one to really have any conscious memory of what his emergence from the womb was like. However, he can undoubtedly hear the story from his parents and anyone else present. He can verify the date, time, and place of his birth (as well as his parentage) by looking at his birth certificate. There are hospital records, photographs, and, more recently, videotapes to commemorate the event. Through these sources, the baby born can “remember” his own birth thirty years down the road.

As memories transfer over long periods of time, they inexorably become conjoined with history. (Or rather, create a history of their own.) Thus, when we ask the question, “How do people remember their history?”, we are in a sense asking the question, “How do people’s memories carry on over time?”. This can be achieved through many different methods. We gain memories, and thus histories through other people, through word of mouth. This is oral history, a tradition that has kept many stories and histories alive. Other ways that we remember historical figures, events, and places are through art, architecture, and literature. All these outside sources create memories for us today of the events, people, places, and stories that we were not alive to experience for ourselves.

However, this ability to create a history through memory is not flawless. Because people are such an important part of the process of creating history through their memories, and each individual remembers things differently from another, history changes and fluctuates over time, producing different versions and variations of the past.

Ireland is an excellent place to witness collective history in action. Partly because of its isolation, Ireland has been able to preserve its old legends and stories from much farther back than many other European countries. Long before they were written down, stories were passed from generation to generation through the oral tradition. Eventually many of the old stories were put into writing, and today we can find the oldest existing copies of them in ancient manuscripts.

Within these manuscripts, four groups of stories exist. There are the mythological stories of the Tuatha De Danann, the Fenian cycle stories, and a group of stories surrounding the kings who ruled from approximately the third century BCE to the eighth century CE.² The last group of stories is those of the Ulster cycle. They deal with “the exploits of King Conchobor and the champions of the Red Branch, chief of whom is Cuchullainn, the Hound of Ulster.”³

While the oldest versions of these stories are preserved in ancient manuscripts, it is not through those manuscripts that most modern Irish men, women, and children are familiar with them. Discovering just how the memories of these ancient stories (which Ireland is famed for) are preserved and maintained was the aim of this project. Specifically I focused on one legendary figure in particular: Cuchullain– the hero of the Ulster cycle. The preservation of this ancient legend is an especially unique example of collective memory in action because the stories surrounding him are so remarkably old (traditionally believed to take place around the time of Christ), and there is really no solid evidence in existence to prove that he ever really existed.

Through the preservation and propagation of the stories surrounding Cuchullain, the Irish have maintained a memory of him, and even incorporated him into their national history. He has become to many the epitome of the Irish character in his “readiness to fight against, and if necessary fall by, overwhelming odds,” in addition to being an iconic example of how collective memory works.⁴

METHODS

The goal of this project was to experience first hand how collective memory was actively working in Ireland to perpetuate the memory of Cuchullain and the legendary stories that surrounded him by visiting Ireland myself. My travels took me on a two-week tour of Dublin and Carlingford in Ireland, and Belfast and surrounding areas in Northern Ireland. Thus, my primary sources were the Irish people and the place itself. Tapping into these sources meant many, many conversations with anyone and everyone who was willing to spare some time to talk to me about their knowledge of Cuchullain, and how that knowledge was gained. While I was able to document seven more formal interviews on tape, which followed a relatively standard line of questioning, most people did not want to be recorded. The information gained through these conversations was simply documented through note-taking. In addition to the human aspect of the project, I visited bookstores, libraries, the General Post Office (where a bronze statue of Cuchullain resides), tourist centers, and museums, as well as simply wandering the streets. Interaction with the people and observation of the place allowed me to gain both an insider and an outsider perspective on how Cuchullain maintained his place in Irish history and legend.

RESULTS

Throughout my stay in Ireland I found references to Cuchullain everywhere. He was in children’s books, books on the myth and legend of Ireland, in bronze statue form in the General Post Office, in housing development signs, on compact discs, in street names, in the common Irish name “Collin”, in graffiti on the streets of Belfast, in guide books, on stamps, and on hiking maps. With all this it is no surprise at all that I found him very much at home in the minds of the people. However, I found that while the name was almost always known, along with a character description of “an old legendary hero” (or something similar), anything further was often not known. It was the children and the select few who had a sincere interest in their history (legendary, actual, or both) who really knew the story (though it must be noted that were anyone to develop a sudden interest in Cuchullain, they would find no shortage of resources from which to learn about him). The people who had no in depth knowledge of the stories of Cuchullain often seemed embarrassed or ashamed that they didn’t know more. They clearly feel that he is an important part of their culture and heritage, and the prominent presence of his name and story anywhere and everywhere certainly demonstrate that he is a figure whom the nation as a whole is in no hurry to forget- and the name, if not the details, is certain to continue to maintain its comfortable position in the memory of the Irish people.

The first stop on my journey was in Carlingford, Ireland, which is located on the north-eastern coast of Ireland, just below the border of Northern Ireland. It is in County Louth, which is also referred to as “Cuchullain Country” because of its position as a prominent backdrop for many of the Cuchullain stories. The most popular Cuchullain story here was the “Tain Bo Cuailnge” (or “Cattle Raid of Cooley” in English). The story of the Tain supposedly took place in the Carlingford/County Louth region, and it is basically Ireland’s national epic, of which Cuchullain was the hero. Therefore in Carlingford, Cuchullain was a difficult name to forget. He was mentioned in countless pamphlets and booklets advertising the region, as he is part of its rich history. While in Carlingford, you are constantly reminded of the story of the Tain as there are signs posted throughout the town directing you on the ‘Tain Way’, which is a hiking path that people can take to follow the progression of the Tain itself, which happens to pass through Carlingford. There is even a large sign with a map of the ‘Tain Way’ outside of the Cooley Peninsula Tourist Office in Carlingford. On it, specific locations and characters that are important to the Tain story are noted. Included among these is Cuchullain. In the brief description of the Tain, it is noted that “the mighty warrior Cuchullain does battle with the armies and his foster brother Ferdia as he defends the Brown Bull and the province of Ulster.”⁵

In addition to the ‘Tain Way’, there was also a new housing development going up in Carlingford which was called “Cuchullain Heights.” This simply demonstrated how the legend has permeated modern times. Even if the story isn’t told all the time, the name is constantly present, and thus becomes hard to forget.

The town of Carlingford is a tiny one, but it still manages to have a small public library. At the library, there is only one book on Cuchullain, and it is a children’s book. However, it is easy enough to find Cuchullain resources elsewhere. At the Cooley Peninsula Tourist Office, I found two more children’s books: *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* and *Cu Chulainn* from the Irish Legends series. Along with these, *The Cuchullain Saga* was also available on compact disc, told by Frances Quinn.

In addition to the physical materials available at the tourist office, the employees themselves turned out to be remarkable resources for information on both Cuchullain and the story of the Tain. While I was there, I interviewed Frances Taylor and Raymond Hunt, who both had a particular interest in Irish legends, and knew the Tain and Cuchullain’s role in it very well. Frances Taylor informed me that “you’re taught about Cuchullain in Nationals” (Nationals being Irish public schools). She commented that the reason for Cuchullain being taught is that he is an important part of Irish heritage.⁶ She believed that to some degree the Cuchullain character did exist, and the stories surrounding him are based in some truth. The mythological and magical aspects that surround him have just likely been added over time. The importance of Irish legends such as Cuchullain, she added, is that legend is an enormous part of the Irish national identity. They are known for it, they have a richer tradition of legend and lore than most countries, and that is a fact that the Irish take great pride in, and thus the preservation of their legends is something they want to continue and maintain. However, the understanding among the Irish of their heritage is just beginning to develop and grow, she believes, and has in the past often not been as fully appreciated as it should be.⁷

Raymond Hunt provided a similar interview, with many of the same opinions.⁸ What I noted about these two people, was that they had a distinct personal interest in Irish legends and myths and thus were much more educated about them (specifically Cuchullain and the Tain) than most others. This made it clear that while Cuchullain was ever present and even taught to children, the memory of him faded without one’s own personal interests inducing one to go on and learn more, and maintain the memory for themselves.

Compared to these two individuals, the majority of people I spoke to in Carlingford did not know much beyond Cuchullain’s name and his status as a legendary hero. For this reason, most of them did not want to be interviewed on tape. It seemed as though they were embarrassed of their lack of knowledge, since Cuchullain is supposed to be the Irish hero, and thus did not want to be recorded on tape saying that they didn’t really know anything about him.

However, three individuals in their late teens and early twenties were willing to be interviewed despite their lack of knowledge regarding Cuchullain. All three remembered learning about Cuchullain in school (they estimated around the age of twelve or thirteen), yet they did not know much, if anything about any stories that surrounded him. One of them, Nikki McKevitt, was from Carlingford and thought the story of the Tain, and Cuchullain were probably only taught in the Cooley Peninsula area, as that is where the story takes place. However, the other two, Jimmy Bell and Michael Corkery, were from Dublin and Cork respectively, and both remembered being taught about Cuchullain in school when they were children, as well. Taking into consideration that they remembered hardly anything about Cuchullain now, I asked each of them whether it was important for this legendary hero to be taught about in school, and if so, why? The response all around was yes, Cuchullain should continue to be included in school lessons, because he is an important part of Irish history. However, despite their inclusion of Cuchullain as an integral part of Irish history, they were all uncertain as to whether he ever really existed or not.⁹

Children, on the other hand, seemed to have no doubt whatsoever of the existence of Cuchullain in their countries history. A couple of girls in Carlingford said they learned the story from about fourth to sixth grade in history class. They were happy to learn about Cuchullain because he is a part of their history. They were tested on what they learned, and felt that Cuchullain was certainly a real person, due to the fact that he is taught in their history class. This conversation was followed by one with a teacher from Dublin. She verified that Cuchullain is taught about throughout Ireland, so all Irish kids ought to know it. As to the reality of Cuchullain's existence, she commented that the fact or fiction of the stories and the person himself is not really addressed– it is left up to the kids to decide. The reasoning for it being taught, she continued, is that it is a significant part of Irish lore and history. Even though Cuchullain may just be a legend, it is important to teach because Irish lore and legend is such an essential part of Ireland that it *is* their history.

Cuchullain's place as an Irish legendary hero certainly does not mean that he is an unknown in Northern Ireland. The second stop of my journey brought me to the Belfast area of Northern Ireland. Cuchullain was the hero of the Ulster cycle, and a defender of Ulster in his stories. The Ulster part of old Ireland is now mostly Northern Ireland, and thus I expected Cuchullain to be known certainly as well, if not better, in the North. While in Belfast I visited the Ulster Museum, and learned that there had previously been an exhibit on Cuchullain there. There was a pamphlet available at the museum gift shop that briefly described the exhibit, as well as one book, *A History of Ulster* by Jonathon Bardon, which had a picture of the Cuchullain statue that stands at the General Post Office in Dublin on the cover. Beyond that, it was hard to find anything on Cuchullain.

That entirely changed when I went to the Ballynahinch Library Headquarters outside of Belfast. There, I went through countless books on Irish legend and lore, and found a great number of resources that addressed Cuchullain. Thus, information on Cuchullain is readily available, though perhaps not as much on display as it was in Carlingford.

The split between Protestants and Catholics seemed to have an impact on the preservation of Cuchullain. Most students attend religious schools (either Protestant or Catholic of course) and thus Cuchullain and Irish legend and lore that are non-Christian do not seem to find a place in Northern Irish curriculum. This is not surprising considering that Northern Ireland is part of Great Britain, and thus maintaining uniquely Irish culture and heritage is not as great a priority there. I also noted as I rode through East Belfast, that a mural on a building depicted Cuchullain and described him as "the great defender of Ulster." This demonstrated yet another way he is remembered and his legend maintained.

The final stop on my journey was Dublin, Ireland. There, Cuchullain plays the part of an especially important national hero. In Dublin, there is a statue of Cuchullain at his death in the General Post Office (GPO). Beneath the statue, on the pedestal, a plaque reads:

"We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland, and to the unfettered control of Irish destinies, to be sovereign and indefeasible. The long usurpation of that right by a foreign people and government has not extinguished the right, nor can it ever be extinguished except by the destruction of the Irish People. In every generation the Irish people have asserted their right to national freedom and sovereignty. Six times during the past three hundred years they have asserted it in arms. Standing on that fundamental right and again asserting it in arms in the face of the world, we hereby proclaim the Irish Republic as a sovereign independent state, and we pledge our lives and the lives of our comrades-in-arms to the cause of its freedom, of its welfare, and of its exaltation among the nations."

Thomas J. Clarke
Sean MacDiarmada
P.H. Pearse
James Connolly

Joseph Plunkett
Eamonn Ceanrit
Thomas MacDonagh

The statue, designed by Oliver Sheppard in 1911, was created and placed in the General Post Office to commemorate the Irish fight for independence from the British. Cuchullain became emblematic in this fight because in concert with the revolt against the British, the Irish gained a renewed interest in preserving their traditional Irish heritage, which Cuchullain represented. A tour guide in Dublin described the importance of him in the Republic of Ireland, south of where most of his exploits took place, because of the reviving Nationalism that came in the fight for independence. Cuchullain rose as the Irish hero yet again with the revitalization of the Gaelic tradition.

In addition to the statue in the GPO, Cuchullain is present throughout Dublin as he was in Carlingford. The same children's books that were found in the Cooley Peninsula Tourist Office could be found in Dublin bookstores. In addition, every bookstore had plenty of Irish myth and legend books that included mentions of Cuchullain, as

well as a few history books. The story of the Tain was mentioned on a display sign at the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin, and at the museum gift store, a book on the Tain (at the young adult level) was available.

Cuchullain is present in other aspects as well. His given name, 'Setanta', is an Avenue in Dublin. Hurling, which was Cuchullain's game according to legend, is now a very popular game among the Irish. In addition, the name 'Colin' is derived from 'Cuchullain' itself, and is a popular Irish name.

Clearly, this man who may or may not have ever existed has made a lasting impression on the Irish, and will not be forgotten any time soon. He can be found in street names, on signs, in books, in museums, in schools, and most importantly in the minds and memories of the Irish people (though the extent of their knowledge may vary). The collective memory of Cuchullain is collected from a large variety of sources, allowing him to be remembered by many people, for many different reasons.

CONCLUSION

My research has led me to the conclusion that, simply put, there are a number of ways that Cuchullain has been remembered, as well as a varying degree to which each individual person remembers him. What does this mean in the bigger picture? The degree of peoples remembrance depends upon several factors, including, but not limited to, their education, their interests, their values, and their social environment. However, preservation of that memory is subtly enhanced by the minute details that are found throughout ones physical environment in simple items such as signs, stamps, books, and statues. Alone these things may seem insignificant, but collectively, they are keeping a name from being forgotten by never letting it leave one's mind entirely. Thus, the presence of these little things helps to preserve the memory of what was once fresh, new knowledge.

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