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MEDICAL ASPECTS OF THE FIRST RECORDED CELTIC INVASION OF ULSTER (THE TAIN)

THE oldest non-ecclesiastical manuscript in Ireland is the *Lebor na hUidre* (*lour na heera*) or *Book of the Dun Cow*. It contains part of the *Táin Bo Cuailnge* (*Tawn Bo Kool-nje*) or *Cattle Raid of Cooley* which describes the invasion of Ulster by the combined forces of the three other provinces to capture the Brown Bull of Cooley. The Cooley peninsula is the tongue of land between Carlingford Lough and Dundalk Bay. Two thousand years ago, when the invasion occurred, Ulster extended southwards to the river Boyne so that the Cooley Peninsula was well within Ulster territory.

THE TEXTS

The *Book of the Dun Cow* (now in the Royal Irish Academy, Dublin) was compiled prior to 1106 from manuscripts whose language dates them at about the sixth century and Dr. Ian Adamson (1974), a Fellow of this Society, suggests that the story was first committed to writing in the monastery at Bangor, Co. Down. A more complete version of the story is included in *The Book of Leinster* (now in Trinity College, Dublin) which was also compiled in the early twelfth century. The monk who wrote it did not think highly of the contents and added his own comments at the end: "But I who have written this story, or rather this fable, give no credence to the various incidents related in it. For some things in it are the deceptions of demons, others poetic figments, some are probable; others improbable; while still others are intended for the delectation of foolish men" (O'Rahilly, 1967). I think that we will find that he was writing more truth than he suspected and that through his writings we can gain a view, admittedly a layman's view, of medical practice in Ireland 2,000 years ago.

One may be tempted to argue that what was first written 600 years after the event could not possibly give a true picture of the event, but surprisingly John M. Allegro (1970), the internationally recognised authority on philology and well known for his work on the Dead Sea Scrolls, states: "Happily oral traditions



are not so susceptible to change as those which are passed on by the written word." So it is possible that through the *Tain* we can gain some knowledge of medical practice of the Celts, but I do not want to confine myself too rigidly within a medical framework.

THE TRANSLATIONS

Not being a Celtic scholar, I cannot pretend that this is a work of scholarship. All I can attempt is to look at various translations and pick out incidents of medical interest which are surprisingly numerous. A cursory glance at the facsimile reproductions of some pages of the two books, reproduced by Sir Henry James by a combination of photography and colour printing and published in 1874, explains why different translators have produced different results. Except when quoting from specific translators I shall use the nomenclature introduced by Kinsella (1970), whose translation is scholarly, readable and has the advantage of being illustrated by Louis Le Brocqy. All quotations, unless otherwise specified, are taken from Kinsella's "*The Tain*".

The cattle raid is only one incident in the story of Ulster and her warriors, who were known as Warriors

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of the Red Branch. This “Ulster Cycle” is the mine from which a large number of stories has been taken, including the “Lays of The Red Branch” by Sir Samuel Ferguson (1897), who has been acclaimed as Ulster’s premier narrative poet, but whose lyric “The Lark in the Clear Air” has become one of our most popular ‘traditional’ songs.

IRELAND TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO

As already indicated, Ireland was divided into four provinces. Medb (Mayv) was Queen of Connacht with her consort Ailill. Her capital was at Cruachan, now known as Rath Croghan, Co. Roscommon. Conchobar (Conor) was King of Ulster, with his capital at Emain Macha (Ayvin Macha), now known as Navan Fort, which lies a few miles west of the city of Armagh. Territorially Ulster was at its zenith. Her traditional boundary was the huge earth-work, the Black Pig’s Dyke, running westwards from the large circular rampart known as the Dorsey or Doorway, which is located south-west of Slieve Gullion near present-day Crossmaglen. Sualdam (Sooaldav) was King of the plain of Murthemne (Moor-tev-ne), which is the area around present-day Dundalk. He was married to Conchobar’s sister and was nominal father of Cuchulainn (Koohullin), the hero of our story. There was also a suggestion that Cuchulainn was the product of an incestuous relationship between Conchobar and his sister and another version of the story is that his father was Lugh (Loo), one of a very large pantheon of Celtic gods. The largest collection of images of these gods is in the Protestant Cathedral in Armagh, where they are euphemistically known as grotesque figures. We still remember Lugh in an annual festival which has degenerated from a mass, the Lughmass or Lammas, to the Auld Lammas Fair at Ballycastle.

THE INHABITANTS OF ULSTER

Celts had been invading Ireland for about 500 years (Neeson, 1965) and were the overlords of the pre-existing peoples who had themselves invaded our island thousands of years previously. The first invaders were giant mesolithic hunters, followed by small agile neolithic farmers. These two groups are probably the only pure races ever to invade Ireland and they have left their traces in our genetic pool. The rugby field provides an excellent illustration—Willie John McBride would seem to be the lineal descendant of the mesolithic hunter and those of my generation will remember the gallant George Cromie, who was probably the smallest descendant of the neolithic farmers ever to don the green shirt for Ireland. In the Tain the inhabitants of Ulster who were present before the arrival of the Celts known as the Ulad are called Piets.

Duff (1953) and Adamson (1974) identify them as the Cruthin, “the most ancient inhabitants of Britain and Ireland to whom a definite name can be given”. Duff states that their capital was at Mount Sandel near Coleraine. The Piets possibly were a mixture of mesolithic, neolithic and Celtic invaders who had reached Ulster before the Ulad.

There seems to have been very little difference between Piet and Celt or Cruthin and Ulad. Both were tabu-ridden head-hunters who, whatever their relationships had been before the threat of invasion, were united in resisting it. In *The Yellow Book of Slane* (James, 1874) and in *Cuchulainn of Muirthemne*—the translation of all the stories dealing with Cuchulainn by Lady Gregory (1912)—there are definite suggestions of cannibalism, and Frazer in the *Golden Bough* supports this interpretation especially as regards the drinking of human blood.

The Tain marks the beginning of the relentless pressure of the Gaels on Ulster which continued for the succeeding five centuries during which the Ulad were absorbed by the Cruthin. Eventually they emigrated to Scotland and a thousand years later their descendants returned from Lowland Scotland to stamp their personality on this province in the plantation of Ulster (Adamson, 1974).

THE PILLOW TALK

Medb and Ailil were for once occupying the same bed in Cruachan. That seems a strange statement to make about husband and wife, but Medb, on her own admission, was a nymphomaniac. She claimed that for all her married life she had at least one lover and for each lover there was at least one more waiting to take his place. The pair started arguing as to which had brought most to the family home and tempers rose as each article of furniture, clothing or jewellery produced by one was equalled by the other. At last Ailill produced his magnificent white bull at the head of his herd of cows and heifers. Medb had to admit defeat but resolved to get for herself the Brown Bull of Cooley which was at least the equal of the White Bull of Connacht.

By fair means or foul she induced the other provinces to join this hosting to capture the Brown Bull. Wealth in those days was on the hoof and if all the rest of the men of Ireland expected worthwhile pickings, Ulster’s wealth must have been very great. The armies assembled on the plain of Magh Ai (Mahee) near Cruachan and were placed under the supreme command of Fergus, ex-King of Ulster. The explanation of that strange fact, although not why he lost his throne, is to be found in the story of Dardriu (Derdriu) and the sons of Uisliu (Ishlu).

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DERDRIU OF THE SORROWS

The sad story of Derdriu is one of the stories of the Ulster Cycle which is well known, but it is not so well known that she cried in the womb at the onset of labour.

“The men of Ulster were drinking in the house of Fedlmid (Fe-lim-i) . . . His wife was overseeing everything and looking after them all. She was full with child. Meat and drink were passed around, and a drunken uproar shook the place. When they were ready to sleep the woman went to her bed. As she crossed the floor of the house the child screamed in her womb and was heard all over the enclosure. At that scream everyone in the house started up . . .”

When I first read that I agreed with the scribe who had written the Book of Leinster and had advised his readers not to believe a word of what he had written! However, on enquiring from my obstetric colleague, Dr. H. Ferris, I found that in this instance my incredulity was ill-founded. Foetal crying has been heard on several occasions in Ards hospital, once necessitating Dr. Ferris’s hurried departure from church to deliver a second twin. He tells me that it is not necessarily a sign of foetal distress but does indicate the need to expedite delivery.

Derdriu, a beautiful girl, was reared in isolation and was intended to be Conchobar’s bride. She fell in love and eloped with Noisiu (Noyshu), one of the sons of Uisliu (Usnach, according to other translators). The lovers and Noisiu’s two brothers and their retainers fled from Conchobar’s wrath and ended up in Alba. The three sons of Uisliu were mighty men of valour and were badly missed by the other warriors of the Red Branch who wanted Conchobar to forgive Derdriu and bring back the sons of Uisliu to help in the defence of Ulster.

At last Conchobar agreed and sent Fergus, who was recognised by all as a man of honour, to bring the wanderers home. Derdriu did not believe that Conchobar could ever forgive and forget, but her fears were overruled by her husband and brothers-in-law. The party set sail for Ulster, probably aiming for Dunseverick which was then the trading port between Ulster and Alba. They were blown off course and landed near Ballycastle at a sloping rock, “still known as Carrig Usnach” (Garrett, 1968). On the headland just above Carrig Usnach is Corrymeela, that modern symbol of reconciliation, but, as we all know, Derdriu’s homecoming was not for reconciliation.

On arrival in Ulster, Fergus received an invitation to a banquet in Dunseverick. He was under *geasa* (*gasa*) or tabu never to refuse such an invitation and, although doubts about Conchobar’s trustworthiness assailed him, he had to accept. Derdriu and the sons

of Uisliu had to press on to Emain Macha because they had put themselves under tabu not to eat in Ulster until they sat down with Conchobar at a meal to celebrate their forgiveness and reconciliation. Conchobar had planned differently and had mercenaries ready to kill all three brothers. Contrary to James Stephens’ retelling of the story, Derdriu did not die of grief but lived in sorrow for a year during which she resisted all Conchobar’s advances. She then killed herself in the first road traffic accident recorded in Ireland. Conchobar had given her as a concubine to Owen, one of his cronies, and as he was bringing her away in a chariot—but here Mary Hutton can take up the story:

“There was a cliff of stone against the way;
She threw her head against the cliff of stone
So that she made bruised fragments of her head,
And she was dead.”

There is a suddenness and finality and economy of words in that reporting which we do not get to-day.

Fergus and many others of the Red Branch Warriors were so enraged by Conchobar’s duplicity that they rebelled and burnt Emain Macha to the ground. The person of the king was sacred so they could do no more, but they left Ulster and became mercenaries for Medb in the same way as Uriah entered the service of David after the fall of the Hittite Empire. Recent excavation at Emain Macha (Navan Fort) by Dr. Dudley Waterman (Harrison, 1976) has revealed evidence of a huge conflagration which can be dated to about 265 B.C. This, if it is the same destruction as caused by Fergus, would put back the story of the Tain by about 300 years, but that is as nothing compared to the 2,000 years which recent excavations in Syria have suggested should be added to the generally accepted date of Abraham (Magnusson, 1977).

THE PANGS

After that long flash-back, we return to the armies on their invasion route, which, as already explained, had to be more or less due east to get to the Dorsey, west of Slieve Gullion or to the Pass of the North, east of the mountain, through which the main Belfast to Dublin road and railway now run. Medb was hopeful for rapid success because her spies had brought back news that Conchobar and his warriors were laid low by a recurring illness known as ‘the pangs’, which can only be explained by another long flash-back.

The whole story is too long to quote, but, in brief, a fair was being held in Ulster and a woman in advanced pregnancy was forced to race against the king’s chariot. “She called out to the crowd, ‘Help me!

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Wait till my child is born.' But she couldn't move them. 'Very well,' she said, 'a long lasting evil will come out of this on the whole of Ulster.' 'What is your name?' the king said. 'My name and the name of my offspring,' she said, 'will be given to this place. I am Macha, daughter of Sainrith Mac Imbaith' (Sanrith MacIvith). Then she raced the chariot. As the chariot reached the end of the field, she gave birth alongside it. She bore twins, a son and a daughter. The name Emain Macha, the Twins of Macha, comes from this. As she gave birth she screamed out that all who heard that scream would suffer from the same pangs for five days and four nights in their times of greatest difficulty. This affliction, ever afterward, seized all the men of Ulster who were there that day, and nine generations after them."

This explanation of the 'pangs', which, as we will learn, prevented the Red Branch Warriors going to the help of Cuchulainn from Autumn to Spring, raises more questions than it answers. How did five days and four nights become extended to months? Did Cuchulainn's vigil at the ford last only a five-day week and over the succeeding centuries did days become extended to months? We do not know, but the whole description suggests a psychological rather than a physical illness. Some authorities suggest that it is based on the practice known as *couvade*, in which, in some primitive tribes, the father has the pains while the mother has the child. But this does not correspond with the description of Dardriu's birth, during which her father was roistering along with the other warriors.

There is another clue in the description of Medb's raid up to Dunseverick which occurs later on in the story. She and her warriors were careful only to kill and capture women and children because if any of the stricken warriors were killed their illness would have been transferred to the killer. So it was an infectious disease and yet Sualdam and Cuchulainn were immune. We have seen the power of *tabu* repeatedly in the daily life of these people and must conclude that this illness was mass hysteria and Sualdam and Cuchulainn were immune because they were not of the Ulad. Cuchulainn's wife, Emer (Ay-ver), who was not of Ulster stock, thought it was even worse than hysteria; she accused them of malingering—"shaming the travail of women" (Henderson, 1899). All those who have done any medico-legal work will agree that the dividing line between the two conditions can be very blurred, but I think we should give them the benefit of the doubt and call the illness mass hysteria.

The Macha of Emain Macha, or of the present Armagh, is not the princess who sits patiently outside

Altnagelvin Hospital in Londonderry. She is a very shadowy creature also known as Macha of the Golden Hair, who is credited with the foundation of the Broin Bhearg (Braun Varg), the sick bay or hospital which was in use in Emain Macha for 600 years.

CUCHULAINN

Fergus warned Medb not to be hopeful of easy success because they had to pass across the plain of Murthemne near Dundalk where Cuchulainn and his father were not affected by the pangs.

At first Medb would not believe that Cuchulainn, a mere youth of 17 years, could be anything other than a fly to be brushed aside. This gives Fergus an opportunity to describe the life and prowess of Cuchulainn.

Cuchulainn very early in life went to Emain Macha to join his uncle's court and to receive his education. Education among the Celts seems to have been a matter of sending children to family after family as foster-sons to learn the specific art for which that family was famous, be it swordplay, throwing the javelin or even the art of hospitality. This custom also undoubtedly cemented the bonds of kinship and I am glad to be able to find a medical reason to refer to it. Today fosterage involves the services of at least a medical social worker and that is excuse enough for me to quote Mary Hutton:

"Blai (Blaw), the lord of lands
Of Tara in the Ards of Ulster, took me
Because of the close kinship of his race:
So that I got my due of wealth with him,
And learnt the way to entertain the men
Of Ulster, for the week of entertainment,
Together with their king, red-sworded Conor."

Tara Cottage, where I now live, is tucked between the sea and Tara Hill. My previous home not only had the name Cruachan on the gate when I bought it but was also so named in the title deeds. It was this coincidence which stimulated my interest in the story of Medb and Cuchulainn.

There is another Cruachan quite close to Tara Hill. It has been Christianised by the addition of the name "Cooey", who will be mentioned later. According to James Shanks of Ballyfounder, an antiquarian of a former generation who lived in the shadow of Tara Hill, the words Tara and Cruachan had extra connotations in addition to their literal meanings—Tara, literally a high place, was the official residence of the king; and Cruachan, literally a little round hill, was the unofficial residence or family home (Rutherford, 1913).

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Tara Hill is crowned by Tara Fort or Forth, which undoubtedly is the remains of a fortified Celtic homestead—the seat of the local king or chieftain. It has never been excavated but, according to Lady Gregory, the standard of living in these Celtic houses was very high: “There were a hundred tables of white silver in it, and three hundred of brass, and three hundred of white bronze. And there were thirty vessels with pure silver from Spain on their rims, and two hundred cowhorns ornamented with gold or silver, and thirty silver cups, and thirty brass cups, and on the wall there were hangings of white linen with wonderful figures worked on them.”

The gold ornaments in the Ulster, Irish and British Museums, and especially the bronze mirror and pair of bronze flagons in the British Museum, support Lady Gregory’s statements, but there is a great discrepancy between the standard of metal work and the architecture of the Celts. Archaeology has shown that the houses were of wood and wattle with a hole in the thatched roof for the escape of smoke from an open fire in the centre of the room. If there is less gold, silver and bronze in Tara Cottage than there ever was in Tara Forth, there is at least less smoke!

AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

When Cuchulainn’s battle-fury was aroused and the sympathetic system took control, a handsome stripling was converted to a veritable ogre. “There-upon contortions took hold of him. Thou wouldst have weened it was a hammering wherewith each hair was hammered into his head, with such an uprising it rose. . . . He closed one of his eyes so that it was no wider than the eye of a needle. He opened the other wide so that it was as big as the mouth of a mead cup. He stretched his mouth from his jaw bones to his ears! He opened his mouth wide to his jaw so that his gullet was seen. The champion’s light rose up from his crown” (Dunn, 1914).

It is impossible to explain all those phenomena by the outpouring of adrenalin and noradrenalin. But if the Celts knew nothing of the existence of either part of the autonomic nervous system, they recognised the power of the parasympathetic system over the sympathetic as the following incident shows.

On the first day Cuchulainn took up arms, he sallied forth to the perpetual look-out on Slieve Gullion near the Dorsey. Not seeing any enemies, he went farther south and finally returned to Emain Macha with the heads of three enemies, a wild deer tethered between the rear shafts of his chariot and 20 swans fastened to his chariot with cords—fluttering above it like an array of modern two-string kites. Conchobar realised that in this state of elation Cuchulainn would

not distinguish between friend and foe and would kill them all unless his battle-fever was quenched. “‘Let the young women go,’ said Conchobar, ‘and bare their breasts and their swelling bosoms, and if he be a true warrior he will not withstand being bound, and he shall be placed in a vat of cold water until his anger go from him’” (Dunn, 1914). This stratagem worked but it took three vats to cool him down properly!

Cuchulainn also realised the power of mind over matter and arranged with his charioteer that if ever his battle-prowess fell below normal he should upbraid him and revile him as a coward and wastrel until his temper was properly aroused and the adrenalin and noradrenalin started flowing freely again.

THE HERO LIGHT OR HALO

It was a widespread belief among the Celts that heroes and demi-gods emanated a supernatural light and that they were invincible to ordinary warriors. A Roman general made great use of this belief by adapting the helmets of his troops to contain a torch and therefore they became invincible to the ordinary Gael or Celt. (I have been unable to find documentary evidence for this statement.) An Edwardian artist, Stephen Reid, interprets the champion’s light on Cuchulainn as a halo, similar to the halo of religious art (Hull, 1909).

The words halo, nimbus and aureole, which can all mean the same thing, did not enter the English language until the seventeenth century. Originally the halo was part of the insignia of the sun god—Helios or Apollo—and some of the pagan Roman emperors who were deified had halos added to their portraits. It is not surprising that in Christian art in pagan Rome the halo is absent. Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Empire and in 323 transferred the capital to Byzantium (Constantinople), which was very near to Galatia, whose inhabitants were Celts. Some Galatians had been converted by Paul in the first century but the majority presumably retained their Celtic traditions until and after Christianity was forced upon them. Is it too fanciful to suggest that it was their influence which Christianised the halo in the middle of the fourth century?

Hall’s “Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art” states that the halo was not used as a sign of divinity in Christian art until the fifth century, but in the recent exhibition of Roman gold and silver in the British Museum there was on view a silver dish, made in the mid-fourth century, bearing the portrait of Constantius II complete with halo. He was one of the triumvirate who succeeded Constantine and was head of the Church as well as being Emperor. There is no doubt in my mind that his head is encircled by a halo, but this

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feature is not mentioned by Kent and Painter (1977) in the descriptive catalogue.

The usual explanation for the existence of the halo is that some people actually see a halo of different colour around the head of each living person. This would explain the existence of the halo, but not its application only to holy or divine persons. I know a nurse who is one of these 'para-normal' people and when she found that she is apparently unique she was so upset that she will not even discuss the subject. One point of interest is that both her father and she can generate sufficient static electricity that shaking hands with them may at times be hazardous. She has to be very careful to discharge her static electricity before touching a patient, but she has one advantage over the medical profession—she is first to know when a patient is dead.

HYGIENE

It is not surprising that the hero Cuchulainn was able to instil fear into the invaders, and by guerrilla tactics, feats of strength and the tabu that went with them, he was able to halt them. This then is an opportune moment to look at the hygiene of a Celtic army—not that the scribe has any heading so named—but by inference we learn that they did not build latrines but they had to go outside the confines of the camp to attend to the calls of nature—all except Medb. Such petty restrictions did not apply to her—she just used the floor of her tent!

Like many another army, the invaders became lousy and Cuchulainn was also infected, presumably by stripping the armour from his victims. There is a pathetic portrait of him "squatting, haunch-deep in the snow, stripped and picking his shirt". I suppose the absence of separate night clothes was a factor predisposing to infestation and at least up to the time of the historical battle of Magh Rath (Moirá) in 637 A.D. even the king slept naked (O'Donovan, 1842).

THE CAPTURE OF THE BULL

Knowing that Cuchulainn could not be in two places at the same time, Medb divided the army into two parts, one under the command of Ailill and the other under Fergus and herself. Ailill was suspicious of this arrangement and sent his charioteer to spy on Medb and Fergus. He had his suspicions confirmed when the charioteer caught them in the act of adultery. Ailill was not surprised. It was the price he reckoned that had to be paid to Fergus for his help.

Medb with part of the army carried out a raid as far as Dunseverick and returned with a great booty of cattle, women and children—to put them in their proper order of importance! On another foray the

rough terrain of the Cooley peninsula was penetrated and the raiders returned in triumph with the Brown Bull.

This, one thinks, should have been the end of the war because Medb had achieved her object. But she was not satisfied and was intent on total victory. Finnabair (Finavir), her daughter, who had a very good reason to be disappointed that the war had not ended, asked her mother why she had this "marvellous hatred" of Ulster. She was told that it was "only natural to hate proud Ulster" and in any case she wanted to wreak her vengeance on Conchobar, who had raped her 25 years previously. When we think of Medb's self-confessed life-style, we must agree that this is an unlikely story and it is not surprising to learn from another source that at the time of the alleged rape Medb had killed her own sister Clothru, "and out of her sides, Furbaide (Furvaddy), son of Conchobar, was taken with the swords" (Henderson, 1899). This suggests that Conchobar had resisted Medb's advances in favour of her sister Clothru and now Medb saw a chance of humbling him. Congreve sums it up:

"Heav'n has no rage, like love to hatred turn'd,
Nor Hell a fury, like a woman scorn'd."

SINGLE COMBAT

Cuchulainn, by skilful use of his sling both by day and by night, was killing large numbers of the invaders, so they were glad to make a pact with him that before they could advance farther Cuchulainn would have to be defeated in single combat. Cuchulainn, although he was severely wounded on many occasions, killed all comers till the Spring of the following year. Not only did he fight by day but he was on guard at night. Anyone who has suffered from insomnia or has had several consecutive sleepless nights for any reason will recognise the truth of the following description of the involuntary cat-naps which the insomniac cannot prevent: "For from the Monday before Samain (Savin—Summer's end) even unto the Wednesday after Spring beginning, Cuchulainn slept not for all that space, except for a brief snatch after mid-day, leaning against his spear, and his head on his fist, and his fist grasping his spear and his spear on his knee" (Dunn, 1914).

The end of each duel was decapitation, from which, of course, there was no recovery. Compound fracture of pelvis and long bones and ruptured liver and spleen and perineo-abdominal wounds were always fatal, but simple fracture of the skull and even penetrating wounds of abdomen and chest were not necessarily fatal even if the mesentery were ruptured.

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I think this is more a tribute to Celtic hyperbole than to medical skill!

UNARMED COMBAT

During the 1939-45 war, when training for unarmed combat became popular, I thought that something new had been discovered in the art of war, but there is nothing new under the sun. Cuchulainn was as expert in unarmed combat as with sling or lance.

A warrior named Larene (Lereeny) was chosen to meet Cuchulainn in single combat. His brother was a friend and foster-brother of Cuchulainn and knew that once Larene was killed he would be expected to avenge his death and therefore would himself be the next victim. He asked Cuchulainn to spare Larene's life and this Cuchulainn agreed to do and went unarmed into the battle. Dunn describes the encounter: "Cuchulainn ground and bruised Larene between his arms, he lashed him and clasped him, he squeezed him and shook him, so that he spilled all the dirt out of him, so that the ford was defiled with his dung and the air was fouled with his dust and an unclean filthy wrack of cloud arose in the four airs in which he was . . . From that time forth for the remainder of his life he never got up without a sigh and a groan, and he never lay down without a moan; as long as he lived he never ate a meal without a plaint, and never thence forward was he free from weakness of the loins and oppression of the chest and without cramps and the frequent need which obliged him to go out", because, as Kinsella adds, "(he) could not empty his bowels properly."

Rupture of both diaphragm and perineum would account for all four sets of symptoms—chest pain, abdominal cramps, frequency of micturition and incontinence of faeces.

FERDIA AT THE FORD

As warrior after warrior was killed by Cuchulainn, it became more and more difficult to get anyone to volunteer for the unequal combat. At last Ferdia (Ferde-a) was constrained to do battle with his friend and foster-brother. After three days of inconclusive duelling, Ferdia realised that the fourth day would bring either death or victory and he knew that if he appeared to be getting the upper hand Cuchulainn would use his secret weapon, the gae bolga (ga bulga). This was an underwater guided missile which never failed to find its target, euphemistically called the fundament, and on impact it burst into numerous barbs—a bit like an opening umbrella. The perineo-abdominal wound caused by this was inevitably fatal. The ford at which this battle was fought and in which Ferdia was killed became known as Ath (Awth) Ferdia,

which in course of time has become contracted to Ardee.

For protection against this gae bolga Ferdia sewed a mill-stone into the skirt of his apron. The word mill-stone conjures up windmills with their massive granite mill-stones, but windmills were not introduced into Europe from Asia until the twelfth century (Gibbon, 1176-1787), and probably at a much later date into Ireland. The mill-stone used by Ferdia was probably the upper stone of a rotary hand-quern of the type still used in Connemara in the nineteenth century (Lyons, 1952). Mrs. Park of Newtownards has a very fine collection of these "fairy millstones". They vary in size from 8 to 20 inches (20 to 50 cms) in diameter, so it would be perfectly feasible to sew a small one into the skirt of an apron or the seat of a pair of breeches.

It is a pity that Ferdia is not credited with wearing breeches because breeches were a Celtic invention (Gibbon, 1776-1787). But, like all advances, they took a long time to reach Ireland. However, as late as the sixteenth century, during the English invasion of Ireland, an eyewitness distinguished the Irish from the English soldiers by the former wearing tight-fitting breeches and the latter trunken hose. The woodcuts of John Derricke, who was on the staff of Sir Philip Sydney, do not differentiate very clearly between tight breeches and loose hose. He states, however, that the Irish were easily distinguishable because they wore a saffron coloured linen over-garment which came down to their knees (Small, 1883). This presumably is the forerunner of the saffron kilt.

Cuchulainn was severely wounded in this duel with Ferdia and was brought home to the plain of Murtheimne to bathe in its healing streams. His wounds were packed with sphagnum moss and protected from the irritation of his clothes by hoops of willow wands—surely the first reference to bed-cradles that we are likely to find.

ATTITUDE TO DEATH

In present-day society death is, or has been until recently, a tabu subject for polite conversation. This reflects a fear of death. We expect to be made better—no matter what our illness. We have not attained the philosophical composure of Sir Thomas Browne who in 1636 could write: "I boast nothing but plainly say, we all labour against our own cure, for death is the cure of all diseases" (Keynes, 1968). The Celts, like the Victorians, lived with death around the corner. What else could a head-hunting fraternity expect? Violent death was the order of the day and in the Annals of Ireland the death in his bed of any king was worthy of special mention. The Celtic warriors feared death

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but often went into battle with a complete disregard for their own safety, not bothering to wear armour or even clothes. They were fatalists—as most soldiers are.

When Ferdia had the premonition that his fight with Cuchulainn would be his last, Mary Hutton expresses his thoughts very well:

“ . . . and well we know
What must be, must be, Man may not avoid
His hour of birth, nor yet his hour of death;
But he is driven and constrained to come
Unto that sod where his last grave shall be.”

Dr. Douglas Hyde (1901) gives the literal translation as: “A man is constrained to come unto the sod where his final grave shall be” and paraphrases it to:

“O Cuchulain, fierce of fight,
Man of wounds and man of might,
Fate compelleth each to stir
Moving towards his sepulchre.”

Fatalism was not the sole cause of their bravery. Wagner (1971) states: “Celts are reported to have been highly religious people with a central belief in immortality and a happy life in another world after death, a belief from which their well-known bravery in war and disregard for death are derived.”

In spite of the Celts' widely-held belief in reincarnation (Ross, 1975), I can find nothing in the Tain to support the neo-platonic interpretation which W. B. Yeats gives to the life and death of Cuchulainn (Raine, 1974). I am neither mystic nor poet, but I cannot help wondering what he would think of the “terrible beauty” which still stalks through our land 61 years after he saluted its birth.

In the Tain several warriors are described as going into battle naked and one of the vignettes is the description of an old naked warrior. The well-known statue ‘The Dying Gaul’ in the Museo Capitolino in Rome depicts the fallen figure of a naked warrior with a long trumpet and sword lying beside him. It was erected in the third century B.C. by Attalus I, King of Pergamon, to commemorate a resounding victory over the Celts or Gauls of neighbouring Galatia. Pergamon was the home of one of the churches reprimanded by the writer of the Apocalypse or Revelation of St. John the Divine. It was also the birthplace of Galen, who inherited a long tradition of healing because Pergamon had been a notable centre for the healing cult of Asklepios, who was worshipped as ‘The Saviour’. The title ‘Saviour’ is here used in its correct Greek sense as “saving from disease, harm, peril, etc.,

and is a common epithet of Zeus and kings” (Allegro, 1970).

Cartwright and Biddis (1972) claim that the phenomenal spread of Christianity in the Roman Empire in the first three centuries of this era was stimulated by its specific medical mission in a succession of plagues. “The miracles of Christ and the miraculous power entrusted by him to his followers were an earnest of divine intervention which might cure mortal sickness or defeat death itself ... So was formed the cult of Christ the Healer.”

PSYCHOGENIC SHOCK

After the duel between Cuchulainn and Ferdia the Ulster warriors recovered from their ‘pangs’ and some came on their own initiative to stem the invading host. Some were vanquished and some were bought off by various means. Rochad (Rochu), the most handsome of the Ulster warriors, came with 100 retainers and when Finnabair heard of his approach she confessed to her mother that he was “her true and first and chosen love”—a real Romeo and Juliet situation! “If you have so much love for him,’ Ailill and Medb said, ‘sleep with him tonight and ask him for a truce for our armies until he comes against us with Conchobar on the day of the great battle.” When Finnabair returned to the camp the following morning she found that seven kings of Munster had rebelled because each of them agreed with their spokesman, who said: “That girl was promised to me, with fifteen hostages as a guarantee, to get me to join this army.” The combined forces of Medb, Ailill and Fergus and the Galeoin (who seem to have been earlier inhabitants of the South, just as the Piets or Cruthin were the earlier inhabitants of the North) put down the rebellion with a total loss of 700 men. When Finnabair heard this, she fell dead of shame, or as O’Rahilly puts it: “Her heart cracked like a nut in her breast through shame and modesty.” I suppose we must diagnose psychogenic shock as the cause of that death from natural causes.

BEDSIDE MANNER

In the days of the Tain it was the hallmark of a good physician to be able to diagnose a man's illness by the way the smoke arose from the hole in his roof, and after inspecting a wound he was expected to be able to state not only what weapon caused it but also who wielded the weapon. That, of course, we can put aside as nonsense, but Cethern's treatment by and of the physicians can teach us a lot.

Cethern, a renowned Ulster warrior, was one of those who recovered early from the ‘pangs’ and went to aid Cuchulainn and was himself gravely wounded.

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“He came back from the battle with his guts around his feet, and Cuchulainn pitied his wounds. ‘Get me a healer,’ Cethern said to Cuchulainn. A bed of fresh rushes was fixed for him and a pillow.... The first healer came up and examined him. ‘You won’t survive this,’ he said. ‘Then neither will you,’ Cethern cried and struck him with his fist, and his brains splashed out through the seams of his skull and the windows of his ears (Dunn). He killed 50 healers ... in the same way.... Cuchulainn said to Cethern, ‘You had no right to kill those healers ...’ ‘They had no right to give me bad news’ was the reply.”

Those 50 healers all made the same mistake—they gave a poor prognosis without even being asked, and, even worse, when a consultant was called in, they were proved wrong. I am all in favour of never telling a patient a lie, but we must remember that our diagnosis and prognosis may be wrong and as long as there is a ray of hope it must not be extinguished. Fortunately, if we do communicate bad news we are not likely to suffer the same fate as Cethern’s first 50 physicians.

DIAGNOSIS AND TREATMENT

Fingin, the holy healer, the consultant, Conchobar’s own physician, was next to be summoned to Cethern’s bedside. He examined the wounds and said “‘They have cut the bloody sinews of your heart. It is rolling around inside you like a ball of wool in an empty bag’ ... After this the healer gave him a choice: either to treat his sickness for a whole year and live out his life’s span, or get enough strength quickly, in three days and three nights, to fit him to fight his present enemies. He chose the second course. The healer asked Cuchulainn for bone marrow to heal him, and Cuchulainn ... took what beasts he could find and made a mash of marrow out of their bones. Cethern slept day and night in the marrow, absorbing it. He said afterwards: ‘I have no ribs left. Get me the ribs out of the chariot frame’ ... Cethern took his weapons and made off towards the armies, with the frame of his chariot bound around him to give him strength.”

I think we can discount the guts around Cethern’s feet as more Irish exaggeration, but the statement about absence of ribs and the use of the chariot frame as an abdominal and chest support surely makes the phrase about Cethern’s heart rolling around like a ball of wool in an empty bag a very vivid description of a flail chest and mediastinal flutter.

MARROW BATHS

This healing by marrow bath is quite frequent in legendary Celtic lore, going back to Diancecht—the Irish Asklepios—and appearing as late as the twelfth cen-

tury, by which time it had taken on a sacerdotal role. Giraldus Cambrensis, who accompanied Henry II on his subjugation of Ireland in the twelfth century, described the inauguration of The O’Donnell as the King of Tyrconnell at Doon Rock near Letterkenny as follows: “All being assembled on a hill, a white beast was brought before them, unto which he who was chosen as king, approaching, declared himself to be just such another (that is, a mere beast): whereupon the cow was cut in pieces, boiled in water, and a bath prepared for the new king of the broth, into which he entered publicly, and at once bathed and fed” (Anonymous, 1839). This inauguration ceremony may have been completely pagan but the ceremony before the O’Donnell forces went into battle certainly was not. The Cathach was ceremoniously carried around the army in the hope that its power would be transferred to the soldiers. The Cathach is the Psalter surreptitiously copied by St Columba from that owned by another monk and it was the subject of the first copyright decision—“To each cow its calf, therefore to each book its copy.” What is thought to be the original sixth century Cathach is one of the treasures in the Royal Irish Academy. The pagan inauguration rite was probably followed by a Christian ceremony and by the following century had been completely replaced by such a ceremony in the Abbey at Kilmacrenan (Byrne, 1973).

ST PATRICK AND THE SNAKES

The Gallaghers, or O’Gallaghers as they were then, played a leading part in this ceremony (Byrne, 1973) and for several centuries The O’Gallagher was the sub-chief and Marshal of The O’Donnell’s forces. They were sufficiently important to have their own coat of arms which contains “a serpent in fess proper” and the crest is a “crescent gules, out of the horns a serpent erect proper” (MacLysacht, 1957).

It seems strange for an Irish sept to have serpents in its coat-of-arms—the dozen or so septs or families who have this mark of distinction must have been here before St Patrick, because, as we all know, he banished snakes from Ireland! It is easy to be facetious about this legend, but there may be more truth in it than is zoologically possible.

The statue of the ‘Dying Gaul’ to which I have already referred bears close inspection. On the ground before the eyes of the dying warrior there is a snake and surely a battlefield is the last place we would expect to find any wild animal, especially a snake. I suggest that we can interpret this best by comparing it with a similar but hypothetical memorial which Saladin I might have erected to commemorate a victory over the Crusaders. In front of the eyes of the dying

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Crusader would be a cross or a crucifix. We know that the snake was one of many animals revered by the Continental Celts and I am suggesting that it is here representing one of the Celtic Pantheon. MacCulloch (1911) identifies the snake as the emblem or even as the god of the underworld. The English Celts or, if that is too much a contradiction in terms, the Celts who inhabited Britain before the Roman Invasion, used the snake as a religious symbol and may well have worshipped it (Sharkey, 1975), and the Irish Celts probably did likewise. The snake, serpent or water-serpent appears frequently in Irish Celtic mythology and its banishment by St. Patrick was its suppression as an object of worship. Ross (1967) states that "... any lack of serpent lore in Ireland is due to the deliberate suppression of this sacred pagan animal on the part of the Church..." St Patrick's banishing of the snakes is therefore true in a mythological rather than a zoological sense.

HEALING WELLS

The sweat-houses of former centuries and the healing wells which are still with us in a Christianised form are in the same tradition as the marrow bath and I am sure that it is no accident that there is a holy or healing well in the shadow of Doon Rock. St Cooley's wells outside Portaferry have recently been opened to the car-loving public at vast expense and rosary beads left on the thorn bush overhanging the well testify to its current use—carrying on a custom which is centuries old. St Cooley is the legendary saint of the Upper (Southern) Ards. The ruins of his church or temple, built beside the wells and reputedly going back to the seventh century, have been renovated and Mass was celebrated there in July last, probably for the first time since the eighteenth century.

MEDICAL CORPS

When the men of Ulster recovered from their illness they mobilised on the hill of Slane. The last troop to arrive was the Medical Corps. Medb's look-out described them: "'Yet another company then came to the mound in Slane of Meath,' continued McRoth, 'a numberless bright-faced band; unwonted garments they wore; a little bag at the waist of each man of them. A white-haired, bull-faced man in front of that company; an eager, dragon-like eye in his head; a black flowing robe with edges of purple around him; a many-coloured leaf-shaped brooch with gems in the robe over his breast; a ribbed tunic of thread of gold around him; a short sword, keen and hard with plates of gold in his hand; they all came to him to show him their stabs and their sores, and he gave each one a cure, and what at last happened to each was even the

ill he foretold him.' 'He is the power of leechcraft; he is the healing of wounds; the thwarting of death; he is the absence of every weakness, is that man,' said Fergus, 'namely Fingin, the prophet-mediciner, the physician of Conchobar, with the leeches of Ulster around him . . . Their medicine bags are the sacks which thou sawest with them'" (Dunn, 1914).

The word mediciner in the middle ages meant professor (Underwood, 1977), and this suggests that the Broin Bhearg was a medical school at which the physicians had their training.

There is very little need for comment on that except to compare and contrast Fingin and his band of physicians with Machaon and Podaleirius of the Achaeon forces in the Iliad who were primarily warriors and secondarily surgeons. Fingin and his troop were primarily healers and the short sword was a weapon of self-defence, not offence.

The final battle was a success for the men of Ulster. They won the battle but really had lost the war because of the loss of their wealth of cattle, women and children. The final incident in the story is worthy of close examination.

HYDRAMNIOS

The army was fleeing towards the River Shannon at Athlone: "Medb had set up a shelter of shields to guard the men of Ireland . . .

"Then Medb got her gush of blood.

'Fergus,' she said, take over the shelter of shields at the rear of the men of Ireland until I relieve myself.'

'By God,' Fergus said, you have picked a bad time for this.'

'I can't help it,' Medb said. 'I'll die if I cannot do it.'

"So Fergus took over the shelter of shields at the rear of the men of Ireland and Medb relieved herself. It dug three great channels, each big enough to take a household. The place is called Fual Medba, Medb's Foul Place": literally 'Medb's urine'.

The four facts we get from the story are that in her hour of need Medb turned for help to Fergus, not to her husband. She passed a huge volume of fluid which was thought to be urine. She was in severe pain before she passed it and the onset was heralded by a gush of blood. When taken with her adultery with Fergus a few months earlier, this, I suggest, adds up to a classic case of acute hydramnios, which can be very acute and extremely painful. It is frequently associated with congenital malformation (Macafee, 1950), and such malformations are more common with el-

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derly parents such as Medb and Fergus were. The volume of fluid may be as great as six gallons (27 litres) (Brews, 1963), and if this were thought to be urine, then no wonder that the amount became exaggerated over the years until it was large enough to gouge out the foundations for three houses! Even that, on closer examination, is not so remarkable as it first appears, because the only foundations for many Celtic houses were very shallow trenches in which was placed a plank of wood, through holes in which upright stakes were placed.

POSTSCRIPT

That marks the end of the Tain but not the end of the story. Violence breeds violence, then as now. Medb was killed by her nephew Furbaide to avenge his mother's death and is buried at Knocknarea in County Sligo. Cuchulainn's turn came too, when the relatives of those whom he had killed in single combat joined together and slaughtered him. A statue of the 'Dying Cuchulain' is in the General Post Office in Dublin, while we in Ulster hardly know his name. The death of Cuchulainn has inspired many artists and poets, the most recent being Dr. Ian Adamson, a Fellow of this Society, who for this occasion has written:

THE DEATH CALL OF CUCHULAINN CHAMPION OF ULSTER

1. We have slain him, but we fear him
As we stand in silence now,
For the Hero-Light still lingers
Like a lantern on his brow;
And the wiles of witchcraft jeer him
With the phantoms of our dead
As they moil like May Mosquitoes
Round his torn and bleeding head.
2. Now the host of Ireland shivers
In a swift encircling gloom,
For the Noon-Day Sun is sharing
All the anguish of his Doom;
And the Shield of Conor quivers
As the Waves of Rury sound,
Easing all the pains of childbirth
From the Curse of Macha's Mound.
3. "Oh my Father! I am dying
As the Wise Men have foreseen
And the Red Branch rise in vengeance,
Stirred by Conall's awful mein.
Oh my Father, hear my crying!
With the parting of this day
Let the fairest Dreams of Fola
From this Island fade away."
4. Thus he speaks; the Queen of Connacht
Screams and spits with maddened glee,

And around him, drunk and dank,
Obscenely dance the Sisters Three.
But we know that we have won naught,
For our Great Spears will not rise
Till the mighty Hound of Cullen
Wakes at last in Paradise.

S. I. G. Adamson

The poem refers to many events in Celtic mythology which are not part of the Tain, but some readers may be stimulated by it to delve deeper into our cultural heritage.

MODERN PARALLELS

Cuchulainn's death was avenged by Conall Cernach, and so it went on, and so it still goes on:

"Each killing only asks for more,
For some to kill is just a chore:
Slaughter is rife"

(Gallagher, 1977).

The Ulster of Conchobar, Derdriu and Cuchulainn was the land of both Ulad and Piet or Celt and Cruthin, but both were united against a common enemy. It was easy for them to unite to repel an invader, but, so far, we have been unable to overcome our traditional, cultural and religious differences to unite to conquer the enemy within the gates. Our common enemy—in fact, the enemy of all civilisation—is violence and the lethargy which prevents us taking adequate action is every bit as effective as 'the pangs' which afflicted the Warriors of the Red Branch.

Last winter two women, by their courage and charisma, brought thousands of Ulster men and women to their feet to demonstrate their hatred of violence. They even mounted an invasion of the South by combined Cruthin and Ulad, or

Catholic and Protestant, or Republican and Unionist, and once more the forces of Ulster confronted the Rest of Ireland in the valley of the Boyne.

Whatever we think of events since then, we must admit that these two Nobel Peace Prize winners achieved something which no one else had thought of attempting and it may be that, in spite of present evidence to the contrary, historians in the future will look back at that confrontation and mingling in peace on the Boyne Bridge in Drogheda as the turning-point in our struggle.