

## **The Combat of Lug and Balor: Discourses of Power in Irish Myth and Folktale**

**Joan N. Radner**

If you stand on the northwestern coast of Ireland's County Donegal and look out across the North Atlantic on a clear day, you will see like "a castellated mirage on the horizon"—Tory Island, one of the world's most barren inhabited islands. Two and one-half miles long and three-quarters of a mile wide, Tory is windswept and has no trees. Its two tiny towns and their surrounding fields and bog are dwarfed by gigantic rock formations and dramatic ocean inlets, just as the names of Tory's towns—East Town and West Town—fade to cartographic blandness next to the vivid, evocative names of its natural crags and harbors.

Like so many other environments of potent oral cultures throughout the world, Tory's named landscape is the visible and significant record of its layers of oral history. Among the stories told by and among these rocks is a very ancient one. Dún Baloir, Balor's Castle, the high rock at the eastern end of the island, is the legendary home of King Balor, a monstrous oppressor whose single, poisonous eye is said to have withered permanently all the vegetation on Tory and on the visible mountains of the nearby Donegal coast. Balor had a single daughter whom he kept imprisoned in the crag of An Tor Mór (The Great Tower), near his castle, isolated from all men because of a prophecy that Balor could be killed only by his own grandson. Another island placename, Port na Glaise (The Harbor of the Gray Cow), commemorates Balor's predatory jealousy of the mainlanders, evoking the story of how he stole from a Donegal blacksmith a magical cow, An Glas Gaibhleann, that gave an endless supply of milk, and by her tail dragged her ashore onto the island at Port na Glaise. The young hero, Ceannfhaolaidh (Kineely), who came to rescue the cow also gained access to An Tor Mór and left Balor's daughter (and in most versions of the tale her twelve serving maids as well!) pregnant before he made his escape the next day. Returning nine months later, he escaped in his little boat with all

thirteen infants, wrapped up in a cloak fastened with a thorn; the name of Portdellig (The Port of the Thorn) commemorates the offshore spot where the thorn broke, casting the infants (all but Balor's grandson) into the sea, where in some tellers' renditions they became seals.

Balor's grandson, in many folktale versions named Lugh Lámfhada (Lugh of the Long Arm), grows to be a righteous youth, standing against Balor's oppressions. When Balor's mainland agents show up at a wedding to demand of the bride the traditional *droit de seigneur*, Lugh maims or kills them; when Balor himself comes to the mainland and kills Lugh's father (thereby originating the name of the entire district, Cloghaneely, Ceannfhaolaidh's Stone) in revenge for the repossession of An Glas Gaibhleann, Lugh swears revenge. Seizing a red-hot staff of iron from the smith's forge, he drives it through Balor's poison eye. Realizing that the prophesied end has come, Balor tells his grandson to behead him and to place his severed head on top of his own to gain his power; wisely, Lugh places the head on a rock instead, and the drop of poison that falls from it shatters the rock and digs a cavern in the earth into which the deepest of the local lakes is said to have arisen.

Celticists and Indo-Europeanists will immediately recognize the story behind this inscribed landscape as a descendant of one of the most famous texts of early Irish literature, *The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, the story of the mythic battle between the Túatha Dé Danann, the pagan Irish gods, and their (also supernatural) enemies, the Fomorians. Although *The Second Battle* is a far more complex narrative than the nineteenth- and twentieth-century folktales whose versions I have summarized above, it shares several features with the modern tale. The ultimate hero of the gods is a young warrior-king named Lug of the Long Arm. He is in fact the grandson of Balor, one of the champions of the Fomorians, who, to seal an earlier alliance with the Túatha Dé Danann, has given his daughter in marriage to them. In addition, Balor in the myth does have a "piercing eye" (*Birugderc*), which is opened only on the battlefield. In the final moments of the great battle, young Lug faces and challenges Balor's terrible eye (Gray 1982a:61):

Four men would raise the lid of the eye by a polished ring in its lid. The host which looked at the eye, even if they were many thousands in number, would offer no resistance to warriors.... Then he and Lug met.

... "Lift up my eyelid, lad," said Balor, "so I may see the talkative fellow who is conversing with me."

The lid was raised from Balor's eye. Then Lug cast a sling stone at him which carried the eye through his head, and it was his own host that

looked at it. He fell on top of the Fomorian host so that twenty-seven of them died under his side; and the crown of his head struck against the breast of Indech mac Dé Domnann [King of the Fomorians] so that a gush of blood spouted over his lips [and he died].

Taking their lead from Georges Dumézil, Indo-Europeanists and Celticists have drawn comparisons between this Irish battle and that between the Asuras and Devas in Vedic mythology and the Aesir and the Vanir in Scandinavian lore (Dumézil 1948). *The Second Battle of Mag Tuired* has become one of the pillars of the reconstruction of the early Indo-European narrative tradition (Gray 1981, 1982b, 1983; Ó Cathasaigh 1983). It has been suggested that *The Second Battle* constitutes a conceptual exploration of the bases of Celtic kinship relations, kingship, and social roles, and that the battle between the Túatha Dé Danann and the Fomorians reflects an early stage of the expansion of the Indo-European peoples, when aristocratic warrior invaders were conquering, intermarrying with, and coopting the agricultural skills of indigenous peoples.

It is clear that the myth, including the alliance between the Túatha Dé Danann and the Fomorians symbolized by the marriage between one of the gods and Balor's daughter, and ending with the battle in which the Fomorians are subjugated, has from its origin carried concepts about the power relationships between two political groups (Gray 1981:192-93), and has presented a strong paradigm of Túatha Dé Danann (and thus Irish) victory. While these elements have remained constant in the story's popular evolution, however, the tale of the primordial conflict of Lug and Balor has changed dynamically through history to comment on the direct experience of its makers and re-makers. In fact, when the episode first appears in *The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*, it is obviously in the process of adaptation. We do not have any pre-Christian text of this supposedly "pagan" myth. Ireland was converted to Christianity in the fifth century; the earliest surviving version of *The Second Battle* does not seem to go back before the ninth century, and was probably written in the eleventh. It bears many marks of Christian imagination, including the fact that the encounter between the archetypal young hero and the gigantic champion of the enemy army seems modeled upon the Biblical David's slaying of the Philistine champion Goliath (McCone 1989:138-39).

Furthermore, if the story behind *The Second Battle of Mag Tuired* began as an Indo-European myth of conquest of indigenes by outsiders, in Ireland—a country historically much plagued by outsiders—it early changed into a myth of the defense of the country *against* outsiders. Significantly, in the earliest surviving version Balor is identified as *rí na*

*nInnsi*, King of the Hebrides, a title that came into being only during the Viking period: in other words, the sinister Balor is imagined as one of the Vikings whose major impact on Ireland coincided with the centuries during which this version of the battle story took shape. The Fomorians are portrayed as both indigenous and alien, a population both inside and outside Ireland—just as the Vikings were both settlers and raiders.

The fact that this paradigm exactly describes later colonialists as well was not lost on the Irish men of learning. In a late sixteenth-century praise-poem addressed to a chieftain of the O'Byrnes, the English occupation of Ireland is metaphorically referred to as "Balor's bondage" (*broid Balair*), and Balor (the image of the rack-renting English planter) is said to have demanded a tax of one ounce of gold from each Irishman, on pain of the loss of his nose. The O'Byrne chieftain, hyperbolically compared to Lugh Lámhfhada, is called on to save his people from servitude (Mac Airt 1944:132-33).

Such explicit equation of Balor with the English colonizers is rare. Implicitly, however, as the story develops orally and in manuscript through the centuries of English occupation, it comments precisely on the nature and progress of colonialism itself. Lugh's origins, for example, as the offspring of a liaison between gods and demons, natives and invaders, point to the historical Irish tradition of intermarriage with settlers, "the classical weapon with which medieval Irish aristocrats intuitively countered cultural domination," and one that succeeded against the Vikings and the Normans, but failed from the Tudor period onwards when the arriving colonizers became too numerous (Ó Tuama 1988:29). Significantly, as the Lugh and Balor narrative evolves over time into a folktale of the English landlord era, the early versions' motif of open intermarriage, intended to neutralize the foreign threat, is replaced by the hero's stealthy tryst with Balor's daughter in an isolated tower.

It seems to me no coincidence, furthermore, that the tale gains a new closing motif—the so-called Episode of the Head—during the period at which the English conquest of Ireland intensified. In this motif, Balor, his evil eye already knocked out, urges his grandson to behead him and place his head on top of his own. If Lug does this, Balor promises in a poem, he will "earn my blessing" and inherit "the triumph and the terror that the men of Inis Fáil [that is, Ireland] found in me" (Mac Neill 1908:34-35; Murphy 1953:135); in a seventeenth-century version of the tale, Balor promises his grandson "my prosperity and my great luck, my horror and my valor"; in a nineteenth-century folktale version, he promises that Lugh "will know everything in the world, and no one will be able to conquer you" (Ó Cuív

1945:54). The temptation that he holds out, in other words, is that the Irish hero will learn to behave like his oppressor. And this was precisely the goal of the English occupation of Ireland in and after the sixteenth century: not only territorial conquest of the country, but also *cultural* domination that aimed to eradicate the native laws, literature, Catholic religion, and language itself and replace these with English institutions and language. Irish heads were to be filled with English thoughts. Lugh's instinctive resistance to Balor's stratagem figures forth what Seán Ó Tuama has called the Irish "cultural will to survive," which "remained both flexible and obstinate for some three centuries after the initial [English] programme for destabilisation began" (1988:29).

Read through the same lens, Balor's behavior in the folktales of the past two centuries metaphorically dramatizes the Irish view of the English colonizers. (I am here referring chiefly to folktales from Donegal and Tory Island, although many versions have been collected from other areas of Ireland as well.) The tales represent Balor as rapacious, greedy, demanding. He is often unmistakably a landlord—in fact, an absentee landlord who demands impossible rents, deploys his hated bailiffs to represent him on the mainland, and steals his tenants' means of subsistence (the miraculous cow, *An Glas Gaibhleann*). According to one teller, when Balor would open his eye, nothing could survive, "men or beasts or birds or fish"; his glance would burst rocks and trees and dry up wells and rivers (Mac Gabhann 1944:335-36). Despite Balor's acquisitiveness and his agents' licensed rape of Irish women, his world is barren. The landscape carries the story of Balor's negation of life, in the places named after his story, in the withered vegetation of Tory and the mainland mountains, and in the shattered rocks, trenches, and bottomless lakes created by the poison drops from his head. In contrast, in local folk tradition the green fields of the mainland are said to attest to the lactiferous bounty of the smith's cow (Therman 1989:17), and the very presence of seals in the sea commemorates the fertility of the young Irish hero who fathered Lugh on Balor's daughter.

Over the past millennium, and probably much longer, the combat of Lug and Balor has been told and retold, written and rewritten, revised constantly in order to present in fictive form the key political and economic configurations of the day, and to demonstrate that even invasion and cultural imperialism can be resisted. The validity of the narrative, for those who tell it, is borne out by its inscription in the very landscape of Ireland and in each placename that, as Seamus Heaney puts it, "succinctly marries the legendary and the local" (1980:131). Volatile imagination informs the

solid rock. To quote Henry Glassie, “History makes the locality rich. Its names become cracks through which to peek into excitement . . . , a way to make the small place enormous, complete, inhabitable, worth defending” (1982:664).

*The American University*

### References

- Curtin 1971 [1894] Jeremiah Curtin. “Balor on Tory Island.” In *Hero Tales of Ireland*. New York: Benjamin Blom. pp. 283-95.
- Dumézil 1948 Georges Dumézil. *Mitra-Varuna: Essai sur deux représentations indo-européennes de la souveraineté*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Glassie 1982 Henry Glassie. *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Gray 1981 Elizabeth A. Gray. “Cath Maige Tuired: Myth and Structure (1-24).” *Éigse*, 18:183-209.
- Gray 1982a \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *Cath Maige Tuired: The Second Battle of Mag Tuired*. London: Irish Texts Society.
- Gray 1982b \_\_\_\_\_. “Cath Maige Tuired: Myth and Structure (24-120).” *Éigse*, 19:1-35.
- Gray 1983 \_\_\_\_\_. “Cath Maige Tuired: Myth and Structure (84-93, 120-67).” *Éigse*, 19:230-62.
- Heaney 1980 Seamus Heaney. “The Sense of Place.” In *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux. pp. 131-49.
- Mac Airt 1944 Seán Mac Airt, ed. *Leabhar Branach: The Book of the O’Byrnes*. Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies.
- Mac Gabhann 1944 Micí Mac Gabhann. Transcription of interview (unpub.), Department of Irish Folklore, University College, Dublin, MS 932.

- Mac Neill 1908 Eoin Mac Neill, ed. *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn*. vol. 1. London: Irish Texts Society.
- McCone 1989 Kim McCone. "A Tale of Two Ditties: Poet and Satirist in *Cath Maige Tuired*." In *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in Honour of Professor James Carney*. Ed. by D. Ó Corráin, L. Breatnach, and K. McCone. Maynooth Monographs, 2. Maynooth: An Sagart. pp. 122-43.
- Murphy 1953 Gerard Murphy, ed. *Duanaire Finn: The Book of the Lays of Fionn*. vol. 3. Dublin: Irish Texts Society.
- Ó Cathasaigh 1983 Tomás Ó Cathasaigh. "*Cath Maige Tuired* as Exemplary Myth." In *Folia Gadelica: Essays Presented by Former Students to R. A. Breatnach*. Ed. by P. de Brún, S. Ó Coileáin, and P. Ó Riain. Cork: Cork University Press. pp. 1-19.
- Ó Cuiv 1945 Brian Ó Cuiv, ed. *Cath Muighe Tuireadh*. Dublin: Institute for Advanced Studies.
- Ó Tuama 1988 Seán Ó Tuama. "Gaelic Culture in Crisis: The Literary Response, 1600-1850." In *Irish Studies: A General Introduction*. Ed. by T. Bartlett, C. Curtin, R. O'Dwyer, and G. Ó Tuathaigh. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan / Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble. pp. 28-43.
- Therman 1989 Dorothy Harrison Therman. *Stories from Tory Island*. Dublin: Country House.