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Introduction

The greatest heroes acknowledge his superiority; his enemies tremble at his name; and the highest encomium that can be bestowed on one whom the poet would most exalt, is to say, that his soul was like the soul of Fingal.

—HUGH BLAIR, “A CRITICAL DISSERTATION
ON THE POEMS OF OSSIAN” (1763)¹

FIONN MAC CUMHAILL could well be considered the greatest Gaelic hero—and there has certainly been no shortage of great Gaelic heroes. But unlike Cú Chulainn or Cormac mac Airt, who also once enjoyed wide renown, Fionn and his roving warrior band, the Fianna, have retained their popularity into the modern period. Their stories have enthralled audiences for well over a millennium—longer, even, than the British King Arthur and his knights.² Indeed, prose and poetry about the Fianna comprise a prolific body of ‘Fenian’ narrative that spans roughly 1,400 years from the earliest written sources in Old Irish to modern literature and folklore originating in Ireland, Scotland, the Isle of Man, and the North American diaspora. That they have long held the Gaelic imagination is no small thing, but what is more, they have also made a substantial cultural impact well beyond their Gaelic point of origin. The names of these heroes have graced the lips of presidents, emperors, and kings: Thomas Jefferson found versions of their tales “the source of daily and exalted pleasure”; Napoleon Bonaparte admired their martial valor, envisioning himself as a modern Fenian warrior; and Napoleon’s godson, upon whom the French emperor bestowed a heroic Fenian name, became the first King Oscar of Sweden.³

This burst in international popularity was something of a historical fluke, since it was due not to any mass exposure to the Gaelic stories themselves, but

to a series of eighteenth-century creative adaptations in English, collectively known as *Ossian*, which James Macpherson claimed to have translated from manuscript and oral sources. Macpherson's adaptations had a great impact on the way the tradition was viewed and the uses to which it was put in the following centuries; yet, his efforts were by no means the first historically significant reformulation of this lengthy tradition, and they would not be the last. This book explores the changing fortunes and altering perceptions of the Fenian tradition from its earliest extant witnesses in the seventh century, through its eighteenth-century Ossianic debut on the world stage and the reverberations of that newfound renown in the Gaelic world, and finally into the modern period of nation-building, national image formation, and folklore collecting.

Our Heroes

Aspects of the representation of heroes are international. While not generally portrayed as deities, heroes' abilities typically broach or exceed the ordinary limits of human possibility. People—usually men—of action, they tend to exhibit physical strength, martial excellence, and a commitment to defending or upholding the social order. More specific heroic characteristics may be socially and culturally dependent, and there is variation from one hero to another.⁴ In a present-day Western Anglophone milieu, for instance, it can be observed that Superman, Spider-Man, Iron Man, Batman, and Black Panther all fill socially protective roles, but exhibit different backgrounds, outlooks, and skills. The same can be said for the Fianna.

The hundreds of stories and songs that make up the Fenian tradition depict a legendary early medieval golden age when Gaeldom is justly ruled and the Fianna are its defenders. Patrolling the Irish and Scottish wilderness, they alternate among temporary encampments, sustaining and entertaining themselves by hunting. Their pastoral idyll is frequently interrupted, however, for peace is hard won in an age when the fabric separating this realm from the otherworld is thin, and powerful invaders are eager to encroach on Gaelic territory. Ever watchful, our capable heroes successfully keep upstart otherworldly lords at bay and shield their shores from attack, but not all antagonism is external. At the height of the tradition, the warriors over whom Fionn presides hail from two long-embattled kindreds—Clann Bhaoiscne and Clann Mhorna—whose truce is wont to waver when tensions run high. Amid regular threats to their group and the broader society they protect, there are thus ever-present overtones of internal strife.

Fionn himself belongs to Clann Bhaoiscne. Indeed, the earliest texts frequently introduce him as *Finn ua Baiscne*, ‘Fionn, descendant of Baoiscne.’⁵ His connection with this kindred is maintained across the centuries, although from the late medieval period until the present day he has more commonly been called either Fionn mac Cumhaill (i.e., Fionn, son of Cumhall) or simply Fionn, his renown being such that no patronymic is needed to clearly identify him.⁶ That Fionn is, in fact, a descriptive sobriquet rather than an original name is another point of commonality he shares with heroes worldwide.⁷ Various sources give his birth name as either Deimhne or Glais Díge and attribute the bestowal of the name Fionn, ‘fair-haired,’ to unacquainted or poorly acquainted observers of his innate superiority.⁸ In one instance, in a competition against other boys, an adult witness to his childhood strength dubs the fair lad ‘Fionn,’ while in another, a poet named Fionn File—the hopeful beneficiary of prophetic knowledge imbued in the salmon of Fecc—realizes that the ‘Fionn’ foretold to receive this gift is not himself, but rather our young protagonist and rechristens him.⁹

On the Clann Bhaoiscne side of the Fianna, Fionn is joined early on by his son Oisín and nephew Caoilte, and later (from circa 900–1200) by others including Diarmaid ua Duibhne and Oisín’s son Oscar, while the most prominent members of Clann Mhorna, Goll, Garadh, and Conán enter the written record around the same time. As in the case of Fionn, several of the Fianna’s birth names differ from their heroic monikers. Caoilte, ‘slender-warm,’ receives his name when an otherworldly smith comments on his appearance in a hot forge; Oscar, ‘agility, strength,’ is found to have some strength left in him after a harrowing encounter, according to modern folklore; and Goll, ‘one-eyed,’ is so called due to his loss of an eye in a long-ago battle.¹⁰ Like modern superheroes, moreover, each is associated with one or more unique traits, such as Fionn’s unnatural wisdom, Caoilte’s incredible speed, and Goll’s great might. But the Fianna are not stock characters; their portrayals are complex. These and other aspects of their characterization develop over the centuries, and notable personality traits wax and wane.

The diverse stories about them include accounts of great victory, fascinating adventure, harrowing rescue, steadfast love, and heart-rending betrayal. A narrative tradition long in the making, its origins are shrouded in the mystery of prehistoric Ireland, and its oral and written aspects have been entwined from the earliest extant sources. Sparsely surviving early medieval accounts of our heroes suggest that circulation continued to be predominantly oral until the tenth century when an initially slow trickle of Fenian ink swelled to a lively

rivulet, preserving longer and more copious texts that shed increasing light on our developing characters and their exploits. A surge in the early thirteenth century produced the longest extant Gaelic medieval text, *Acallam na Senórach* (The dialogue of the elders), and subsequent centuries witnessed a veritable deluge of Fenian compositions as the Fianna attained the premodern equivalent of bestseller status. They were the most prevalent topic of literature in Early Modern Gaelic (c. 1250–1650), and they maintained this prestige for centuries, occupying considerable space on manuscript pages even into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹¹ Thanks to the efforts of modern folklorists, thousands of orally collected accounts show their ongoing prominence not just in the Gaelic languages, but also among English speakers in the former ‘Gaelic world’ and its diasporas. Composition has continued, moreover, in both Gaelic and English. Reimagined not only by Macpherson, but also by proponents of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Celtic Revival, not to mention numerous twentieth- and twenty-first-century authors, composers, screenwriters, and the like, our heroes’ storied renown persists to the present day.

Fenian Studies

Despite the Fianna’s widespread and enduring popularity, this book is the first full-length, comprehensive analysis of Fenian stories and songs and their place in society. Until relatively recently, scholarly concentration largely fell on other bodies of Gaelic heroic literature—primarily texts concerning Cú Chulainn and other legendary Ulster warriors—none of which were as long-lasting or prolific. Although scholars are beginning to rectify this situation, the vastly important Fenian narrative tradition remains marginal to the received history of Celtic, and by extension, Western literature. Multiple Fenian texts lack editions and translations, let alone sustained critical analysis, and Fionn and the Fianna continue to receive only a fraction of the attention that their heroic British counterparts, Arthur and his knights, do. But the winds of change are blowing. Since the early 2000s, more scholars than ever before have turned their attention to Fenian topics, and the fruits of their labors can be observed in conferences organized, grant-funded projects initiated, courses offered, theses supervised, and articles and books published. Through their efforts, we are witnessing the emergence of an academic field of Fenian studies, the continued growth of which will undoubtedly result in ever diminishing gaps in knowledge and a greater awareness of the importance of this prolific corpus to our understanding of Gaelic, Celtic, and broader Western written and oral narrative traditions.

The present swell of Fenian scholarship is rooted in a wave of publications in the final decades of the last century when our heroes captured the attention of a small but dedicated academic cohort. A foundational triad of monographs appeared in the 1980s, which included Joseph Nagy's *Wisdom of the Outlaw* (1985), analyzing accounts of Fionn's youth from a Lévi-Straussian structuralist perspective; James MacKillop's *Fionn mac Cumhaill: Celtic Myth in English Literature* (1986), documenting major English-language engagements with the tradition; and Dáithí O hÓgáin's *Fionn mac Cumhaill: Images of the Gaelic Hero* (1988), providing a nonspecialist introduction to a broad range of material, including several rarely considered texts in Early Modern Gaelic. These were supplemented by articles by these and other scholars, among them notably Máirtín Ó Briain, Alan Bruford, and Donald Meek, and two substantial essay collections dedicated to Fenian material, *Fiannaíocht: Essays on the Fenian Tradition of Ireland and Scotland* (1987), edited by Bo Almqvist, Séamas Ó Catháin, and Pádraig Ó Héalaí, and *An Fhiannaíocht* (1995), edited by Pádraig Ó Fianachta. This body of scholarship—the first modern critical examinations of the Fenian tradition—illuminated a languishing corpus for the inspiration of a new scholarly generation.¹²

The academics entering the field in the present century have trained under and worked alongside the aforementioned pioneers, and are responsible for the current unprecedented vibrancy of Fenian studies. Under their stewardship, a series of Fianaíocht conferences has taken place,¹³ first at the University of Cambridge in 2009, then the University of Glasgow in 2014, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig on the Isle of Skye in 2018 (in conjunction with the Ulidia [Ulster cycle] conference), and, most recently, Mary Immaculate College in Limerick in 2022. These have produced three new essay collections, *The Gaelic Finn Tradition* (2012), edited by Sharon Arbuthnot and Geraldine Parsons, *The Gaelic Finn Tradition II* (2022), edited by Sharon Arbuthnot, Síle Ní Mhurchú, and Geraldine Parsons, and *Proceedings of Ulidia-Finn 2018* (forthcoming), edited by Ralph O'Connor, Abigail Burnyeat, Geraldine Parsons, and Domhnall Uilleam Stiùbhart. Topical symposia have also generated essay collections dedicated to specific Fenian collections and texts, including *Duanaire Finn: Reassessments* (2003) and *Tóruigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne: Reassessments* (2018), emerging from the Irish Texts Society's annual seminars in Cork in 2002 and 2017 and edited by John Carey and Kevin Murray respectively, and *In Dialogue with the Agallamh: Essays in Honour of Seán Ó Coileáin* (2014), emerging from a conference at University College Cork in 2012 and edited by Aidan Doyle and Kevin Murray. Two publications in preparation by myself and Joseph Nagy have resulted from a series of workshops at Harvard's

Radcliffe Institute in 2018 and 2021, moreover, the first an essay collection featuring representative work in each period of the tradition and the second a textual reader for classroom and nonspecialist use.

Since the essay has long been the predominant critical medium in the discipline of Celtic Languages and Literatures, as Arbuthnot and Parsons point out, the significance of these collections is undeniable.¹⁴ They have begun to be supplemented by single-author studies, moreover, including Kevin Murray's *The Early Finn Cycle* (2017), a guide to the primary and secondary sources for early Fenian literature (c. 600–1225) intended for university students, but reflecting the most current scholarship and therefore also of specialist interest. Murray's companion booklet, *The Early Fenian Corpus*, which followed in 2021, supersedes Kuno Meyer's considerably earlier survey of the same corpus in his *Fianaigeacht* (1910), while Joseph Flahive's booklet *The Fenian Cycle in Irish and Scots-Gaelic Literature* (2017) provides an up to-date introduction to the field for students and nonspecialists and Tadhg Ó Síocháin's *Caoilte sa Luath-Fhiannaíocht* (2021) offers new insight into the earliest depictions of a single character. Such resources make Fenian narrative more approachable, enabling newcomers to more easily situate themselves within this sizable textual tradition, and improving scholars' ability to teach and work with the material.

Work is also underway to improve the accessibility of the primary corpus. In addition to the textual reader mentioned above, which will contain new translations in cases when existing resources are outdated or the texts have never been translated, the past few decades have seen the publication of an attractive new translation of *Acallam na Senórach* (1999), edited by Ann Dooley and Harry Roe; a consolidated edition of the later, longer *Agallamh na Seanórach* (2014), edited by Nessa Ní Shéaghdha; and a new edition of *Lige Guill / The Grave of Goll: A Fenian Poem from the Book of Leinster* (2009), edited by Diarmuid Ó Murchadha. While the number of Fenian texts still needing first or new editions and translations extends into the hundreds, the publication of a handful of additional texts edited as thesis projects is likely in coming years. We have also seen the recent commencement of major digital initiatives, including the Fionn Folklore Database, launched in 2023 and directed by me, which provides the first comprehensive classification system for Fenian folklore, and Kevin Murray's newly funded project to produce a digital critical edition of the *Acallam*, which promises to far surpass the current standard edition published in 1900.¹⁵

These rapid advances are enormously significant, but given the emergent state of the field, considerable gaps remain. Fenian criticism to date has concentrated primarily on texts in Old and Middle Irish, examined the much larger

body of Early Modern Gaelic texts less frequently, and, with some notable exceptions, tended to sidestep Macpherson's *Ossian* and its reverberations and overlook the modern oral corpus. The tendency to prize earlier texts over later compositions reflects a longstanding bias in the study of Gaelic literature, but this ground is shifting, and genres once out of favor, like so-called 'bardic' poetry and heroic romance (including Fenian romance), have begun to receive increased attention.¹⁶ With regard to the oral corpus, the absence of a reliable finding aid prior to the launch of the Fionn Folklore Database long hindered Fenian folklore scholarship, although scholars like Ó Briain and Bruford did make major contributions in this area in the latter third of the twentieth century. Recent work inspired by the database has begun to emerge, however, and considerable further advances can be expected in this area too in years to come.¹⁷ Regarding *Ossian*, academics in non-Gaelic disciplines have ushered in a new wave of scholarship that views the momentous historical controversy over Macpherson's epics not as a stark case of fraud or authenticity, but rather as the result of complex social, political, and cultural conditions motivating multiple parties to act in highly principled, if sometimes morally ambiguous ways.¹⁸ Even so, apart from Derick Thomson's 1952 study *The Gaelic Sources of Macpherson's 'Ossian'*, which provides firm evidence for the adaptation of parts of Macpherson's text from Gaelic Fenian and heroic lays, few modern Gaelic scholars have tested the Ossianic waters.¹⁹ Similarly, although the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Celtic Revival has been subject to reassessment in recent years, almost no attention has been given to revivalists' engagement with and contribution to the Fenian narrative tradition. That the work of Macpherson and the revivalists is predominantly in English may be the primary deterrent, although new compositions in the Gaelic languages from the nineteenth century to the present day have also received limited attention. There is therefore considerable room for expansion of the field of Fenian studies, and several areas exist in which growth is particularly wanting.

A New Approach

Although this book cannot address every remaining gap in the scholarly record, its scope is considerably broader than any previous study of the corpus. More anthropological than philological, it explores Fenian narrative in its multilingual cultural contexts, tracing the emergence and development of prominent aspects of the tradition from the early medieval to the modern periods, with the aim of better understanding not only how our heroes' stories have been told, but why.

Irish philosopher Richard Kearney writes that “telling stories is as basic to human beings as eating. More so, in fact, for while food makes us live, stories are what make our lives worth living. They are what make our condition *human*.” Without stories, not only would life be unbearably boring, but much of what we deem to be human would be impossible. This is because, as critical thinkers dating back to Aristotle have observed, we process our very existence through story. Not only does the narrativized “creative redescription” of the world in story reveal “patterns and hitherto unexplored meanings” that help us understand our everyday reality, but stories also provide the conceptual distance necessary to imagine alternate modes of existence.²⁰ In whatever medium it is communicated—oral, written, or otherwise—a story is never just a story. In its reflection of one’s thoughts, it invites a response from another. It is a mode of entertainment, certainly, but also of contemplation, of communication, and, laterally, of action. It is indeed no coincidence that technological innovations from photography to the mobile phone were first conceptualized in stories.²¹

The Fenian tradition provides ample space for imaginative engagement with the narrative past, the historical present, and the aspirational future. Part (pseudo)historical fiction, part (proto)fantasy, stories about Fionn and the Fianna project their creators’ and interlocutors’ perceptions of a bygone Gaelic heroic age through the lens of their contemporary realities. In doing so, whether intentionally or not, they encode pressing concerns of their day and elicit reactions from their listeners, readers, and viewers. Some among their audience then go on to compose new accounts of our heroes, or to present renewed versions of well-known storylines from their own unique perspectives. An ever-expanding multiform tradition proliferates. And it does so justifiably, for as folklorist Alfred Nutt wrote about Fenian tales in 1899, “No literature can, for so many centuries, maintain itself and preserve its plastic vitality without good and sufficient reason.”²²

In what follows, I trace the fates of Fionn and the Fianna across the centuries and throughout the Gaelic world and undertake to explain their persistent popularity. My approach intermingles distant and close reading practices, scanning the breadth of the corpus to identify emergent patterns and focusing in on different moments to elucidate the contemporary significance of individual texts.²³ Because the entirety of the tradition has yet to be adequately expounded, the book is necessarily as descriptive as it is analytic, and it engages only sparingly with theoretical interventions. My objective here is narrative history; I examine these Fenian stories in order to tell *their* story. And I find that they have engaged audiences from the seventh century to the present

day not just because they are entertaining tales, but also because they are relevant to people: they reflect the aspirations and concerns of diverse groups responding to historical changes both within and without. I explore this premise in three chronologically ordered parts.

The first part details the development of the Fenian narrative from its earliest extant textual records through the medieval and early modern creation of its greatest literary achievements. Tracking the evolution of persistent themes and characters across multiple forms and genres over the course of centuries, I demonstrate how the cycle has adapted to meet the needs and expectations of successive generations.

The second part devotes groundbreaking attention in a study of the Fenian tradition to the fiery controversy stirred by James Macpherson's adaptation of Fenian characters and plots in his international bestseller *Ossian* (1761–63). A Gael himself, Macpherson's engagement with this material was unique. The controversy, moreover, aroused a wave of interest in genuine Fenian narrative and led to the preservation of some of the most important Fenian texts. Exploring this cultural phenomenon from a Gaelic perspective, I consider the Fianna's journey to international fame, and examine the controversy's impact on the transmission and reception of Fenian narratives in Ireland and Scotland in the century following *Ossian's* publication.

The third part addresses the position of Fionn and the Fianna in the modern Irish and Scottish nations from the beginning of the Celtic Revival period (c. 1860) until the present day. I explore how the fascination with both nations' Gaelic heritage contributed to the publication of medieval and early modern primary source texts, the composition of new adaptations, and the collection of a vast corpus of folklore. I investigate, too, the use of Fenian tales and tropes in the push for Irish independence and the symbolic expression of ethnocultural identity, as well as the reinterpretation of the Fianna in schoolbooks and children's literature, where they remain a popular topic to this day.

The image of the Fenian tradition that emerges from this tripartite consideration is one of a dynamic and multifaceted body of story and song that has remained relevant over the centuries due to constant adaptation. Throughout the lifespan of the tradition, multiple population groups have embedded their contemporary concerns in the stories and songs in ideologically significant ways, so that Fenian narrative not only has a long history—it has affected that history and been affected by it.

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Page numbers in italics indicate figures.

Abbreviations

- BDL Neil Ross, *Heroic Poetry from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (1939)
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