

The Children of Lir

As Retold by David K. McDonnell (www.clandonnell.net)

Part 1

A battle was fought so long ago that no one could tell you much about it, save its name and location, and about that they might be doubtful. So I will not bother telling you the name and location. One side of the battle was the Gaels, who roamed the continent of Europe for hundreds of years before arriving in Ireland. The other side was the Tuatha de Danaan¹, the more mystical people who had long ruled the island.

The battle was won by the Gaels who thereafter ruled all of Ireland. But the Tuatha de Danaan was still held in high esteem for their knowledge and wisdom, and for their command of the mysteries of life itself.

As time went on, the Gaels became more and more people of the world. The Tuatha de Danaan receded into the world of mystery and imagination. They were, after all, people of the gods. The Gaels and the Tuatha de Danaan thus conceded to the other that which was least important to it and gained from the other what was of most importance to itself. This was, indeed, a very sensible arrangement. And when you think about it, how many wars and disputes, and how much blood is spilled, because people lack the good sense to exchange something of little value to them but of great value to another.

After their defeat, the de Danaans from all five provinces of Ireland assembled together to choose a king to rule over them. These leaders were wise enough to realize that it was not to their advantage, and indeed to their great disadvantage, to be divided and split into separate communities without a common purpose.

Of all of the chiefs, there were five from among whom a king would be chosen. These were the greatest, wisest, and most powerful chiefs among them. The remaining chiefs, that is all but these five, went into a solemn session and debated who would become the king above them all. After much deliberation, the chiefs reached a decision. They agreed that the most fitting person for such a high position was Bodbh Dearg² of Connacht.

I won't tell you the stories about three of the other candidates, for their stories are often told elsewhere. But I will tell you that all three were delighted with the selection of Bodbh Dearg because they knew that he was indeed more than suitable for the job. All three paid due homage to their newly elected king.

¹ TWO-ah DEE DAY-naa

² BOV JAR-ug

But one of the five candidates, Lir³ of Monaghan, took the election of another as a personal insult. He was certain that no one but himself should have been considered, and when he found out otherwise he was filled with envy and anger. He stormed out of the assembly, speaking to no one, nor showing homage or any sign of respect to the new king.

The chiefs who witnessed this ill-mannered behavior were incensed. They agreed amongst themselves to raise an army and march to Lir's fortress in Monaghan and, once there, burn down the fortress and kill Lir. But Bodbh Dearg prevented them:

“Lir is a powerful man and now an embittered one as well. If we attempt to reduce him with an army, he will defend his territory and many men will be killed. Whatever the result, it will not make me any more your king than I am now.”

The remaining chiefs were impressed by Bodbh's wisdom and justice, and made them feel better about their decision to select him instead of Lir.

For many years, Bodbh ruled over the de Danaan from his palace in Connacht, and Lir lived with his people in isolation in Monaghan. It was a lonely decision he had made, for no one in Ireland would associate with Lir other than his people in Monaghan.

But a new misfortune struck Lir. His beautiful wife died from a mysterious illness from which she had suffered only a few days. And while Lir was despised in most of Ireland, his wife was well respected by all. The entire island mourned her death.

Bodbh was particularly moved, not only with the thoughts of Lir's dear wife, but with compassion for poor Lir.

“It is time such as this,” he told his nobles, “that a man is most in need of friendship. Lir has too long been a stranger. Now that his wife is dead, I must offer my friendship to him, if he would accept it.”

“As you all know,” he added, “I am foster-father to the three daughters of Aillil⁴ of the Aran Islands. They are among the most accomplished and beautiful women in Ireland. I will offer one of them in marriage to Lir, and Lir would be foolish to reject such an offer of friendship.”

The chiefs were again impressed with the king's wisdom, and a message was sent to Lir. Lir was pleased with the message. He had become even lonelier with the loss of his wife, and considerable time had passed since his annoyance at having been passed over for the kingship. He therefore assembled a great entourage and began the long journey to Bodbh's castle in Connacht.

³ LEER

⁴ AYE-lil

Lir was greeted with much fanfare and celebration with he arrived. All were delighted that the de Danaan were finally united under a single king, without a single drop of blood being shed.

Lir was soon introduced to the three foster-daughters from Aran. They were indeed as represented. Each was beautiful, witty, and intelligent. The eldest was Niamh⁵ and the middle daughter was Aoife⁶. The name of the youngest matters not at all, since she is not part of the story.

Lir found it impossible to choose one of them for her own sake, and said: “To choose is beyond me, for I cannot say which of them the best is. But if I must, I will choose the eldest for she must be the most fitting to be the wife of a de Danaan chief”.

All were impressed by Lir’s wisdom, and the king agreed to the match. Their wedding was celebrated with a great feat at Bodbh’s castle. When Lir and Niamh made it to Monaghan, the wedding was celebrated yet again.

In the course of time, Lir and Niamh had children – twins – a girl named Finola⁷ and a boy named Aedh⁸. Within a few years, Niamh gave birth to another set of twins – both boys – named Fiachra⁹ and Conn.

But the birth of the second pair of twins was met with equal parts joy and sadness. For Niamh died giving them birth. For a second time, Lir had lost his wife.

When the news reached him, Bodbh Dearg felt nearly as much grief as Lir. But after a long period of mourning over the loss of his foster-daughter, Bodbh assembled the chiefs and said:

“We are all afflicted with the terrible sorrow of the death of Niamh. But no one grieves more than Lir. We owe to him to do what we can to alleviate his sorrow, and to make the ties between him and the rest of Ireland even stronger. And so, I will give to him my second foster-child, Aoife, as his wife”.

Messengers were once again sent to Lir, and he received the message with equal parts affection and sadness. The affection was for the peace of mind of being part of the de Danaan under a single, noble king. The sadness was over the loss of Niamh, who he had loved dearly.

⁵ NEEV

⁶ EE-fa

⁷ Fin-OH-la

⁸ EEd

⁹ ‘FEAR-kra

After an appropriate period of mourning, Lir travelled to Connacht. After the marriage of Lir and Aoife, the two traveled to Monaghan to begin their life together. And they were happily married for many years, although Aoife did not have the blessing of children of her own.

But Aoife loved her husband, and she loved the children of her sister – who were not only her niece and nephews but her step-children. Indeed, her love for them grew each day. And she wasn't the only one who loved them. Bodbh the king gave them the love of a grandfather. He visited the children often in Monaghan, and as often brought them to him in Connacht.

In point of fact, all of the de Danaan loved these children for the twins were especially kind and gentle – conditions rare enough nowadays, thanks to the fact that it is even rarer in their elders.

But no one loved the children more than Lir. He played with them for hours before he began the work of the day. And he played with them again when his daily work was done. He took no more delight than he did when he was with his four children.

It was this very delight in, and love for, his children that soon brought him great sorrow.

For over time, Aoife's love for the children turned to jealousy and hatred. One would have to look into her heart to discover why she changed so dramatically. Perhaps it was the absence of her own children. Perhaps it was Lir's extreme devotion to the children. Whatever the reason, envy provides its own logic.

Aoife's jealousy became such an obsession that she became ill – both in mind and in body. She lay in bed for a year, full of bitterness and brooding evil. Her sickness worried Lir, for he loved her and had already lost two wives. His attention to her did not help, but rather fed her jealousy.

And so, she reached a decision: the children must go!

And so ends Part 1 of the story of the children of Lir.

Part 2

After a year in bed, Aoife announced that she had recovered. To celebrate, she would visit Bodbh and take the children with her. The three boys were delighted, both with her recovery and with the thoughts of a visit with Bodbh. Finola was not.

Finola, you see, had a dream the night before. In the dream, Aoife perpetrated a dreadful deed upon Finola and the three boys. Although it was only a dream, Finola she did not want to leave Monaghan. She was, though, ashamed to share her dream with anyone else.

Within a few days, Aoife, the four children, and Aoife's most trusted guard left for Connacht. The guard, Conan by name, served under Aoife's father in Aran for many years before she was fostered to Bodbh. Conan continued to serve Aoife while she was fostered to Bodbh and then married to Lir.

On the journey, Aoife asked Conan: "Is there anything in the world in which you would not do for me?"

"No," replied Conan. "I have watched over you for your entire life and I would never allow any harm to befall you."

"Well then I must ask you to do a deed for me," said Aoife. "I am losing the love of my husband. It is because of these children. They have ruined my life. I ask you to remove them from my sight and then kill them."

Conan looked at her in horror as she spoke. But his look served only to increase Aoife's rage. She took a sword in her hand and was determined to kill the children herself. But Conan stopped her, and her instincts told her to come up with an alternate plan.

The group continued their journey and reached the shores of Lough Derravaragh¹⁰ in Westmeath. With a smile on her face, Aoife led the four children to the lake and suggested that they take a bath. The gleefully agreed and removed their clothing.

As the children ran past Aoife, one by one, each naked as the day they were born, Aoife struck them with a golden druid wand. As she did so, each child was turned into a beautiful, snow white swan.

The four bewildered and frightened children fluttered away, each trying desperately to shake off the feathers. Eventually, they quieted down and an immense sadness descended upon them.

Finola, like the others, still possessed her power of speech. And she turned to her aunt and step-mother and asked: "Aoife, why did you do this terrible thing to us? We have always loved you, and thought that you loved us in return?"

Aoife merely watched, and failed to respond to Finola's questions.

"Please, tell us at least this," added Finola. "How long shall we remain in the shape of swans, so we may at least know when our misery will end?"

"You would have been wiser not to ask," said Aoife. "But since you did, I will give you the answer."

¹⁰ DARE-ra-VAR-ig

“You will spend 300 years on Lough Derravaragh here in Westmeath,” she added. “300 more years you will spend on the Sea of Moyle between Ireland and Scotland. You will then spend 300 years off Innisglora on the western sea of Mayo. And even after that, you will remain swans until the great prince of the north marries the great princess from the south, and until another great man brings a new god to Ireland.”

“Neither your power, nor mine, nor that of anyone else, can free you until such time comes. But, I will grant you the power to keep your human speech and your human intelligence. And your voices will be so sweet that you will sing music sweeter than any music heard anywhere in the world.”

With that, and with the shocked Conan at her side, Aoife turned away from the lake. She left the four swans swimming aimlessly near the shore.

Aoife received a great welcome as she reached the castle of Bodbh. The king was delighted to hear of her recovery and was anxious to see her and the children. When he saw that the children were not with her, he inquired as to why.

Aoife of course made up a lie, although she knew it would be found untrue in time. But in the manner of all those who commit an evil, she had no choice but to lie about it, thus compiling one wrong upon another. And so she said:

“I did not bring them because Lir is no longer your friend or ally. He has turned against you, as he has turned against me. He no longer trusts you with the children.”

Bodbh was astonished to hear this, for certainly Lir knew that Bodbh would never harm the children. He questioned Aoife further, and there were many discrepancies about her answers. He sensed something was wrong, but could not figure out what they might be.

Bodbh sent a messenger to Lir, who asked for the children to visit in Connacht. Lir replied that the children had already left for Connacht with Aoife.

“Aoife arrived alone,” said the messenger. “She told the king that you would not allow them to come with her.”

Lir could not understand why Aoife would say such a thing to the king. He had never known her to lie before. He thought, perhaps, her illness left her partially deranged. In any event, he knew that he must find the children!

He gathered his men and they rode for Connacht, looking for the children every inch of the way. Eventually they reached Lough Derravaragh where they thought it would be a good place to rest and water the horses.

The four swans swam silently a wee bit from the shore when Lir and his entourage arrived. Finola was the first to see them, and she sang with all power of music which she had. Her brothers joined in and of course they were heard by Lir and his men.

When they reached the shore, they were astounded to see four swans singing in human voices. Lir walked to the water's edge to get a closer look, for he knew this strangeness was no small thing.

"Dear father," said Finola. "You do not know us, but I am Finola and these are your other children. We were changed into swans, with our lives ruined, by the hatred and witchcraft of Aoife."

Lir gave a loud shout of grief, and it looked for a moment that he would lose his mind. When he recovered sufficiently, he asked:

"How is it that I can restore you to your proper form?"

"There is indeed nothing within your power to restore us, father," replied Finola. "We will remain swans for at least 900 years."

To which Lir responded: "You still have your speech and your reason, so we will take you to live with us in Monaghan, behaving as if you still had human form."

"That is not possible either," said Finola. "We are condemned to inhabit the waters and we can no longer live with humans. We only have the power to make music for those who will hear it."

Lir and his men remained at the lake that night, and listened to the sweet music of the four swans. But as dawn broke, Lir walked to the lake and said good-bye to his children.

Lir continued his travels to Connacht. When he arrived, he was reproached by Bodbh for not bringing along the children. Aoife stood by Bodbh's side.

"It was not I who prevented my children from coming to stay with you," said Lir. "It was Aoife. She turned the children into swans, now swimming in Lough Derravarragh."

Bodbh didn't believe Lir at first, as one could imagine. Bodbh turned to Aoife, looking for a denial. But no denial came. As Bodbh looked into the eyes of Aoife he realized that Lir had spoken the truth.

"Aoife, what have you done?" asked Bodbh. "It will be worse for you than for the children, for their suffering will someday come to an end. Your suffering never will!"

Bodbh then struck Aoife with a golden druid wand, quite similar to the wand used by Aoife to strike the four children. Aoife immediately turned into a morrigh. She looked much like

a crow but with ugly, leathery wings. She was now a morrighu – a demon of the air. She was destined to fly over the worst places on earth from that point on until the end of time.

Bodbh and his court, and the Tuatha de Danaan from all of Ireland, assembled on the shores of Lough Derravaragh. The Gaels of Ireland traveled there as well, since they too heard of the treachery of Aoife and the calamity imposed on the children of Lir.

Together they heard the most pleasant music ever to be heard on the face of the earth. Nothing before, and nothing since, has ever compared to the sweet music of the four swans.

For 300 years, the people of Ireland, whether de Danaan or Gaels, traveled to this lake whenever they were ill or in distress. For anyone who listened to the music could forget their trouble and their pain. They could sleep a gentle sleep, from which they would awake calm and refreshed.

At the end of the 300 years, it was time for the swans to leave. From the calm, peacefulness of the lake to the dark waves of the Sea of Moyle.

On the morning of the 300th day, the four swans began to skim over the lake. Their wings lifted them over the water and their long necks outstretched. Higher and higher they climbed. They looked down upon the lake and saw the camps of the Irish people below. As they flew north to the Sea of Moyle, they saw crowds of people below them, for everyone wanted one last glimpse of the children of Lir.

The people of Ireland were so saddened and upset by the departure of the children that they made a new law. From that day on, and continuing to this day, it is against the law in Ireland to kill a swan.

And so ends Part 2 of the story of the Children of Lir.

Part 3

The law forbidding the killing of a swan may have saved some Irish swans. But it did nothing for the children of Lir. They remained condemned with their curse and now faced centuries at the Sea of Moyle.

Sadder still, people felt content with the new law. And since there was nothing left for them to do, most soon forgot about the children of Lir.

The children themselves were left adrift on the Moyle. It is a wild sea, with steep, rocky coasts. The water was in sharp contrast to the warm, calm water of the lake. The water of the Moyle was cold and never calm. Wave after wave, forced by bitter winds came down from the north.

As dark as the sky normally was above the Moyle, there was a day early one winter when it became even darker. A storm was on the way.

Finola said to her brothers: “This storm will soon arrive and it will certainly separate us. It would be well for us to fix a meeting place afterwards, or else we may never see each other again.”

Fiachra then added:” Let’s meet at Carricknarone, for we all know it well”.

For several hours, the four stayed together, huddled in a tight group on top of the raging sea. The billows got rougher, though, and lightning flashes threw themselves from the clouds. As the storm grew worse, the four swans were separated, each of them thrown in a different direction, although the sky was so black, none of them knew which direction they were now heading.

By dawn, each of them was more dead than alive. Finola rested a bit on the calmer sea, and then made her way to Carricknarone – the rock of the seals. Once there, she climbed to the top of a rock and looked for her brothers. Not only did she not see her brothers, she did not see any seals – even though they were known to congregate there. Cold and terrified as she was herself, she feared that neither the seals nor the swans survived the storm.

Finola believed her to be the sole survivor, and wished to die. But when she had accepted death for herself, she a small speck of white, on an otherwise black sea, on the horizon. As the speck moved closer, she saw that it was Conn. She forgot her own despair and plunged into the water. With considerable effort, she helped Conn reach the Carricknarone.

Shortly afterwards, they both saw Fiachra bobbing through the water. They both plunged into the water to bring him to safety. It indeed took the efforts of both Finola and Conn, for Fiachra was far closer to death than to life.

Sometime later, Aedh swam towards them. His condition was far better than the other three, for he found shelter in a Scottish cave during the storm.

“It is so wonderful for us to be together again,” said Finola. “But we must be prepared for many more storms like this in order to survive our 300 years here.”

And so they lived for many, many decades. They suffered and endured but were bound together by their shared hardship.

One storm in particular tested them to the limit. Great wind and snow came to the Moyle, so severe that nothing they had undergone before, and nothing they were to undergo after, could surpass it. The storm continued, day after day and night after night. They reached Carricknarone, but their feet and wings were frozen solid. The skin was ripped from their feet as they moved and

the quills from their wings were torn from their bodies. When the salt of the sea reached their cuts, their torture was doubled.

But their curse prevented them from leaving the Sea of Moyle. They stayed and they endured.

Many decades later, the children saw a large group of warriors riding up from the south to the mouth of the River Bann. They children swam closer to the shore to see who they were. The warriors saw the swans swimming towards them, and changed course to meet them. They were, it turns out, de Danaan warriors who had traversed the coast of the Moyle for many years trying to find these very swans.

The warriors and the swans exchanged the warmest of greetings. The swans learned that the de Danaan people were well, but their happiness could not be complete without knowing that the children of Lir were safe.

“No tongue can tell you the suffering and torment we have gone through, and it is too much to remember,” Finola said. “Perhaps you can take this song back with you.”

The swans sang yet another beautiful song, which the warriors took back with them. “It is not within our power to save them,” the warriors thought, “but the de Danaan will be glad to know that they are still alive.”

The children of Lir continued their ordeal of the Sea of Moyle for many, many more years until at last, they fulfilled their 300 years on the Moyle. It was now time to head west.

The swans lifted themselves from the cold billows of the Moyle and flew west over Ireland. They flew high, not seeing what was beneath them for fear that it would break their hearts even further. They came down upon the sea near Innisglora.

The sea there was not as cold as it was on the Moyle, but the storms from the Atlantic were far greater. While the hardship upon the children was not the same, it was of equal intensity.

A young man named Aebhric¹¹ lived close to this shore. He hunted and cultivated his crops here. He often saw the swans overhead and heard their wonderful songs. Like everyone else who heard these swans, he was enchanted by them.

One day, when the swans were especially close to shore, Aebhric called out to them. To his surprise, he discovered that the swans could converse as well as they could sing. In time, the swans told him their entire story, from the beginning. And while it was, indeed, a difficult story to believe, Aebhric accepted it completely. Years later, he repeated the story to others which was

¹¹ EYE-brick

thereafter passed on generation after generation, and it is why we know of this story this very day.

The swans found their hardships renewed to such an extent that to describe what they endured on the western sea would only be to repeat the story of what they endured on the Moyle.

There was, though, one night of difference. On this night, the ice and snow came in thick in a blinding, gale-force blizzard. The sea from Innisglora to Mayo was solid ice. No other night of their centuries of torment was so desolate. The swans reached a point in which they could bear it no longer.

And then an eerie thing happened. At the very worst moment of their misery, Finola felt a spirit that was strange and terrifying, yet comforting as well. It was indescribable, yet greater than anything she had ever felt before.

“Brothers, there is something here with us that I do not understand,” she said. “It is beyond my understanding, and past yours, and past the understanding of any mere man. And yet I must believe it. I believe it to be Truth.”

“It is the Truth that made the world – the earth, the seas and the heavens,” she added. “We must put our trust in the Truth and it will save us.”

“We will,” they said, “and we feel it too.”

That is how it happened. At that hour, when they were beyond any hope within themselves or from without, the heavens had sent them the Truth. From that point on, they were not troubled by cold or storm or hunger, or want of anything.

And so they remained on the western sea for the remainder of their 300 years.

And this ends Part 3 of the story of the children of Lir.

Part 4

300 years passed on the western sea, as had 300 years on the lake and 300 years on the Moyle. It was time now, finally, for the children of Lir to leave the waters.

They four took flight from the western shore and flew directly to Monaghan and the home of Lir. But nothing but sadness and desolation was before them. The great castle of Lir, which once dominated the surrounding plain, was broken and tumbled. The windows were empty, the mortar had fallen from between the stones, and many of such stones had fallen from the walls. The halls were empty and overgrown with grass and weeds. The village which flourished around the castle was now gone completely.

The four swans spent the night at the empty castle. They stirred many times during the night, each time they made sad, sweet music in tribute to the past. They left in the morning, heading back to Innisglora. They had lived in the sea around Innisglora for 300 years, but this time they landed on the island itself.

For many years, they flew from island to island along the coast – no longer bound by the curse to stay in the sea. And so they lived, not knowing that St. Patrick had arrived in Ireland not long before.

One night, the swans heard a strange sound coming from Innisglora. It was a repetitive sound, and reverberated over the island and surrounding sea. They didn't know what could make such a sound, but Finola had an intuition:

“This must be the sound we have been waiting for and it means that the end of the curse is near!”

The four swans sang out, as loud and as beautifully as they could, for they all now sensed an end to the curse. A priest on Innisglora, who was a disciple of St. Patrick, heard the sweet music and walked into the direction of the sound. When he reached the source of the music, he saw nothing but four swans. He realized, immediately, that these were the children of Lir.

The priest spoke with the swans, and the swans spoke back. The children were so delighted with the priest that they joined him at his monastery. They spent many years together, exchanging their knowledge. The swans told the priest stories of the de Danaan and the Ireland of a millennium before. The priest, in turn, told the swans everything that had happened, or at least all that he knew, over the past 1,000 years. In particular, he taught them about St. Patrick and the new faith now accepted by all of the Irish.

The king of Connacht at the time was Lairgnen¹², and his wife was Deoch¹³ from Munster. They were, as you might have guessed, the wedded prince of the north and princess of the south mentioned in Aoife's spell on the children of Lir.

The queen was a vain woman. Like many of her station, she was gracious and kindly towards others – so long as she was satisfied that she possessed all of the best herself. She could not abide the thought of someone possessing something that she did not.

The story of the singing and talking swans of Innisglora reached Connacht and the ears of the queen. She was consumed with the desire to own the swans herself, so she went to the king and asked for them.

¹² LARE-nyan

¹³ DAY-awk

The king knew that the children of Lir were not birds to be bought or sold, but simply said that he would not acquire them. The king had never refused her before, so she left in a pout that very hour for her father's castle in Munster.

The king wanted his queen to return, so he decided to obtain the swans. He sent messengers to the priest at Innisglora, but of course the priest refused to give up the children. The king went himself to Innisglora to confront the priest. He asked whether it was true that the priest refused to give up the swans for the queen.

"Indeed it is true," said the priest, "for I have no power to give them any more than you have power to take them."

"I'll show you what power I have," said the king in a huff.

With that, the king grabbed one of the swans.

It was then that a strange thing happened. Suddenly, the white feathers covering the four swans faded and their shapes altered before the eyes of all who were present. Slowly, the four children of Lir resumed human shape. But with a difference!

Instead of the four happy, delightful children who were the love of the de Danaan a thousand years before, they had the look of humans who were, indeed, a thousand years old! Each was bent, old and extremely wrinkled. Their eyes were sunken deep in their heads. The four children of Lir were so feeble that they could not stand.

The king was transfixed with terror and fright, and he turned and instantly left.

The children of Lir must have realized that they were about to die, and Finola said to the priest: "All we ask is that you bury us here, together, standing facing one another with our arms around each other as we have often stood when we were in this world."

With that, they sang one final song. It was not the sweet music which was sung by the swans for a thousand years. Rather they sang with old, cracked voices.

When they died, the priest saw a vision of four lovely children whose faces were radiant with joy. The priest gazed at them for a moment, his own eyes filled with tears.

The priest fulfilled the final wish of the children. They were buried, standing up as was an old Celtic custom, with each one facing the others.

And so ends the story of the children of Lir.