

Brian Boru; Hero And Unifier

A Senior Studies Report

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## Introduction

Myth embodies the collective self of a people. It contains everything that we are inspired to be and everything that we are capable of being. It contains the hopes, dreams, and the reality of the world that once was and is. Like the literature of other cultures, Irish Literature recreates the foundation of the Irish people in its stories and myths. In this paper, I wish to show how the life of a single man has become mythologized and embodies not only the dreams of the Irish people of that time, but also the hopes and dreams of the Irish people throughout the centuries through which they have aspired to be a unified and free people. This character is Brian Boru. Brian was the high king of Ireland (1002-1014) and is still revered by the Irish as one of the most important and influential kings in its long history.

In order to discuss this topic, there are several things that must be established. The first is what a myth is and how it is represented in Irish Literature. The second is the history and character of the man, Brian Boru, including the position that he held in Ireland's past and how he became the individual who embodied the unity and freedom that the Irish people have striven for over the centuries. The third thing to be discussed is the way in which this mythological character has been transformed over the centuries, as the needs and dreams of

the Irish people changed.

To accomplish the latter task, this study examines three main retellings of the Brian Boru story, written in different centuries, and shows how these are related to the history of each particular period and to the general theory of myth.

### The Myth

According to The Princeton Book of Poetic Terms, myth is "a story or a complex of story elements taken as expressing, and therefore as implicitly symbolizing, certain deep-lying aspects of human and transhuman existence" (Preminger 154). Because myth taps something felt or experienced by all, the emotions and values in myth are related to the reader and generate recognition of similar values and emotions that readers hold. As Levi-Strauss notes, "...human societies merely express, through their mythology, fundamental feelings common to the whole of mankind, such as love, hate, revenge; or ... they try to provide some kind of explanations for phenomena which they cannot understand otherwise" (170). The emotions and values represented permeate our thought sequences and are, in turn, acted upon.

Actions result because the emotions are incorporated into the very psyche of the individual. The representations *become* the self, and myth is both result and cause. The reaction to myth is often emotional. As Campbell notes, "[a]n eruption of emotion is characteristic of the spontaneous shift of an idea from the level of sentiments to that of sensual consciousness. Furthermore, the appearance of such an eruption obviously means that a certain spiritual process has reached a conclusion" (Time 34). This conclusion is the

incorporation of the emotions into the psyche after which the emotions are acted out. Further, myth, then, is an idea or collection of ideas that is passed on from generation to generation, whether the individual is conscious or unconscious of it or them. It is through this transmission that myth relates the very essence and meaning of the values and beliefs that are held and practiced. Myth is universal. "No human society has yet been found in which such mythological motifs have not been rehearsed in liturgies; interpreted by seers, poets, theologians, or philosophers; presented in art; magnified in song; and ecstatically experienced in life empowering vision" (Campbell, Mythmaking 19).

A primary mode of myth transmission is through literature, which passes ideas from one generation to the next and thus helps to form culture. Humanity, "apparently, cannot maintain itself in the universe without belief in some arrangement of the general inheritance of myth" and literature allows us to explore this in depth (Campbell, Power 20). Through making myths concrete, it provides something that we can identify with in this life, enabling us to derive meaning from our existence. Ideas, motives, norms, values, beliefs, quests such as unity, etc. are the "things" that give us meaning for our lives. Many of these "things" are found in all cultures and thus myth may become universal.

[The] explanation is that the human psyche is essentially the same all over the world. The psyche is the inward experience of the human body, which is essentially the same in all human beings, with the same organs, the same instincts, the same impulses, the same conflicts, the same fears. Out of this common ground have come what Jung has called the archetypes, which are the common ideas of myths.

...They are elementary ideas, what could be called "ground" ideas. These ideas are what Jung spoke of as the archetypes of the unconscious. (Campbell and Moyers 51-52).

It is because different cultures have this common link that they have the same relative meanings in quite a number of their myths. The story of creation, for example, has parallels in the Hebrew text of "Genesis", the Pima Indians of Arizona's "The Song of the World", the creation story in the Hindu Upanishads, and the stories of the Bassari people of West Africa, to name just a few (Campbell and Moyers 42-45).

When these myths are expressed as literature, the writer can expressively relate the ideas that he/she chooses to pass on to future or past generations and suggest what the future might be or have been like to his or her contemporaries. "Like all animals, man lives in the present. But, unlike animals, man is always aware of

both the past and the future" (Patai 81). Myth is a primary way of doing this.

For people in the present, myths are "energy releasing, life-motivating, and directing agents" (Campbell, Time 20). It is apparent in the way that we ask ourselves "What does the future hold". As Patai notes, for ancient man "[t]he question 'What was?' gave rise to...the contrapuntal question, 'What will be?' ... answered by various types of myths" (81). Even if we are conscious of what is happening around us, we can still be unconscious of the myths that have been passed to us by our ancestors, driving us to make decisions and live our lives in a certain way, in the hope of allowing the future prescribed by them.

Further, while we might tend to believe that myth is a mark illiterate cultures or an object of anthropological interest, this is not true. As Kirk points out, "[m]yths concern us not only for the part they play in all primitive, illiterate, tribal or non-urban cultures, which makes them one of the main objects of anthropological interest...but also because of men's endearing insistence on carrying quasi-mythical modes of thought, expression, and communication into supposedly scientific age" (2). Twentieth Century cultures, then, are no less subject to myth than their forbearers.

"Mythology confronts [us] with a situation which at



first could be looked upon as contradictory. On the one hand, it would seem that in the course of a myth anything is likely to happen. There is no logic, no continuity...With myth, everything becomes possible" (Levi-Strauss 171). This frees both reader and speaker to explore the issues confronting the culture or individual in new ways. The reader is influenced by the myth through the medium of mythical literature. By taking "precisely this awareness of a basic antinomy pertaining to the nature of myth", it "may lead (them) towards its solution" (Levi-Strauss 171).

### Irish Myth And History

In addition to what could be called universal myths, each culture has myths that are not like those in other cultures. These myths have striking impact upon the cultures from which they come, and in fact, it is the variation in their myths that makes cultures differ. This was especially true of the Irish. Douglas Hyde says that, "the Irish people rendered all that is of most value as literature, which was and is the property and in some sense the product of the people at large, and it exercised upon them a most striking and potent influence" (x).

The peculiarly Irish myths were based upon Irish history and as a result center around tales of the respective period. The central historical theme is one of invasion. The "Book of Dunn Cow" (700?-1100?) says that the Irish people, or the people who inhabited Ireland, have constantly been invaded by outsiders. These outsiders caused a constant division in Ireland. From the Firbolgs resisting the invading Tuatha De Dannan to the Tuatha De Dannan resisting the invading Celtic people, to the current century, division and war are always apparent in Irish history. The Celtic people, also known as the Milesians, who were probably from Spain, won out in the early wars. But there never really was peace, never really anything but division and dissension against other warring nations and even among themselves.

The Celts, upon arrival, were under the leadership of one family, the Milesians, and it is said that all the true Celtic people are descendants of this family. They became the kings of Ireland, with different brothers governing the various tribes. This point is stressed not only in the "Book of Dunn Cow", but also by Geoffrey Keating and the Cocadh Gaelheal re Gallaibh. Since there was more than one king, there was bound to be dissension; we need not look further than the strength of sibling rivalry to understand some of the foundations of this strife. It was an act of brother fighting brother.

According to Brehon Law, the law of ancient and early Christian Ireland, there was to be a high king. This high king, it was believed, would unite the people under a common bond. Many historians have postulated that the high kings were much too weak, or that the tribal kings were much too strong. In either case, no one king was ever able to unite, through rule, all of the Irish people.

This dissension created a weakly structured race of Celtic people who were unwilling to work together for the most part. As a result, when confronted by the Norse invaders, they were unable to keep the invaders from ravaging their land. The only difference from invasions of other countries was the fact that the invading force did not completely conquer the island. They, the conquerors and conquered, co-existed. High king after

high king failed to meet the challenge, the challenge of unifying the kingdoms under the high kingship and routing the foe from the island.

This struggle, central to their experience, would of course appear in myth, and Irish myth is more continuous than that of many other cultures. In fact, as Douglas Hyde again points out, "Undisturbed by the Romans, unconquered though shattered by the Norsemen, unsubdued though stricken by the Normans, and still struggling with the Saxons, the Irish alone has preserved a record of its own past, and preserved it in a literature of their own, for a length of time and with a continuity which outside of Greece has no parallel in Europe" (17).

Through invasion after invasion, the Irish seem to persevere. Their striving to save the text of the past shows that they are in possession of something that is very dear to them, namely their myth. They look toward their myths for hope, because although they survived every invasion, they were never free of the tyranny that the conquerors placed upon the conquered. Their myths offered the possibility of escape through presentation of options.

The central focus of most of these myths is a hero who will free them. Bill Moyers in interviewing Joseph Campbell asked "Why are there so many stories of the hero in mythology?" And Campbell responded, "Because that's what's worth writing about. Even in popular novels, the

main character is a hero or heroine who has found or done something beyond the normal range of achievement and experience. A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself" (Campbell and Moyers 123).

Hope is found in the hero. The hero is liberator of the people. "The hero expresses the human longing for a new beginning, the primordial hope for a second chance" (Biallas 125). This places the hero in a very prominent position within the myth. The hero "will announce a kingdom where the integrity and worth of every person, thing, moment, however lowly may be defended and become the object of special wonder and delight" (Biallas 126). The hero will become the unifier of the people and make life cohesive and free. If this is a universal theme, it is particularly important to the Irish.

### Criteria For A Hero

In summary, then, the most frequent myth involves a hero, like those mentioned above, and this is not only apparent in Irish literature, but also in most other mythological texts. Most of these heroes are similar in a number of ways. According to Campbell, in his book The Hero With A Thousand Faces, there are six different phases the mythological hero goes through in a story. These are: "the childhood of the hero, the hero as warrior, the hero as lover, the hero as emperor and tyrant, the hero as world redeemer, and the departure of the hero" (Campbell, Faces 319-356).

The childhood of the hero is important in most myths involving heroes. As Campbell notes, "...the tendency has always been to endow the hero with extraordinary powers from the moment of birth ... The whole hero-life is shown to have been an agent of marvels with the great central adventure as its culmination" (Faces 319). This means that the hero represents a mission or theme before he is even of the age to act upon it. This theme or mission predates the infant's conception. It is often up to the hero to rid the world/people of the deceptions and crookedness by which they are possessed. "Herohood is predestined," says Campbell. It comes from a greater source than that provided by human standards.

Sometimes this hero is a historical figure who may

not have the necessary childhood. Campbell notes, however,

If the deeds of an actual historical figure proclaim him to have been a hero, the builders of his legend will invent for him appropriate adventures in depth. These will be pictured as journeys into miraculous realms, and are interpreted as symbolic, on the one hand, of the descendants into the night-sea of the psyche, and on the other, of the realms or aspects of man's destiny that are made manifest in respective lives" (Faces 321).

The second phase of the hero is the hero as warrior. This is where "...the mythological hero is the champion not of things become but of things becoming..." (Campbell, Faces 337). This notion comes from the usual obscurity out of which the hero develops. Even though his purpose is set, due to its predestination, the hero still has to acquire his talent and task. The plot of the story must be laid for the reader of the story. The visualization of the tyrant or suppressor must be made known so that the hero's mission or theme is clearly defined. "From obscurity the hero emerges, but the enemy is great and conspicuous in the seat of power; he is enemy, dragon, tyrant, because he turns to his own advantage the authority of his position" (Campbell, Faces 337). The tyrant must be dealt with in whatever means is justified

in meeting the hero's goal, the deed that he must accomplish. "The elementary deeds of the hero are those of the clearing of the field." (Campbell, Faces 338)

The third phase is the hero as lover. The hero is always seen as rescuing the damsel in distress, or finding that unitary person who is his counterpart. As Campbell says, "She is the maiden of the innumerable dragon slayings, the bride abducted from the jealous father, the virgin rescued from the unholy lover. She is the 'other portion' of the hero himself..." (Faces 342).

The fourth phase is the hero as emperor and tyrant. In this characteristic we find, simply, that to "...see [the hero] is to perceive the meaning of existence. From his presence boons go out; his word is the wind of life" (Campbell, Faces 347). The hero becomes the law itself; his word is the word of the law. Everything must be centered around him as though he were the sun and everything else were the rest of the planets in the solar system, as though he were a god.

Somewhere along the line, however, the hero must break free of the stereotypical role of the emperor. The hero must become human and recognizable to the people so that they can relate to him. Once this is done, he is looked upon as human and not supernatural. Because the community no longer sees him as divine, they become unruly and more frequently second guess his authority. The hero



becomes aware that the only way in which the community can be upheld is through force. It is because of this that the hero/emperor is looked on as "tyrant."

The fifth phase deals with the hero as world redeemer. "Their myths open out to cosmic proportions. Their words carry an authority beyond anything pronounced by heroes of the scepter or book" (Campbell, Faces 349). The fifth phase takes us far beyond that of the fourth phase. We find the hero has a weight behind his words that seems to come not just from him, but from a mystical power. This phase shows the backing of God, or gods, behind the hero, making him invincible until his deed has been performed.

The sixth and last phase is the departure of the hero. Everyone knows that the hero must die in order for him to be human, for all humans die. However, the hero does not have to die, per se, he must leave the presence of the normal life and go to something that is beyond. He must instill life into the very heart of those who believe and have faith in him. In other words, he must continue to live but in a different and non-physical way. "The last act in the biography of the hero is that of death or departure. Here the whole sense of life is epitomized. Needless to say the hero would be no hero if death held for him any terror..." (Campbell, Faces 356).

In order for the events and cultural conditions of

the past to take a firm hold in literature, there has to be someone involved in order for the story to have meaning for us. We cannot comprehend things that are not related to us in some way. The myth holds the key. It reaffirms to us that we have something in common. The hero of the myth becomes the very thing that we desire the most. The Irish were especially attracted to their heroes, because their culture had been ridden with disunity and invaders for centuries. And as discussed previously, these heroes are found within the Irish myth, within Irish Literature.

Brian The Early Hero

According to two early sources of Irish Literature, the "Book of Dun Cow" and the Cogadh Gaelheal re Gallaibh, one of the Irish mythical heroes is Brian Boru, a historical figure born in the year 948. These early sources are an accounting of the oral tradition of the *fili*, an Irish poet, which was strictly poetry. The "Book of Dun Cow" is said to have existed in the time of Brian Boru, but historians such as Keating say that the work is unreliable because it was copied over and added on to over the years. It seems that the stories, though they do contain actual historical evidence, have been amended in order to present some of the characters as though they were, or almost were, gods. These additions to the text are called "embellishments," and therein, of course, lies the stuff of myth.

The Cogadh Gaelheal re Gallaibh was written around 1100 C.E. by the descendants of Brian Boru. The text was written so that they could preserve the name and the accomplishments of their heroic ancestor and great king, the high king of Ireland. This book went into great detail about the life of the king and mentions many details that are not present in other texts of that period.

From these texts a history of Brian that reflects mythological status can be drawn. Not much is known of

the childhood of Brian Boru, and so the initial characteristics of the hero do not seem to be present, with the exception of two or three facts. Brian Mac Cennedi (Brian son of Kennedy) was born to the chieftain Cennedi of the Dal Cais who inhabited the area of Thomond. Thomond is a small area of land east of Limerick, on the Shannon River, known as Boruma (Hence Boru as his second name and battle cry). Brian was the youngest of twelve sons of Cennedi. Mahon, his eldest brother, was the first of the Dal Cais to become king of Munster, when the last of the living heirs to the throne died leaving no sons. There were other chieftains who had clear title to the throne, but the army of the Dal Cais won the throne for Mahon.

Brian fought under Mahon and helped him to gain the throne, but when their opinions of how to fight the Norse differed, they separated. Thus began Brian's trial, which was quite successful. As the "Book of Dun Cow" says;

"He slew more than one-hundred

By his own hand that spring,

Despite the efforts of

His brother the king" (Author, an unknown scribe).

This is significant, for this is the act that establishes Brian as a warrior. He fights the Norse, with a small group of men, and learns the skills that the Norse use for fighting. Afterward, he turns their own skills

upon them and kills many of them, as noted above. Brian thus begins the task that he is called to perform: the expulsion of the Norse and the uniting of Ireland.

Mahon constantly worked toward peace with the Norsemen, until Brian the warrior entered the castle to make amends. Brian eventually did make amends with his brother, married, and had a number of children who were reared at the court. Only two sons are mentioned by Mac Laig, poet of the Dal Cais household. They were Murrrough and Donogh, who were slain in battle. According to the "Book of Dun Cow" and Cogadh, Brian was survived by two other sons, Teigue and Donnchad.

Upon his return, Brian told Mahon and the rest of the army how he, with a small band of men, wreaked havoc on the Norse. Mahon gave Brian his blessing and his forces, and Brian made good use of them over the next several years, freeing Munster from the power of the Norse. He did this by taking the seat of power, the city of Limerick. Mahon, on the other hand, worked to try to bring peace among the kingdoms of Ireland. While he was enroute to a small province in the control of Munster to talk to the Prince of Desmond, who resented the Dal Cais for seizing the throne, Mahon was slain by the Prince of Desmond's troops.

Brian gained the throne the same way that his brother had, through brute force. His army was so powerful that

no one attempted to even try to contest his right to the throne. He vowed that he would seek revenge for the death of his brother and did so by killing the king of Desmond. Brian's reputation followed him everywhere, so now the hero is warrior. He had become an individual of cosmic, supernatural, god-given strength. Everyone listened to Brian, if not out of respect, then out of fear. Thus in 998, Brian Boru became the king of Munster and moved into another phase of the mythical hero.

After becoming king, Brian vowed to unite the Irish people and force the Norsemen from the Island forever. This is the quest, his deed: the unity of the Irish people. It was something that had never been done before. According to the Cogadh Gaelheal re Gallaibh, Brian succeeded by taking the high kingship in the year 1002 and then in defeating the Norsemen and the king of Leinster on Good Friday of 1014. This was known as the Battle of Clontarf and it "...remains the greatest single episode of Irish history in the popular mind" (O'hOgain 73). Brian had fully become the hero. He had done the very deed that was not believed possible, the creation of peace and the unification of Ireland.

Although Brian defeated the Norsemen and the king of Leinster, he also lost his life on the same day. He was killed with a blow to the head, but survived as a hero. After this sad departure, the people of Ireland, or so the

Coqadh Gaelheal re Gallaibh says, saw in Brian the strength and longevity of a man who would once again rise in the hearts of every individual to unite them for the common cause, the cause of Ireland itself.

### Brian Boru The Historical Hero

Brian did not leave a strong heir to the throne. Slowly but surely, the strength of Ireland diminished, which allowed the invasion of Ireland by the Anglo-Normans. Because of this invasion, the literature of Ireland changed.

Middle Gaelic became the new language of Irish Literature. Instead of there being just the ballad or poetic form of the *fili*, these were combined with the oral tradition of the bard and became the ballad. With this Middle Gaelic came the idea that Irish experience needed to be expressed without the embellishments that the *fili* seemed to place upon everything (Greene xxii). While Douglas Hyde suggests that the embellishments were necessary: "it is a necessary device that was used in order for the values and standards of the past people of the Irish culture", to be passed along from one generation to the next, "lest they forget who they are and what they stand for" (518). One of the most noted authors during this period, Geoffrey Keating (1570-1650), did not. Keating's most famous work is entitled, History of Ireland, and he used the Coqadh Gaelheal re Gallaibh as one of its primary sources, but Keating chose to relate his history in a different way. His idea was that Ireland should stop dwelling in the past and aim toward the future.



Keating had to rely upon the *fili* as a source for his own History of Ireland. Even though he tried to make it a positive and just historical source, he had to make an interpretation of bardic writings that were supposedly filled with embellishments. As he interpreted, he left some of the older inclusions out and as was true of the earlier books, no one can ever be sure whether Keating has supplied the full history or not.

Keating's portrayal of our hero is much like that of the earlier writings, but with one exception. Keating sees Brian the hero as emperor and tyrant rather than as redeemer. Brian had usurped his power by brute force instead of by a legitimate means. The heir to the throne was usually determined by the blood line that went back to the Milesians. Brian's blood line was of princely origin, but it was not a continuous blood line. His brother, Mahon, had usurped the throne by the same means that Brian used and was executed because Desmond of Molloy was the rightful heir to the throne. Brian's word became law because he tyrannically beat down, with brute force, any opposition that did not adhere to what he said. According to Keating, Brian used scare tactics, with troops, in order to force the princes and kings of Ireland to pay tribute to him.

Brian is seen as a more deceptive and cunning usurper of the throne by Keating, he is also regarded as a fierce

and glorious warrior, who in a time of peace did unify all of Ireland. It should be pointed out that Keating's era was one of tyranny. The English had invaded Ireland and taken over as its ruler, enforcing their rules and laws by brute force. Thus Keating's rewriting of the myth, his emphasis of the tyrant phase, was in some ways probably in response to his own historical period.

If it were not for the obvious embellishments that the *fili* put in their poetry, it would not be easy to tell whether unity ever existed. However, all sources conclude that Brian did indeed create a unified Irish nation.

Keating says that Brian was then responsible for much of the construction and rebuilding of all of Ireland.

Unity was the ideal that was taught, consumed, and experienced by the Irish people. Through the characters of the past, such as Brian Boru, there were many churches built (with schools), resurgences to create books, roads built to link the nation, and fortresses strengthened in order to create a unity in and throughout all of Ireland, so that Ireland itself was strong and impenetrable. (Keating 164)

In summary, Keating's retelling of the story has no childhood of the hero. However, there is an example of the hero as warrior. Instead of the hero as redeemer as the early sources depicted, Keating depicts Brian as a ruler who used brute force to not only obtain his throne,

but to sustain his law too, which qualifies him as emperor and tyrant. The death of the hero is still mythological. Keating, because he still does reverence the memory of the "great king" of the past.

Brian Boru The Modern Hero

Names such as Lady Gregory, Synge, Yeats, and Joyce, started to come onto the scene of Irish Literature in the 20th Century. English became the written and spoken tongue of the Irish people. Ireland did obtain, as a Republic, its independence from England. The fight is not over though, because the English still have control of the northern part of Ireland. This "revival" of the drives of independence brought back the stories and myths of old. Plays were written about the historical heroes and heroines. Works, such as Yeats' Deirdre, began to surface and a new resurgence of Irish culture was on the way. "But the fact [is] that the [Irish] had never really lost the ability to express [their] own life. [They] needed only the new Ireland, with language revival, through translations, its national theatre, and its new burst of revolutionary zeal to give [them their] opportunity." (Greene xxxii)

In 1979, Morgan Llywelyn, who is second generation Irish, wrote the United States' national best selling book, Lion of Ireland. In this book we see the resurgence of the old character of Brian Boru. There is a difference between the old and new Brian Boru's though. The new Brian Boru is a more universal character. Stories from the Icelandic Saga are incorporated into the book in order to give it even more flare than the "Book of Dun Cow", The

History of Ireland by Keating, and the Cogadh Gaelheal re Gallaibh had to offer. Llywelyn was able to use all of the sources that were available to her throughout the whole world, whereas the people of 11th century Ireland had only word of mouth and very few sources that were written within their own country. Llywelyn used the following writings; *A History of Gaelic Ireland from the Earliest Times to 1608*, by P.W. Joyce; *The War of the Gaedhil and the Gaill, or the Invasion of Ireland by the Danes and Other Norsemen*, ed. James H. Todd; *Najal's Saga*, translated by Magnus Magnusson and Herman Palsson, which is from the Icelandic tradition of the Norse; and many other sources (Llywelyn 558).

In this modern myth, Brian is shown from the very beginning, and unlike the works of the first two eras, he has been given the heroic childhood. He begins, in Llywelyn's book, as a child predestined to take on the role as king and to become the one who unites the Irish people:

The little boy sat on the crown of the rocky hill ...  
 He had sought this hill, at the moment, because no  
 one else claimed it, ... In a tentative voice he  
 addressed the darkening grey sky. 'I am the king,'  
 he said tasting the words. He heard no argument ...

(Llywelyn 9)

This character called Brian Boru takes us through all of

the same familiar story, except that Llywelyn places the character solely and completely in a role representing the theme of unity, the unity of Ireland. Brian becomes the warrior:

Observing them, Brian thought, I am not the only one who loves a story, nor is mine the only heart that hungers for heroic deeds. A champion like those in the legends could unite these men in a bond too strong for the Northmen to break, for the love of great deeds is still alive in our blood. (Llywelyn 131)

Brian ferociously fights along side of his men in battle. He becomes the hero warrior once he builds a name for himself when he fights the Norse in the hills and returns to his brother, to tend his armies.

He had them now they were with him like the beats of his heart. "Boru! Boru!" One body of men--his body. One will--his will. "Boru! Boru!" ... They went together into the swords, into the axes, and nothing could stop them. Nothing could defeat them. They were the Irish; they were his men. They were Brian. "Boru! Boru! Boru!" (Llywelyn 227)

Brian is lover. He married twice once to Deirdre and then to Gormlaith. Encounter after encounter shows the passion and beauty that this king possesses.

I could have tamed her, he thought. When I was

younger, tireless, I would have tamed her and taken joy in doing it. But in all those days I never found the woman on whom I could spend all of myself, just as she obviously never found the man to meet her challenge... (Llywelyn 475).

He has found the perfect match for himself in the woman of Gormlaith. In the battle against Sitric, the Norse chief of Dublin, Brian marches into the city uncontested and captures Gormlaith, the lovely mother of Sitric and keeps her as his wife.

Brian is the redeemer king.

"Malachi has had ample opportunity to prove himself a true king. The poets have always assured us that in the reign of a good and just prince the land will prosper, the cattle grow fat, and both men and animals be fertile. That situation exists in Leth Mow (Brian's territory), but not in Leth Conn (Malachi's, the Ard Ri, territory). Irish people in the north are suffering and I can wait no longer."

"Brian Boru should be the Ard Ri." (Llywelyn 478-479)

Brian sees that the people of the north need the strong hand of the good and prosperous king so that they may be liberated from their plight. Brian goes to their aid with force, if necessary, but it is not. Malachi relinquishes the throne of the Ard Ri, the seat of the high kingship of Ireland, to Brian, who seems to be the pre-ordained high

king.

As Mac Laig handed Brian the Ard Ri's wand of polished hazelwood, the new high king of Ireland swallowed hard and mounted the Stone of Fal. The eerie, unnatural sound shockingly ripped through the charged atmosphere. It began as a moan, a sigh in the mind, then swelled into a stormvoice, a windwail, a cry of a soul at the entrance of the underworld. It vibrated upward into a shriek of wild elation that could have come from no mortal throat, and then it faded away, to be lost in the sougning of the dawn breeze and the echoes of the trumpets ... When the Stone of Fal cried aloud both men started, and Padraic's face lit up as if a candle had been placed within. "He is the Ard Ri," he said in a voice choked with emotion. "Brian is the true king" (Llywelyn 496-497).

The Stone of Fal cried aloud to announce that Brian Boru is the true and rightful heir to the throne of the Ard Ri. Brian had done it. "The peace that Brian had dreamed for her (Ireland) was beginning to settle over the green hills. The savior had come at last.

Brian had the bond of the land. He wedded the land through the high kingship. But there is one last thing that every hero must contend with, the one thing that binds him eternally to the land, that of death.



From where he lay he could see the wall of the tent dissolving into a golden mist and fading away. It was replaced by a rolling grassland between lifting hills, and a road that wound down to the river. The familiar, beloved Shannon. In the far, far distance Mahon paused at last and looked back. He saw the copper-haired little boy waving frantically to him, and beckoned him to come. (Llywelyn 554)

It is from this last segment of text that we see the true meaning of what unity really is. Llywelyn has incorporated Brian Boru into the land of Ireland. He has become one with the land, the people, and everything that can be thought of as Ireland. Brian is the representation of Ireland and everything that it stands for, along with the rest of the people and everything that makes up Ireland. That is the unity of the land, its people, and its very thought. All who are Irish, are proud to be Irish, and are the living and breathing members that make up its body. Just as all who are Christians think of themselves as the one body in Christ, so too are the people of Ireland and its descendants. For they are bound by everything that is of the Irish, just as Christians are bound by their love and belief in Jesus Christ.

Brian Boru is just the historical figure that Llywelyn uses as an example to facilitate this idea that she is trying to relate to the reader. It is up to the

reader to experience and bring to life the example and words that she places on the page. If you are Irish, it may be easier to see and experience, but you need not be Irish to experience it, for we are all a part of this world and live the ever present cycle of culture that exists in it.

From the early sources through Llywelyn's story, Brian Boru remains a hero through the end. There are discrepancies that arose between the three stories, but all of them concur that Brian is and will forever be the hero of the Irish people. Brian Boru's story is something to be admired, something that is put on a pedestal so that Irish, in future generations, can see what makes them a great race. Unity, unity is what has made it great and Brian Boru is that symbol of unity. He is the one who upgraded the roads that linked the nation together. He is the one who strove to educate all Irish people, build the Church, and protective castles to ensure that there would not be the threat of invasion again. Unity is still the society's quest and it is through myth that they embody this quest, through this hero as he is remade for the Twentieth Century.

### Conclusion

In examining the texts of three different eras, we can see that Brian Boru has been established as a great leader of Ireland and is a hero. He has, in each case, met all of the criteria that are required to be a mythical hero. The early sources and Keating have proven, through cross reference, to be relatively reliable accounts of the hero of Brian Boru, but Llywelyn has created a story that has a fully glorified mythical hero. Through this herohood, Brian Boru is established as a unifier, not only in the early cultures of Ireland, but also in the culture of Ireland today. There is, of course, still a need for this. This is why Daithi O'hogain notes, in his book The Hero In Irish Folk History, that the Battle of Clontarf "...remains the greatest single episode of Irish history in the popular mind" (O'hogain 73).

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