

Fianaigecht in the Pre-Norman Period
Author(s): Proinsias Mac Cana
Reviewed work(s):
Source: *Béaloideas*, Iml. 54/55 (1986/1987), pp. 75-99
Published by: An Cumann Le Béaloideas Éireann/The Folklore of Ireland Society
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/20522282
Accessed: 11/07/2012 10:08

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



An Cumann Le Béaloideas Éireann/The Folklore of Ireland Society is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Béaloideas.*

http://www.jstor.org

FIANAIGECHT IN THE PRE-NORMAN PERIOD

PROINSIAS MAC CANA
(Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies)

One of the things one notices about literatures born of mythologies is that personal names may be either all-important or unimportant, depending on the particular perspective from which we view the textual context at any given time. I have referred elsewhere to the urge towards variant reproduction which is a feature of insular Celtic oral tradition and to the inner dynamism of the mythic themes and structures that enables them to generate variant reflexes in response to changes in social or political circumstance or to regional appropriateness. Themes and motifs are transferred freely from one character to another, so that, for example, the same or similar experiences may be ascribed to several different Arthurian heroes, the same expedition to the otherworld is attributed variously to Arthur, Pryderi and Brân, and a number of episodes in the Ulster cycle have their reflexes in the stories of Fionn and the *fiana*. Thus while the underlying thematic structures are relatively stable, the names are highly variable, as if belonging to the accidents rather than to the essentials of traditional narrative. And yet, on the other hand, we are all familiar with the mythological assumption that the name is in a very large sense the person: *der Name deckt sich mit dem Wesen und ist die Offenbarung des Wesens*;[1]

1 W. Schulze, (*Kuhns*) *Zeitschrift f. vergl. Sprachf.* 40 (1907), 411 n. 1.

that to change one's name is to change one's role and even one's very being (as in certain rites of initiation); and that to know the name (or, indeed, the names) of a deity is to have access to him and to exercise a certain control over or claim upon his favours.

This dual perception of the significance of names has its analogue in the differing views of two Celtic scholars who have concerned themselves with the *fianaigecht* and the name and *persona* of Fionn mac Cumhaill. For A.G. van Hamel *Fionn* is a simple epithet devoid of any deeper significance:

> His name means 'White' and would suit anybody, like Dub, 'Black', or Derg, 'Red'. We have no right to identify Finn, because of his name, with the Welsh divinity, Gwynn ab Nudd' (*Gwynn* being the linguistic cognate of Old Irish *Finn*).[2]

For Gerard Murphy, however, Finn's name supplements other contextual evidence that he was originally a god: Gaulish inscriptions preserve the related deity-name *Vindonnus* (Celtic **Vindonnos*) and the placename constituent *Vindo-*, which, analogy suggests, probably also referred to a deity, while Welsh has of course the god Gwynn ap Nudd.[3] In fact Fionn's divine origins are now generally accepted, and his name, however precisely it be etymologized, seems in the Irish and Celtic consciousness to have combined the notion of brightness and illumination with that of the discovering of knowledge, both of which figure largely in the stories of Fionn. (The relevant detail on the etymology and semantics of *finn* are set out clearly in Dr Joseph Nagy's recent book on the Finn cycle,[4] a well-informed and sensitive interpretation of the mythological import of the whole corpus.)

I have mentioned the phenomenon of variant reproduction by which versions of a given theme or episode are assigned to different and perhaps quite unrelated heroes. The converse of

2 *Aspects of Celtic Mythology*, Rhŷs Mem. Lect., Brit. Acad., 1934, 26 f.

3 G. Murphy, *Duanaire Finn*, Part III, Dublin 1953, lxxxi ff.

4 J.F. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, Berkeley 1985; see index s.v. *Finn*, and especially p. 236.

this is the case in which thematic analogy, especially where it occurs in a consistent pattern, seems to indicate not simple narrative transference from one distinct character to another but rather the virtual identity of the several characters involved. Once the process is observed in action it is susceptible of considerable theoretical extension, as for example in the work of T.F. O'Rahilly, whose formidable scholarly ingenuity almost succeeded in reducing the gallery of Irish gods to a simple binary system of two opposing deities who bear different names in different contexts. Whatever of O'Rahilly's general conclusion – which few scholars would accept without substantial caveats and qualifications – the assumption on which it is based, namely that the same deity could be known under several names, is well attested by the internal evidence of Irish literature as well as by Celtic epigraphy, and this led Gerard Murphy (as well as O'Rahilly, though much more tentatively) to suggest that 'Fionn was another name for the god Lugh, just as "Ruad Rofessae" and "Echaid Ollathir" were names for the Daghdha.'[5] There is, as he demonstrates, a striking parallelism between the mythologies of the two heroes – for example, Fionn is repeatedly brought into conflict with enemies who appear to be supernatural and may be typified as one-eyed and 'burners', just as the god Lugh fought and slew the demonic Balor 'just as he was about to burn up Ireland with his evil eye' – and the *rapprochement* of the two characters receives some onomastic support from the fact that the two names are conjoined in the compound Findlug (i.e. Fionn-Lugh), which is attested in a variety of texts, including what Murphy terms 'the mythical portion of the genealogies'.

By Kuno Meyer's definition (which is accurate if not exhaustive), a *fian* was 'a larger or smaller band of roving warriors, who had joined for the purpose of making war on their own account', and to become a member of such a band was termed *dul for fíanas* (*fénidecht*).[6] Clearly then, in so far as the practice of *fénidecht* was a historical phenomenon, there could have been many such bands, most of which would

5 *Op. cit.*, lxxxiv ff.
6 K. Meyer, *Fianaigecht*, Dublin 1910, ix.

have left little or no trace in the extant records, and this is in fact the position reflected vestigially in the literature. We read of a number of different *fiana*, each normally designated from the name of its leader (Meyer, *op. cit.*, xiii), some historical, some wholly mythological, it would seem. There is for instance reference to the *fiana* of Fothad Canainne, a figure still trailing behind him the remnants of a complex mythology. One of the triad of brothers, he is described as 'a leader of *fiana* among the men of Connacht' (though generally connected with Leinster), he is associated with fire and represented as an opponent of Fionn, and his inferential divinity is confirmed by the soubriquet Cáindia, 'fair god'. He was the hero of two elopement or love tales included in the archetype of the Middle Irish tale-lists and therefore probably extant in or before the tenth century. One of these, *Serc Caillige Bérre do Fhothud Chanainne*, 'The Love of Fothad Canainne for the Hag of Beare' (or *vice versa*), brings our hero into contact with the most enduring and most universal of all the epiphanies of the Irish earth-goddess, and one would give a lot to know the outcome, but unfortunately the tale seems to have perished. The other, *Aithed mná Ailella re Fothad Canann*, 'The Elopement of Ailill's wife with Fothad Canainne', survives in several summary versions, the oldest of which, according to its editor, Vernam Hull, has some linguistic features as old as the *prima manus* of the Würzburg glosses and therefore reflects an archetype of the first half of the eighth century or still earlier. That he was, like Fionn, something of a mythical *coureur* is borne out by a reference in the Rennes *dinnshenchas* to an amorous adventure of his with the eponym (Lethderg) of the placename Carraic Lethdeirg.[7]

Fothad is given several different pedigrees in the historical literature, one of which makes him son of Maicnia son of Lugaid.[8] But, as Gerard Murphy has pointed out (as well as O'Rahilly), a comparison of the various sources makes it clear beyond doubt that Maicnia, Lugaid, Mac Con (who is

7 *Revue Celtique* 16 (1895), 43.

8 T.F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology*, Dublin 1946, 11.

often given as the father of Lugaid), and the god Lug are all secondary variants of a single divine character.[9] Given the substantial equivalence of Lug and Fionn and also the fact that Fothad Canainne is evidently one of the forms (together with Goll, Aed, and Balor) assumed by the constant opponent of the hero represented by Fionn and Lug, there cannot be any doubt about the close interrelationship between the principal leaders of *fiana* on the mythico-ideological level. Fionn is brought into close association with Mac Con in at least two texts: he fights on Mac Con's side in the battle of Cenn Abrat and kills the old *fénnid* Ferchess in revenge for the death of Mac Con; in the latter instance Fionn is described as Mac Con's *fénnid*, which here seems to mean his *fian*-leader.[10] O'Rahilly goes so far as to conclude that the *fian* of Lugaid mac Con (*aliter* Mac Con) was 'the forerunner of the *fian* of Finn', which may in a certain sense be true, but requires so many qualifications as to be almost meaningless.

That stories about Mac Con's *fian* were current in the second half of the seventh century is suggested by a brief passage in Tírechán's 'Memoir of St Patrick' in the *Book of Armagh* which purports to record the words of a giant whom Patrick has raised from the grave:

> *Ego sum macc maicc Cais maic Glais qui fui subulcus rig Lugir rig Hirotæ. Iugulavit me fian maicc (maicc) Con in regno Coirpri Niothfer anno .c. usque hodié.*
>
> 'I am the son of Cas son of Glas, and I was swineherd of king Lugar king of Hirōt. The *fian* of Mac Con slew me in the reign of Coirpre Nia Fer one hundred years to-day.'[11]

I have also drawn attention elsewhere to the *dinnshenchas* of Sliab Bladma which, it seems to me, probably preserves a variant of the story alluded to by Tírechán: here another Mac Con kills Bregmael, the smith of Cuirche mac Snithe,

9 Murphy, *op. cit.*, 205, 447.

10 O. Bergin *et al.*, eds., *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* ii, Dublin 1908, 76; K. Meyer, *op. cit.*, 38.

11 J. Gwynn, ed., *The Book of Armagh*, Dublin and London 1913, 27; W. Stokes, ed., *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, London 1887, Vol. 2, 324.

king of Medraige and Herot (which placename corresponds to Tírechán's *Hirota*), as well as Bregmael's herd (*buachaill*).[12] But the web is still more complex. In the poem 'Étsid in senchas sluagach',[13] to which O'Rahilly gave the title 'Imthechta' Clainne Tuirill' and which Thurneysen dated not earlier than the eleventh century we are told that Lug sent the three sons of Tuirill abroad, in expiation for their crime in killing his father Ethliu, to seek a number of wondrous objects, one of which was the magic hound of the 'royal smith' (gen. *ríggobonn*) of Irua(i)d. This marvellous hound which was brought into the possession of Lug next turns up in a Fionn-ballad of the twelfth century, 'Dám thrír táncatar i-lle';[14] it is said to have belonged to the king of Irua(i)th and is brought to Fionn and the *fian* by three strange warriors from overseas. Another version of the tale as associated with Fionn is included in *Acallam na Senórach*, 'The Colloquy with the Ancients', the great collection of *fianaighecht* compiled probably towards the end of the twelfth century.

The author of the Fionn ballad explicitly links his narrative with 'Imthechta Clainne Tuirill', but a comparison of the two texts suggests that there is little reason to think that either has been borrowed or adapted directly from the other. It seems more likely that this is another instance of the parallelism between Fionn and Lug, in which case it is not unlikely that two analogous tales involving three supernatural brothers and a magic hound with Lug and with Fionn were already current before the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The role of the smith of Iruaith tends to support this. He is killed by Mac Con together with the herdsman (*subulcus, buachaill*) of

12 E. Gwynn, ed., *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, Part II, Dublin 1906, 54; *Revue Celtique* 15 (1894), 31; P. Mac Cana, *Proceedings of the International Congress of Celtic Studies 1959*, Dublin 1962, 88-93.

13 Ed., Thurneysen, *Zeitschrift f. celt. Phil.* 12 (1810), 239 ff. It is a forerunner of the fourteenth-century tale *Oidheadh Chloinne Tuireann*.

14 L. Chr. Stern, ed., *Festschrift Whitley Stokes*, Leipzig 1900, 8-12; see *Zeitschrift f. celt. Phil.* 3 (1901), 433 f. for a later copy from the *Book of Lismore*.

the king of Iruaith,[15] and his is the magic hound brought to Mac Con and to Fionn. He seems in fact to have been a familiar figure in certain areas of medieval tradition dealing with the otherworld or with the supernatural peoples of Ireland (which is much the same thing): in the tale of the First Battle of Mag Tuired, where he is called Aengaba na hIruaithe (with *aengaba* the near equivalent of the *ríoggobae* of 'Imthechta Clainne Tuirill'), he has quite an important part as one of the chiefs of the Tuatha Dé Danann,[16] but, perhaps even more significantly in the present context, he is doubtless one and the same mythical character as Lon mac Líomhtha in the well-known Fionn ballad, who puts the Fiana under *geasa* to pursue him in a race to his smithy and as reward presents them with charmed weapons. He describes himself as 'teacher of smiths to the king of Lochlainn in Bergen', but in fact the race ends not in Lochlainn (Norway) but in the Cave of Corann (i.e. in the hill of Keshcorran in Sligo).[17]

With regard to the name Iruaith, which crops up in various forms from Tírechán onwards, I have suggested that it was the name of a place in south Connacht, which, like other places in Ireland, was the focus of traditions of supernatural phenomena; that it was, or came to be, used as a name for the otherworld and consequently was sometimes thought of as being overseas; and that finally it became a synonym for Lochlainn in its dual reference to the Otherworld and Norway. I have also suggested that the well-known tale of the battle of Mag Muccrama, in which Mac Con slew Art mac Cuinn, king of Ireland, may have been located in south Connacht because Mac Con was already known as the hero of the events which led to the death of the royal swineherd and/or smith of Iruaith.

But, it may be asked, what particular relevance has all this

15 I adopt here for convenience a standardized form of this place-name; cf. my discussion of the several variants, *loc. cit.*

16 *Ériu* 8 (1916), 34, 36 (see n. 1), etc.

17 E. MacNeill, ed., *Duanaire Finn* Part I, London 1908; G. Murphy, ed., *Duanaire Finn* Part II, London 1933, poem XXXVI; R.Th. Christiansen, *The Vikings and the Viking Wars in Irish and Gaelic Tradition*, Oslo 1931, 197-215, 413. Murphy dates this ballad *c.* 1400, *op. cit.* (1953), 85.

for the development of the Fionn cycle? For one thing it helps to confirm what we can otherwise infer: that there was a prolific tradition of *fianaigecht* during the pre-Norman period which was recorded only casually and sparsely – and often belatedly – in the surviving texts. And it also exemplifies the way in which the traditions of Fionn and Lug so often run in parallel and sometimes converge and intertwine.

But the analogy between Fionn and Lug, though striking, is not total. The main discrepancies have been marked out clearly by Gerard Murphy:

> Fionn, however, as we have seen, is consistently represented as a warrior-hunter-poet-prophet. Lugh, on the other hand, though poetry is among the crafts of which he is master, is never represented as being primarily a hunter or a prophet, but rather as being simultaneously the possessor of crafts such as carpentry, smith-craft, harping and leechcraft. Both difference and resemblance could be explained on the hypothesis that Fionn was the god worshipped in the place of Lugh by some tribe, or group of tribes, who did not worship Lugh.[18]

Here we are in the realm of informed speculation, or extrapolation, and well beyond the limits of demonstration, yet it seems to me that Murphy is on firmer ground in seeking to explain the differences between Fionn and Lug in terms of function or regional distribution than is O'Rahilly in viewing it in terms of chronological priority within Irish tradition. It is fairly well established from the study of Celto-Roman epigraphy and iconography on the Continent and in Britain that a given principal deity's repertoire of functions and attributes could vary considerably by extension, contraction or shifting of emphasis when he was venerated under one or other of his by-names and in regional concentrations of his cult; the very fact that a deity is constantly defined in a particular region or context by an epithet or soubriquet which becomes an autonomous name is in itself clear evidence of an altered perspective: in other words, the deity has developed something of a new 'personality' or 'image' under his new label. There is there-

18 *Op. cit.* (1953), lxxxv.

fore no reason to suppose that the related mythological complexes of Fionn and Lug did not coexist since the earliest period of Irish tradition, and even earlier still in common Celtic tradition.

For Lug (as represented by the god Lug rather than by the *fian*-leader [Lugaid] Mac Con) the antiquity of the complex is attested by the remarkable correspondence between it and what we know of Celtic *Lugus/Mercurius from Classical and Celto-Roman documents. Similarly, in the case of Fionn the remarkable analogies between his myth and that of king Arthur of Britain are such that both must be presumed to derive from a common insular Celtic tradition. (The Welsh lore about Gwynn ap Nudd seems to corroborate this and even to suggest that the British and Irish peers bore the same name, though this need not be an absolute and exclusive inference.) From our point of view one of the main differences between the cycles of (Lugaid) Mac Con and Fionn within the period encompassed by the written literature, say from the early seventh century onwards, is that the Fionn cycle was in the ascendant as a comprehensive expression of *fianaigecht*, expanding and diversifying and assimilating to itself the traditions of the other *fiana* and their leaders, whereas the cycle of (Lugaid) Mac Con did not develop as a reflex of *fianaigecht* but as part of a very different and in many ways contrasting genre: the learned corpus of political 'history' and the 'histories' of the kings who formed it. As James Carney has written of the tale of the battle of Mag Muccrama in which Mac Con defeated and killed Art mac Cuinn:

> It belongs rather to a *genre* that one might call 'political scripture', a mixture of genuine history with symbolic fiction: its function is to propagandise rather than to entertain.[19]

The remarkable thing is, however, that the written record of what must have been a vital and prolific literature about Fionn and his *fian* remains quite sparse and sketchy until the eleventh century. The surviving texts from these early centuries were catalogued by Kuno Meyer in 1910, and his inventory was later revised by Gerard Murphy.[20] It is a very modest

19 M. Dillon, ed., *Irish Sagas*, Dublin 1959, 159.

20 Meyer, *op. cit.*, xvi f; Murphy, *op. cit.* (1953), lv ff.

corpus, yet it does encompass all the essential elements of Fionn's mythico-literary profile. He is a hunter, and as such he lives much of the time in the woods and other uncultivated parts of the country; he is a warrior, a seer and a verse-maker, and he practises *imbas forosnai* and *teinm laída*, two of the three divinatory rites used by the poet-seers, the *filid*, to attain mantic illumination; he is a wooer of women – 'in every upland and in every forest that Fionn frequented there would be a particular woman for him'[21] – and he is, with good reason, jealous of his exclusive rights over those women allied with him. He is credited with a number of lyric/nature poems dating from this early period, but the attribution to him is probably secondary in all or most instances and it is not easy to say when he and his companions came to be typically associated with the composition of nature lyrics.

Already in the tenth century Fionn and the *fian* were being brought within the ambit of Cormac mac Airt, king of Tara and legendary lawgiver (I tend to agree with Gerard Murphy that this special connection is an innovation in the Fionn-tradition), and in the eleventh century, to quote Murphy, 'Fionn was probably definitely placed in the pseudo-historical scheme.' This is reflected in the considerable number of references to Fionn in works of learned *senchas* as well as in poems of the *dinnshenchas* belonging to the eleventh century. In this as in other areas of literary activity the eleventh century was the lead-in to an extraordinary spate of redaction and compilation which conserved much earlier tradition in a numerous variety of adaptations and re-creations. The culmination of this activity with regard to the *fianaighecht* was the rapid expansion of the specialized genre of the Fionn ballad and the composition of the *Acallam*, a frame-tale comprising over two hundred stories and anecdotes told in a pleasant prose interspersed with countless passages of lyric and quasi-historical verse. As with so much else in Irish learning and literature this period was a turning point for the Fionn cycle, at least in the written tradition, a time when inherited material was assiduously revised and new norms accorded acceptance

21 *Cormac's Glossary*, s.v. *orc tréith*, printed separately by Meyer, *op. cit.*, lvii.

or consciously devised.[22] It is therefore a convenient lower limit for this survey of the early evolution of *fianaigecht*.

T.F. O'Rahilly has noted that there is evidence in the literature of several versions of the Fionn legend in the medieval period,[23] a Leinster version, a Munster version and perhaps a Midland version, and yet, as it happens, some of the earliest references to *fianaighecht* come from the north-east, from the broad hinterland of the monastery of Bangor on Belfast Lough, which was evidently the centre of a phase of sustained learned and literary activity during the seventh and part of the eighth century. In so far as the literature is concerned this activity has become closely associated with the manuscript known as *Cín Dromma Snechta*, 'The Book of Druim Snechta', which, to judge by its title, was compiled at the otherwise little-known monastery of Drumsnat in Co. Monaghan.

This manuscript has not survived, but on the basis of the linguistic character of texts said to derive from it Rudolf Thurneysen assigned it to the first half of the eighth century, and, whether or not we accept his dating, the fact remains that the language of a number of the *Cín Dromma Snechta* texts is unquestionably very early and that some of them relate clearly to the literary and historical context of east Ulster in the seventh century. One of these texts, *Immram Brain*, 'The Voyage of Bran', a poetic account of Bran's journey to the otherworld, has a section dealing with the extraordinary birth and the career of a certain Mongán son of Fiachna,[24] and he is also the focus of four short tales which were evidently included in *Cín Dromma Snechta*. Mongán was a historical figure, the son of the king of Dál nAraidi, and he flourished in the early seventh century (*ob.* 625 *Annals of Ulster*), but he had also a mythological aspect, perhaps through assimilation to an otherworld namesake, and enjoyed easy commerce with the supernatural inhabitants of the *síd* (as did the members of Fionn's *fian*).

22 Cf. G. Murphy's comment on the way in which *Acallam na Senórach* 'fixed' Fionn's literary background for the future, *op. cit.* (1953), lxi.

23 *Op. cit.*, 275.

24 K. Meyer and A. Nutt, eds., *The Voyage of Bran*, Vol. I, London 1895, 24-9; A.G. van Hamel, ed. *Immrama*, Dublin 1941, 16 f.

One of the four anecdotes tells more explicitly the story of Mongán's birth outlined in *Immram Brain*: while his father Fiachna was in northern Britain (Albe) aiding his friend Aedán mac Gabráin king of Scottish Dál Riada in warfare against the Saxons, the god Manannán approached his wife at home and persuaded her to lie with him in order to protect her husband from certain death and thereby to conceive a famous son.[25] Unlike most of the other well-known instances of the divine father motif, in this case the god informed the mortal father of the arrangement and then saved his life, and Fiachna acquiesced in the one and was duly grateful for the other.

The verses in *Immram Brain* speak of Mongán's great valour (a feature that goes unnoticed in the four anecdotes) and describe him as a champion among warriors (*fénnidi*). The word *fénnid* is not infrequently used in the general sense of warrior, but other indications of Mongán's involvement with *fianaigecht* suggest that it may here have the more precise meaning 'members of *fiana*'. The notice of Mongán's death in the *Annals of Tigernach* states that he was killed by a stone thrown by Artur son of Bicor Pretēne 'the Briton' (?)[26] and quotes a quatrain by the poet Becc Boirche attributing his death to the warriors of Cantire (*Cenn Tíre*) in Scotland. This corresponds to the reference by the tenth-century Cinaed ua hArtacáin in his poem on the deaths of famous heroes, where he records that 'Mongán who was the diadem of every troop fell by the *fian* of Cantire'.[27]

Significantly the other half of the quatrain in which this occurs is concerned with the death of Fionn, for a close connection between the two characters emerges dramatically in another of the four *Cín Dromma Snechta* anecdotes.[28] When the *fili* Forgoll stated that Fothad Airgdech (brother of Fothad Canainne) was slain at Dubthair in Leinster, Mongán promptly contradicted him and for this *lèse-majesté* was threatened with the full rigour of the poet's deadly satire.

25 Meyer and Nutt, *op. cit.*, 42-5.
26 But cf. K. Marstrander, *Revue Celtique* 36 (1915), 354, n.1.
27 Ed. W. Stokes, *Revue Celtique* 23 (1902), 310 f., 322, 328.
28 Meyer and Nutt, *op. cit.*, 45 ff., 49 ff.

But rescue was at hand. Caílte mac Rónáin, who was one of the prominent members of the *fian* and a foster-son of Fionn, came from the otherworld, travelling on foot (he was renowned among the *fiana* for his fleetness of foot), from the far south-west, where one of the traditional locations of the otherworld lay off the coast, to the royal court of Dál nAraidi in the north-east. Moreover, Mongán was able through his own mantic perception to follow the course of his journey throughout the length of Ireland. When he arrived Caílte vindicated Mongán's stand: he described how Fionn and his followers had come from Scotland and given battle to Fothad Airgdech on the Ollarbae (the Larne river), how he himself had slain him with a cast of his spear and how they had buried him with his precious ornaments. When they went to the place indicated, everything was as he had said and there was an ogam inscription to verify the manner of Fothad's death.

But the most intriguing point of all in this little narrative is that Caílte when recalling the battle of Ollarbae spoke to Mongán as if he had been present there and inadvertently addressed him as Fionn. Mongán hurriedly brushed this aside, but the final sentence of the text underlines it saying: 'Mongán, however, was Fionn, though he would not let it be told.'

This little tale is as important for what it implies as for what it reveals directly. It takes for granted an easy familiarity on the part of readers or hearers with the general content of *fian* lore and links it with the contemporary cultural environment of east Ulster. The battle of Ollarbae was one of the 'two fatal battles of the *fian*', and it was the losses sustained by the *fian* there and at the battle of Gabra that brought about its final dissolution.[29] Its name crops up frequently in Fionn texts down to the modern period, but what is of particular interest to us here is that there would seem to have been a relatively developed tradition about it already at the time when the *Cín Dromma Snechta* text was composed, and that this early record of it is based entirely on the alleged relationship between Mongán mac Fiachna and

29 Cf. W. Stokes, ed., *Acallam na Senórach, Irische Texte*, Fourth Series, Vol. 1, Leipzig 1900, ll. 1095-1144.

Fionn. Indeed if we accept the identification of the two characters with all its logical implications, we must regard Mongán not merely as the avatar or reincarnation of Fionn but also as the living repository of his legend.

Similarly when the author/redactor of the *Cín Dromma Snechta* tale identified Mongán with Fionn and represented him as being much more knowledgeable than the *filid* were about the 'history' and exploits of the *fian*, he must have been fully aware of the inferences which could be drawn from it regarding the currency and status of *fianaigecht* in the early seventh century.

There are many reasons why the cultural climate in east Ulster in the seventh century should have been particularly favourable to the development of the Fionn tales: the emergence of a more liberal, personal and eclectic view of literature (than that conventionalized by the *filid*) among men of quality and learning; the geographical position of the area and the political and ecclesiastical affiliations deriving from it which made it a meeting-place for Irish and northern British thought and tradition; the deep interest of Irish *littérateurs* in the intimate relations between secular and supernatural (as personified in the Janus character of Mongán and exemplified most consistently in the Fionn cycle), an interest which in the intellectual hinterland of Bangor seems to have been combined with a certain imaginative, lyric expressionistic interpretation such as we find in the verse of *Immram Brain* or the prose of *Echtrae Conlai*. In short, east Ulster in the seventh century was the focus of a remarkable phase of literary activity which handled traditional materials in a free, fresh and sometimes innovational style unconstrained by the *filid*'s rigid hierarchy of socio-literary values.

We have no means of knowing from strictly contemporary evidence what stage in its development the Fionn cycle had reached by this time, but for the author(s) of the cluster of anecdota about Mongán it had already acquired much of its later identity – the laconic reference to Caílte and to Ollarbae indicate this – and there is at least one item of evidence which may represent the early seventh century as a time in which *fian*-lore was actively cultivated. In the *Liber Hymnorum* version of the preface to *Amra Choluim Chille* it is

stated that the *filid*, when threatened with banishment by king Aed mac Ainmirech, were maintained for three years by the king of Ulster (apparently Mael Coba son of Fiachna mac Demmáin) and that it was during their stay in Ulster they 'set about composing *fian*-stories (v. 11 *sgéla fēne, Egerton Ms 1782, scela fénned, Yellow Book of Lecan*) of their own invention; and things did not happen at all as they related, but it was in order to impose them on the uncouth people among whom they were then living that eloquent *filid* invented these lying fictions.'[30]

One cannot of course be certain what exactly these 'lying fictions' were that were being invented in the first half of the seventh century (Mael Coba's *obit* is at 647 in the *Annals of Ulster*): if *fian/fénnidi* refers here to the Ulster heroes they may relate to the early elaboration of the Ulster cycle in writing, but if it follows more normal usage then they are more likely to mean the *fian*-lore and perhaps also other tales of similar style and temper. For example, the title *rígfhéinnid* is accorded Maeluma mac Baetáin, one of the royal dynasty of Ailech, who was active in the early seventh century and went, like Mongán's father, to assist Aedán mac Gabráin in his warfare against the Anglo-Saxons, and who seems to have become a legendary figure soon after his own time, not only in Ireland but also in Britain. The references to him suggest a *fian*-leader rather than a conventional battle-leader.

One of his exploits, perhaps that in which he slew the brother of Ethelfrid king of Northumberland, was the subject of a story which has been lost but which is recorded in a medieval tale-list under the title *Echtra Maíle Uma maic Baítáin*, 'The Adventure of Maíl Uma son of Baítán'; despite the fact that it occurs in only one (list A) of the two major tale-lists I believe this to have been a relatively early tale. It belongs with two other lost tales about northern heroes of the late sixth and early seventh centuries: *Sluagad Fiachna maic Baítáin co Dún nGuaire i Saxanaib*, 'The Hosting of Fiachna son of Baítán to Dún Guaire in the Land of the

30 Cf. J.W. Bernard and R. Atkinson, eds., *Liber Hymnorum*, London 1898, Vol. 1, 162 ff.

Saxons' (A) and *Echtra Aedáin maic Gabráin*, 'The Adventure of Aedán son of Gabrán' (A and B), and there is a good deal of other evidence which indicates that there was at one time a considerable body of narrative about important events and outstanding personalities in eastern Ulster and northern Britain/Scotland during what was a crucial and pivotal period of history, both cultural and political, for both Ireland and Britain. After all, it is not mere accident that the struggles of the northern Britons against the Saxons (and among themselves) during this short period should have come to constitute the heroic age of the later British peoples, especially the Welsh.

To judge by what remains of it this east-Ulster historical literature had something of the freshness and immaturity of a new creation that had not been adapted to the traditional learned criteria for heroic narrative. It had a certain *naiveté* and acceptance of magic which is reminiscent of popular or folk storytelling, and it had some of the tendency to blur the boundary between the secular and the supernatural which characterizes the whole tradition of *fianaigecht*. But it proved largely ephemeral: for the most part it has survived only in a handful of tales and anecdotes and in scattered fragments and references. In the seventh century, however, it was a living literary force because its subject-matter had a living relevance, an immediacy and excitement, for those *nua-litridi* who at this very time were actively engaged in the creation of a new written literature free of the constraints on form and subject-matter which controlled the professional oral literature of the *filid*. Perhaps the main reason why this Ulster-Scottish literary complex failed to sustain its early vigour is that the focus of literary activity, so far as the *literati* were concerned, subsequently shifted away from east Ulster, thereby depriving the Ulster-Scottish cycle of its immediate relevance and of the peculiar creative energy which brought it into being in the first place. This may also help to explain why the oral cycle of Fionn and the *fian*, after its promising appearance in the Mongán legend, should have occurred so fleetingly in the manuscript tradition of the next two or three centuries.

Yet another pivotal period for the history of *fianaigecht* was the early and mid-ninth century, when the Viking raids on

Ireland were at their most wilful and destructive. Without exaggerating the Norse depredations it is clear that they affected the fortunes of many Irish monasteries – Bangor was one of them – as well as the pattern of emigration of monastic clerics and scholars to the Continent, but they probably impinged most profoundly in those early years on the emotions and the imagination of the population at large, unlearned and unsophisticated, for whom reports of these marauders from overseas were more reminiscent of otherworld beings than of the conventional raiding and plundering forays which were a familiar feature of Irish life. But given the nature of this influence it could only surface in the written literature after a considerable lapse of time – as it did in the event. There are some indications that already within the Viking period, or soon after, the Norsemen were being assimilated to the mythical people known as Fomoir(i) who irrupted periodically into the Irish world from the beginning of time, threatening the destruction of social order (as well as being assimilated, it must be said, to their divine opposites, the Tuatha Dé Danann), but it is only when we reach the twelfth century that we find the Lochlannaig – to give the Vikings the name by which they are generally known in heroic-romantic literature – established in the role of the Fomore as an accepted part of the furniture of *fianaigecht* story-telling. From then until our own day they have continued to play unendingly the same role of medieval space invaders invariably repulsed by the valour and magic resources of Fionn and his *fian.*[31]

But what later became a cliché of Fionn ballads and stories must have begun as a reaction to a phase of alternating psychic tension, disturbance and release among large sections of the community – it is well to remember that the monasteries which bore the brunt of the Viking raids in the ninth century had extensive holdings of land and large numbers of tenants (*manaig*) and other dependants who would have had rude experience or vivid reports of the alien warriors. This, I suggest, became part of the popular, sub-literary tradition and acted as a stimulus to the *fian*-lore which flourished within it and

31 *Procs. of the Intern. Congress of Celtic Studies, Dublin, 1959*, Dublin 1962, 94-9.

which, by reason of its characteristic themes and flexible structure, offered a particularly receptive context for this kind of folk rumour.

But, as we have noted already, the effect of these events did not become manifest for another two centuries or more, and the obvious question is why this should have been so, why indeed the whole Fionn cycle should have been so largely neglected in the written text from the seventh or eighth century to the eleventh or twelfth.

The explanation is to be sought, most likely, in the peculiar status of the *fiana* in relation to the rest of society. Though they and their function are recognized in native law and considered necessary for the good of the community,[32] this is nevertheless subject to the general reservations, both explicit and implicit, created by the fundamental ambivalence of their relationship to the main social institutions. Though the *fénnid* is acknowledged by society and resorted to when occasion requires it, normally he lives and acts outside society or on its periphery, relying on his own strength and enterprise for the support and protection which he can no longer expect from the solidarity of his kinsfolk and tribe. For to become a *fénnid* was to sever the connections with one's clan, divesting oneself of privileges and responsibilities alike. The *fénnidi* were often, as Meyer puts it, 'men expelled from their clan (*éclaind*), or landless men (*díthir*), sons of kings who quarrelled with their fathers, men proclaimed, or men who seized this means to avenge some private wrong by taking the law into their own hands.'[33] They may also originally – or ideally – have constituted an age-class, representing a formalized association between youth and military activity which is well attested in other societies, an association reflected in the familiar synonym of *fénnid: oac féne.*[34]

Even though it is often difficult to discriminate in the literature between elements that have to do with historical and mythical *fiana* respectively, it is clear that in both cases

32 Cf. K. Meyer, *op. cit.* (1910), ix and references cited there.

33 *Ibid.* Cf. K. Meyer, ed., *Tecosca Cormaic*, Dublin 1909, §31.10: *fénnid cách co trebad*, 'everyone is a *f.* until he takes up husbandry'.

34 Cf. A. Rees and B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, London 1961, 62 f.; K. McCone, *Ériu* 35 (1984), 29, 36 n. 12.

the *fiana* were thought of as quintessential outsiders, associated typically with the liminal areas of forest and wilderness, and owing first loyalty to the fraternity not to tribe or kingdom.

Where the Ulster hero gave allegiance to his king seated in his royal capital, the *féinnid* obeyed only the leader of his *fian*. Where the former had his own permanent fort, his own territory and his own retainers, the latter gives the impression of continual movement within a changing geography. Whereas the Ulster cycle concerned itself with organized society, with the integrity of the political unit – kingdom or province – and the guarding of territorial boundaries, the *fianaigecht* belonged in a world where places were important, even sacred, but political boundaries were ill-defined or irrelevant.

In all of this *fiana* and *fianaigecht* are the antithesis of the Ulster heroes and the Ulster cycle, and the ideology – or rather the spirit – which informs them runs almost wholly counter to the ideology which underpinned the conservative structure of a society in which cosmic collapse was equated with the decay of the distinctions of class and category, and which for that reason was carefully conserved and propagated by the *filid*, jurists, and other learned and privileged brethren of the native establishment. It is only to be expected, therefore, that the attitude of the learned establishment towards the *fiana* should have reflected some of the ambivalence that characterized the role of the *fiana* themselves in relation to the institutions and values of organized society. On the ideological level they were perceived as a mediating element between order and chaos, secular and supernatural, natural and cultivated, youth and maturity, feeling and thinking, while on the empirical level they catered for the maverick elements who found no compatible place, or sought none, within the settled community, offering an outlet for their energies while restraining their excesses. But they were independent and unpredictable and therefore a potential danger to the *status quo* – good reason why they should be treated with circumspection by the *filid* and their associates.

Conversely, the features which rendered *fiana* and *fianaigecht* suspect to the guardians of society would have commended them to the people at large. There is clear testimony that *fian*-lore was widely current among the common people from

the eleventh century onwards, and there is a strong presumption that it had flourished long before then in popular storytelling. This might seem to lend some weight to the theory proposed by Eoin Mac Neill to the effect that the Fionn cycle originated among the indigenous peoples who inhabited Ireland before the Celts and whose descendants constituted the *aithech-thuatha* or subject-peoples of early historical times,[35] though, as Marie-Louise Sjoestedt has pointed out, Mac Neill's theory does not take account of the fact that myths comparable to those of the *fiana* are found in the Germanic world.[36] In any event the concept of *fianaigecht* and the reality must have seemed particularly congenial to those peoples who probably formed the bulk of the population and who were excluded from full partnership with the dominant Celtic tribes for as long as ethnic distinctions were clearly fixed in the amber of learned memory.

I have already referred to the difficulty of distinguishing, where necessary, between mythical and historical *fianaigecht*, between, as it were, the ideal and the real. For example there is considerable emphasis in certain written accounts of the *fiana* on their *esprit de corps* and on the trials and precepts which regulated their admission to the brotherhood and their conduct thereafter, but it may not have been all that easy for the innocent bystander caught up in their activities, especially if propertied, to perceive and appreciate the difference between them and less ethical marauders. Marie-Louise Sjoestedt is on doubtful ground when she claims that the *fénnid* 'is never represented as a brigand'; certainly he turns up at times in very doubtful company. Richard Sharpe has shown the importance accorded in early Irish literature to those organized bands of brigands who frequently go by the name of *díbergaig*, 'marauders, freebooters, bandits', *Dictionary of the Irish Language* (DIL) in Irish and *laici* in Latin.[37] Ecclesiastical writers, to whom

35 MacNeill, *op. cit.*, xxiv.
36 M. Dillon, trans., *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, London 1949, 87.
37 R. Sharpe, 'Hiberno-Latin *laicus*, Irish *láech* and the Devil's Men', *Ériu* 30 (1979), 74 ff.

they were particularly abhorrent, view their practice of *díberg* as a continuation of paganism and themselves as the agents of the Devil. They picture them as organized in groups (often of nine) and bound by some form of ritual allegiance involving an oath (*uotum mali*) and insignia (*signa diabolica*),[38] and in 'The Old Irish Table of Penitential Commutations' *díberg* is included among the sins for which there can be no remission of penance.[39] In fact the attitude of the Church to these medieval 'flying columns' is summed up fairly by the DIL s.v. *díberg* when it says that 'Those engaged in "díberg" seem in early times to have been regarded as outside the pale of Christianity and in league with evil powers'. As Kim McCone suggests, this may explain why the existence of the *díbergaig* is generally ignored and only occasionally grudgingly acknowledged in the legal tracts.[40]

But if the *díbergaig* have had, no doubt deservedly, a much poorer press than the *fiana*, the fact remains that the demarcation between them is sometimes less definite than the composers of *Acallam na Senórach* or the Fionn lays would have cared to admit. The author of the somewhat puritanical *Apgitir Chrábaid*, 'The Alphabet of Piety' (eighth century?) took a more jaundiced view of *fiannas*, the activities of *fiana*, as he listed its four effects on mankind: 'It contracts territories; it increases enmity; it cuts off life; it lengthens torments',[41] though admittedly his may be a biassed testimony, and it is more than balanced by an item in *Immacallam in dá Thuarad*, 'The Colloquy of the two Sages' (*c.* 900?) which includes the 'extinction of *fiannas* among the signs of approaching social catastrophe'.[42] But even in secular *fian*-literature the special status of the *fiana* is sometimes blurred by associ-

38 Sharpe, *op. cit.*, 82 ff.; cf. also C. Plummer, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, Oxford 1910, Vol. 1, cii n. 1; Vol. 2, 384 s.v. *uotum malum*.

39 Ed. D.A. Binchy, *Ériu* 19 (1962), 58 f., §5. Cf. O'Mulconry's Glossary §309: *díberg . . . ní la laochacht ad-rímter . . . ar ní bí i coir laochachtae diúltad Dé 7 giallnae demuin, 'Díberg* is not accounted as of the heroic profession, for it is not part of the proper behaviour of the hero to reject God and serve the Devil.'

40 *Ériu* 35 (1984), 28 f.

41 Ed. V. Hull, *Celtica* 8 (1968), 72 f., §25.

42 Ed. W. Stokes, *Revue Celtique* 26 (1905), 46 f., §235.

ation with more nondescript categories. According to a text which may be of the eleventh century 'Fionn mac Cumhaill was chief of the household to Cormac and head of his exiles and mercenaries and of the rest of his soldiery (*7 cech ceithirne archena*)'.[43] In *Macgnímartha Find*, 'Fionn's Boyhood Deeds', Fiacail mac Codna is described as a *foglaid*, 'reaver, plunderer' in §7, and in §23 Fiacail mac Conchinn, whom I take to be essentially the same character, is described as *á féinid*.[44]

More importantly, the story of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* which hinges upon the conflict between Conaire's kingship and the brigandage (*díberg*) of his foster-brothers, uses the terms *fian*, *fénnid* and *fianlag* as if they were almost synonymous with *díberg* (in the sense 'band of reavers') and *díbergach* (e.g. ll. 620-4).[45] The problem would appear to be that, while *fian* and *díberg* shared the same semantic field,

43 Printed by L. Chr. Stern, *Zeitschrift f. celt. Phil.* 1 (1897), 472; cited by Murphy, *op. cit.* (1953), xli.

44 Ed. K. Meyer, *Revue Celtique* 5 (1881-3), 197 ff. On the essential identity of the two Fiacails see also O'Rahilly, *op. cit.*, 554 s.n. *Fiacclach*.

45 A rather similar scenario occurs in the *Vita Gildae* ascribed to Caradoc of Llancarfan (ed. H. Williams, *Gildas*, Cymmrodorion Record Series, III, 1899, pp. 401-5). Arthur was the king of all Britain and a close friend of Gildas, but the saint's twenty-three brothers resisted his authority, especially the eldest of them, Hueil, who 'submitted to no king, not even to Arthur' and who persistently provoked and harrassed his rightful ruler: 'He would often swoop down from Scotland, set up conflagrations, and carry off spoils with victory and renown. In consequence, the king of all Britain, on hearing that the high-spirited youth had done such things and was doing similar things, pursued the victorious and excellent youth, who, as the inhabitants used to assert and hope, was destined to become king. In the hostile pursuit and council of war held in the island of Minau [i.e. Man], he killed the young plunderer [*praedatorem*].' Gildas was in Ireland at the time, but when he returned to Britain a large assembly of clerics and laity met him to arrange with Arthur the atonement for the killing. Gildas, however, gave him the kiss of forgiveness and his blessing, and Arthur did penance for his transgression and made amends, as best he could, until the end of his life.

Clearly the role of Hueil and his brothers is very close to that of Conaire's foster-brothers, the sons of Donn Désa, and their British

the former had a wider denotational and connotational range: when the *fiana* were good, they were very, very good, but when they were bad, they were *díbergaig* – more or less. In *Tochmarc Ailbe* this distinction seems to be rationalized discreetly in terms of allegiance to the 'high-king'. *Féinnidi* and *díbergaig* and *foglaidi* are included among all the worthy kinds of people invited to king Cormac's feast, and the *díbergaig* and the *fiana* are placed together at the feast and served together with the same foods. It is also stated that during the time Fionn was banished from Cormac's court and separated from the *fian* because of Gráinne, 'all the men of Ireland who were estranged from the king and engaged in free-booting activities (*for dimfeirg on ri*) would gather into Fionn's household, until such time as they should be reconciled with Cormac'.[46] This would suggest that, in the wake of the regularization of the Fian's position as Cormac's army in the learned doctrine of the tenth and subsequent centuries, *fiannas* was identified with the *fénnid*'s activity in the service of the king, *díberg* with his activity as a freelance without the constraints and responsibilities attaching to the king's patronage.

What emerges from all this is that the *fiana* – both myth and reality – had to be treated with some caution by the learned establishment comprising the Church as well as the *filid*. Both had good reasons for wishing to insulate the *status quo* from the threat of sudden unregulated change over which they had no control. Despite their original and still underlying conflict of interests, they had, at least by the seventh century, achieved an effective form of coexistence and collaboration which was to bring them closer and closer together in the course of the following centuries. And the closer they

allies – they were all *díbergaig* – and Conaire's bond of affection for his dissident foster-brothers is matched by Arthur's deep friendship with Gildas. The setting of the theme and its elaboration are very different in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and the *Vita Gildae*, but, allowing for this, the central motif of the 'mortal' embarrassment of the well-intentioned king by his close friends is virtually the same in both cases.

46 Ed. R. Thurneysen, *Zeitschrift f. celt. Phil.* 13 (1921), 260 §6, 254 §1.

were together the less likely were the monastic redactors to accord a high priority to the writing of *fian*-lore.

The solution for this martial free enterprise was the same as that often applied to modern economic free enterprise: nationalization. There is much in van Hamel's interpretation of Irish, and Celtic, religion which I find unacceptable, but I find myself almost in total agreement with him when he says that the 'essential identity of Fenian and Arthurian legend shows that the religion of the land, and its expression in the form of paradigmatic hero-tales, continues a deeply rooted Celtic tradition'.[47] In prehistoric times Fionn and Athur (however he was then named) were evidently pictured as the opponents of external demonic powers in what was basically a myth of cosmic conflict between the forces of destruction and chaos and the defenders of the cosmic precinct, here particularized as Ireland in the one case and Britain in the other. Essentially, of course, this concept was metaphysical and ideological, not part of *Realpolitik*, but the value of myths is that they can be applied to actual historical problems and crises, and so the Arthur myth was localized in sixth-century Britain and his mythic enemies identified with the all too actual threat posed by the Saxon invasions.

Ireland was spared serious foreign intervention until the Norse incursions began at the end of the eighth century, but when it came it produced a similar reflex assimilation of myth to history (and history to myth). The Norsemen were equated to the Fomoire, and this provided an occasion for assigning a quasi-historical role as protector of the national territory to Fionn and his *fian* (I say quasi-historical because the Lochlannaig of the romantic-heroic literature are far removed from the *Geinti* or the *Gaill* of the annals). D.A. Binchy has said of the Norse invasions that, while it would be anachronistic to claim that they created a common sentiment of Irish nationality, 'they did evoke that sense of "otherness" which lies at the basis of nationalism', and even though I cannot accept his formulation of the phenomenon without some qualification, there can be little doubt that the events of the ninth century brought about a certain politiciza-

47 As n. 2 *supra*, p. 30 f.

tion of the cultural concept of nationality which coincided neatly with the (partial) historicization of the role of the *fiana* as the protectors of the land of Ireland. Moreover, this development more or less coincided in time with the propagation of the doctrine of the 'high-kingship' by which learned historians of the establishment sought to impose on behalf of the Uí Néill dynasty the notion that the king of Tara was of right the over-king of all Ireland; from the tenth century what has been described as a political fiction – the 'high-kingship' – had become virtually a historical fact. This was all part of a sequence of profound socio-political, cultural and religious change which extended from about the tenth century to the end of the twelfth, and one small element in this sequence of change was the nationalization of the *fiana*.

By fixing them securely to the 'high-kingship', specifically to that of Cormac mac Airt dated notionally in the third century A.D., the 'pseudo-historians' pretended to draw the *fiana* in from their characteristic habitat on the margins of society and to establish them in close *rapport* with its central institutions. No doubt the change belonged more to theory than to reality, but it was a genuine recognition of the popularity and widening acceptance of *fianaigecht*. It is a well-attested fact – attested for example in the sixteenth and seventeenth century in Ireland – that in times of socio-cultural upheaval, or even of rapid unplanned change, popular or sub-learned genres and strata of literature can surface and win general acceptance once the crust of learned orthodoxy is broken. The *fianaigecht* seems to be an instance of this: the great expansion in the writing of *fianaigecht* belongs to the eleventh and twelfth centuries, which suggests that its graph began to rise some time before that, and I think one can safely conclude therefore that the linking of Fionn with Cormac mac Airt in the tenth century is the first admission of its rising status.