

**Sport, Games, Women and Warriors:
An Historical and Philosophical Examination of the
Early Irish Ulster Cycle**

by

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Abstract

This thesis identifies the early Irish Ulster Cycle of tales as a rich source of information relating to the nature and significance of sport-like activity in the ancient world. Taking the tales of the Ulster Cycle as its data, this thesis adopts a method of analysis which combines aspects of historical and postmodern philosophical processes. The relationships between and among sport, history, truth and fiction are investigated in determining the contribution that the early Irish Ulster Cycle of tales might offer the historian of sport. Central to this notion is the idea that an examination of the role and significance that sport-like activity plays in the Ulster tales might help produce useful and interesting descriptions and understandings of sport in general and sport history in particular. This thesis addresses several aspects of the role of sport-like activity in the tales, namely: the role of sport-like activity in the development of the Celtic ‘hero’; the connection between sport-like activity and combat; the use of sport-like activity in gaining and maintaining social status; and, the role of women in the physical development of the hero. This thesis asserts some important conclusions regarding sport and games in the Ulster tales and their contribution to sport history. The Ulster tales do indeed contain salient references to sport-like activity. Sport-like activity plays a critical role in the definition and status of a warrior. The tales provide evidence of specialised warrior training and an identifiable pattern of martial education of which sport-like activity is a central component. Several women are trained in martial arts and play a primary role in the latter stages of the physical and martial education of warriors. Finally, the sport-like activity in the tales can be seen to contain evidence of an early sport ethic. In essence, this thesis offers a fresh contribution to the understanding of sport in the ancient world by way of an examination of the sport-like activity in the early Irish Ulster tales.

Declaration

I, Jaquelyn Osborne, declare that the PhD thesis entitled ‘Sport, Games, Women and Warriors: An Historical and Philosophical Examination of the Early Irish Ulster Cycle’, is no more than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature:**Date:**

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Those close to me have felt all the joy, anguish and stress which has emanated from my work on the dissertation. Initially, I tortured my parents on a daily basis regarding the frustrations of going back to study. Later, it was my loving partner, Chelsea, who bore the brunt of the uncertainty, the doubt, the enlightened moments and, finally the completion of this thesis. There is no denying that it has, at times, loomed heavily over both our lives. Our children, Alivia and Izayah, were conceived and born during this time. Not one member of my immediate family has ever known me *sans* thesis. Words cannot fully capture the degree of gratitude I owe to my family and it is to them that I dedicate this final manuscript.

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Overview

The principal focus of this thesis is the early Irish Ulster Cycle of tales and their capacity to contribute to an understanding of sport and sport history.¹ In most societies, sport constitutes an important part of culture and, often, national identity. However, despite sport being a rather contrived human activity, it cannot be said that sport is trivial. In fact, it can be central as a source of individual meaning and significance as well as collective imaginings. The capacity of the Ulster tales to contribute to such understandings of sport is the focus of this dissertation.

There are two key research questions which drive this study of sport in the Ulster tales. The first is to establish the relevance of the Ulster tales as a pertinent and viable source of knowledge and understanding in relation to sport-like activity. The second, which comprises several elements, is to determine, more specifically, the contribution of the Ulster tales to an understanding of: a) the nature and significance of sport-like activity in the tales; b) the use of sport-like activity in the martial preparation of warrior heroes in the tales; c) the connection between sport-like activity and ritualised combat in the Ulster tales; d) the links between sport-like activity and the social status of warriors in the tales and finally; e) the incidence and significance of women in the teaching and display of sport-like activity in the tales.

To some extent, this research aims to redress the biases evident in the scholarly study of ancient sport. More specifically, these research questions were prompted by the dearth of materials related to sport in ancient cultures other than Greece and Rome and in particular, related to sport in pre-Christian Ireland and, importantly, the limited amount of information available on the role of women in ancient sport. The Ulster tales contain a number of vivid and salient references to the role of women in the teaching of martial activity.

¹ The early Irish Ulster Cycle, sometimes referred to as the ‘Red Branch’ tales, is a collection of tales in the literary tradition of pre-Christian Ireland pertaining to a certain geographical area (Ulster) and to a particular people (the Uliad). This cycle will be further elaborated upon later in this chapter. The term ‘cycle’ is used by Celtsists studying the Irish tales and it generally means a ‘collection’. The literary tradition of pre-Christian Ireland is divided into four such ‘cycles’. More information is given in section 1.2 below.

Before embarking on the analysis of the tales in order to determine the possible contribution of the Ulster tales to sport history, it is advantageous to examine the potential of the past (via the historical study of sport) to increase the capacity for sport to provide freedom and opportunity in the present. It is the contention of this thesis that history cannot claim to speak for the ‘past’ or offer ‘the truth’ regarding the past. History is a narrative, a human construction. It may be a version of the past but it cannot give direct access to the past or to ‘what really happened’. The historical narrative is as much a product of the historian as it is a product arising from events in the past.² The historian cannot step out of her/his present and adopt some valueless, unbiased, un-situated stance. What the historian can do is construct a narrative which might prove fruitful in encouraging people to adopt new ways of understanding and thinking. In short, then, history can help provide options for assessing how the past is affecting the present and may give some scope for deciding which options are appropriate and/or valuable to persist with into the future. This general view is applicable to the history of sport and, in this context, sport history might very well arm society with the ideas or even simply the inspiration to make experiences of sport more valuable, inclusive and free.

So how is the historian different from the philosopher, or the novelist (historical novelist even)? Might it be about intention? The novelist, the philosopher and the historian may each have a personal agenda and hopes for how sport (or any other human activity for that matter) might be conceived. The novelist tells a story. The philosopher exposes and expounds theories. The literary critic examines and judges the novelist or the playwright. The historian occupies a different position. The historian can draw on fragments of the past, and importantly, offer insight as to how the past is relevant to the present. Moreover, potentially, some historians might write narratives that inspire the future. As Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacobs

² See Alan Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1998) and Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991) for explication of these views. For a discussion of these notions in a sport history context see M. G. Phillips, ‘Deconstructing Sport History: The Postmodern Challenge’, *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 28, No. 3, Fall 2001, pp. 327-343.

suggest, ‘[w]hat historians do best is to make connections with the past in order to illuminate the problems of the present and the potential of the future’.³

Somehow there exists (momentarily, for none of this is guaranteed to be long-lived) a sympathetic and traditional connection to the past. That is not to say that this link is necessary for it certainly is not. That the past is of value is a contingency. Indeed in some senses, humans might do very well if they decide to stop valuing the past.⁴ The past (especially the distant past) should logically have no hold over our conceptions and understandings of the present and the future. Yet the past, or at least a conception of it, shapes the individual personally, socially, politically, culturally and emotionally.⁵ Humans situate themselves by interest, need and familiarity in the threads of history, be it personal, familial, local, societal, national or global.⁶ The world makes sense, mostly, in a modern view of time and knowledge as linear and progressive. It is for this reason that historical narrative, or indeed any narrative, can be influential in the re-conceiving of selves and worlds.

This thesis can be situated in the web of theories that abound both in terms of social sciences in general, and history and sport history specifically. In the third edition of their authoritative anthology, *The Landscape of Qualitative Research*, Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln survey the terrain and substance of qualitative research, contending that discourses of qualitative research can and should be used to ‘help create and imagine a free democratic society’.⁷ Denzin and Lincoln’s introductory chapter situates the reader in the complex ‘landscape’ that is social science and the

³ Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacobs, ‘Telling the Truth about History’, in Keith Jenkins (ed.) *The Postmodern History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 209-218.

⁴ This position of the irrelevance of history to human freedom is forwarded by Keith Jenkins in *Why History? Ethics and Postmodernity*, where he argues that in ‘the rich acts of the imagination provided by theorists who are not historians ... we now have enough intellectual power to begin work for an individual and social emancipatory future without it [history]’. Cited in Keith Jenkins, *Re-Figuring History: New Thoughts on an Old Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1-2.

⁵ Keith Jenkins points out that people create, in part, their identities through history. See Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, p. 19.

⁶ For instance, Jenkins in *Re-Thinking History* suggests that ‘people(s) in the present need antecedents to locate themselves now and legitimate their ongoing and future ways of living’, p. 18.

⁷ N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds), ‘Preface’, in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, *The Landscape of Qualitative Research* (Third Edition) (London: Sage Publications, 2008), p. viii.

theoretical discussions and discourses that have characterised the past century or so of inquiry.⁸ In other chapters, a range of authors explore this landscape.

Some researchers believe that history can get to *the* truth of the human/world/past. As Guba and Lincoln suggest ‘[f]or modernist (i.e., Enlightenment, scientific method, conventional, positivist) researchers, most assuredly there is a “real” reality “out there,” apart from the flawed human apprehension of it’.⁹ Truth and facts hold positions of great importance. The search for truth and the validation of belief using verifiable scientific and mathematic methods is the foundation and indeed the *raison d'être* of academic (and other) inquiry. According to Denzin and Lincoln, the ‘experimental (positivist) sciences (physics, chemistry, economics and psychology for example) are often seen as the crowning achievements of Western civilisation, and in their practices it can be assumed that “truth” can transcend opinion and personal bias’.¹⁰ Postmodernist researchers hold a different view.¹¹ ‘These researchers argue that positivist methods are but one way of telling stories about societies or social worlds. These methods may be no better or worse than any other methods; they just tell different kinds of stories’.¹² The issue of truth, and the claim that philosophy and history have to it, is discussed at length in this thesis.¹³

Positivists further allege that the so-called new experimental qualitative researchers write fiction not science and that these researchers have no way of verifying their truth statements.¹⁴ This is part of a backlash movement that Popkewitz calls the SBR (science based research) movement which represents ‘nostalgia for a simple and ordered universe of science that never was’.¹⁵ Denzin and Lincoln also examine the claims of validity for social science methods and engage in an exposé of various

⁸ N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln, ‘Introduction: The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research’, in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research* (Third Edition) (London: Sage Publications, 2008), pp. 1-44.

⁹ Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln, ‘Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences’, in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research* (Third Edition) (London: Sage Publications, 2008), pp. 268-269.

¹⁰ Denzin and Lincoln, ‘Introduction’, p. 11.

¹¹ In this thesis the term ‘postmodern’ is understood in the rather general sense of the belief in multiple realities and truths.

¹² Denzin and Lincoln, ‘Introduction’, p. 15.

¹³ Chapter Three is devoted to a discussion of the claims history (and anything else) has to truth as well as the various epistemologies that underlie sport history and the scholarly study of the Ulster tales.

¹⁴ Denzin and Lincoln, ‘Introduction’, p. 11.

¹⁵ Cited in Denzin and Lincoln, ‘Introduction’, p. 12.

suggestions by authors such as Flick (that multiple methods is an alternative to, rather than a tool of, validation) and Richardson and St Pierre (that triangulation is not sufficient and that the notion of a crystal with its multifarious reflections, and refractions, its constant ability to change and grow and cast off patterns and light in different directions is far more useful).¹⁶

Ultimately all the thinking as exemplified by the above shows that there are always many versions of the past. There is no one ‘correct’ telling of any event. By way of example, Denzin and Lincoln refer to a play by Anna Deavere Smith, ‘Fires in the Mirror’, which presents a series of performances which are based on interviews with people involved in a racial conflict. There are parts for gang members, police officers, young girls and boys and each telling of what happened reflects a different perspective of the incident.¹⁷ The point here is that the telling of a story, or of an experience, varies according to who does the telling and when. In other words, Smith’s play recognises that storytelling can be seen as comprising multiple narrative possibilities rather than consisting of a monolithic, unified story.

Denzin and Lincoln ask questions about the process of qualitative research and suggest that there are three interconnected, generic activities that define the qualitative research process. Summing these up in one sentence, Denzin and Lincoln conclude that the ‘gendered, multiculturally situated researcher approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that he or she then examines in specific ways (methodology, analysis)’.¹⁸

This thesis asks the reader to conceive of the Irish tales as *a history*, specifically as *a sport history*. What this means is that rather than saying this is ‘the’ history of sport and games in pre-Christian Ireland, this thesis says ‘try looking at these tales to see if they are useful to understanding sport’. This work is an examination of the tales in and of themselves for the potential inclusion of different and interesting forms of sport-like activity and the connections *in the tales* between these activities and the broader

¹⁶ Cited in Denzin and Lincoln, ‘Introduction’, p. 8.

¹⁷ Cited in Denzin and Lincoln, ‘Introduction’, p. 8.

¹⁸ Denzin and Lincoln, ‘Introduction’, p. 28.

interactions and understandings of the tales. Specifically, this dissertation examines the frequency and significance of sport-like activity in the Ulster tales, the role of sport and games in the making of a Celtic ‘hero’ and the impact of women on the physical development of the hero.

It is the contention of this thesis that sport and history should be approached in such a way that it may provide more scope for re-visioning both the significance of sporting heroes and particularly the place of women in sport in the future. Before outlining the methodological processes of this thesis, it is advantageous, at this point, to introduce the Ulster Cycle of tales in more detail and to look briefly at the concepts of history and truth as they relate to this thesis.¹⁹

1.2 The Ulster Cycle of Tales

This thesis focuses primarily on the group of Irish tales which, by convention and tradition, have been grouped under the title ‘Ulster Cycle’. There are four such ‘cycles’ with regard to the early Irish tradition and these are, respectively, the Mythological Cycle, the Ulster Cycle, the Fenian Cycle (or ‘Finn’ Cycle) and the Historical Cycle (or Cycle of the Kings). The Ulster Cycle of tales is concerned with the aristocratic court of King Conchobar Mac Nessa and his ‘Red Branch’ warriors, of which the hero Cú Chulainn is the principal character.²⁰

These tales, while once belonging to a very specific people and region, have achieved a very notable position in the literary inheritance of the Irish people as a whole.²¹ Stacy Gabriel, for example, has explored the notion of how the legends, particularly that of Cú Chulainn, is remembered in Ireland. She found that in addition to numerous sources in the way of books, that the ‘memory’ of Cú Chulainn is evident in street names, the names of housing estates and, most famously, in the statue of Cú Chulainn that stands in the General Post Office in Dublin. Gabriel explains the importance of this now national hero:

¹⁹ These concepts will be more fully explicated in Chapter Three.

²⁰ The characters in the tales can be referred to by often many different spellings through translation and Anglicisation. For instance, Conchobar Mac Nessa is also known as Conor mac Nessa and Cú Chulainn is spelt in various ways (CuChulaind, CuChulainn, Cúchulainn and so on). For the purposes of this thesis Cú Chulainn will be spelt ‘Cú Chulainn’ unless a passage is being directly quoted.

²¹ J. E. C. Williams and P. K. Ford, *The Irish Literary Tradition* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1992), p. 15.

The statue, designed by Oliver Sheppard in 1911, was created and placed in the General Post Office to commemorate the Irish fight for independence from the British. Cuchullain became emblematic in this fight because in concert with the revolt against the British, the Irish gained a renewed interest in preserving their traditional Irish heritage, which Cuchullain represented.²²

Gabriel also acknowledges the fact that students learn about Cú Chulainn in Irish public schools,²³ and although this does not ensure that Irish people know much about the stories, certainly the character and his place in Irish history is cemented via these literal and metaphorical structures. Whatever the means, the Irish do hold these tales, and indeed the ancient manuscripts, in high regard.

The earliest extant manuscripts containing the Irish tales date from the twelfth century but the material is believed to be much older.²⁴ It is widely held that the tales of the Ulster Cycle (and other cycles too, for some manuscripts contain elements of many cycles) existed in oral form some time before being written down. The language of the tales varies in age but at its oldest it appears to date from the eighth century.²⁵

Very few extant manuscripts pre-dating 1000 CE have survived due to a tendency amongst the Scandinavian raiders to destroy whatever was not worth taking.²⁶ Of those that survived, the two earliest and most important for the tales are the *Lebor na hUidre* (The Book of the Dun Cow)²⁷ and the manuscript commonly known as the *Book of Leinster*.²⁸ The *Lebor na hUidre* (LU), dating from before 1106 CE,²⁹ comprises 37 stories including substantially complete versions of a number of

²² Stacy Gabriel, ‘Remembering the Past: How the Legend of Cuchullain is Remembered in Ireland’, *University of Wisconsin - La Crosse Journal of Undergraduate Research*, Vol. VIII, 2005, p. 4.

²³ Gabriel, ‘Remembering the Past’, pp. 3-4.

²⁴ Not only is the language that of an earlier period, there is also a contents list of sorts found that refers to a now lost manuscript *The Book of Druimm Sneahtai* which lists the tales and is dated in the eighth century.

²⁵ Jeffery Gantz, ‘Introduction’, in Jeffery Gantz (ed.), *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 20.

²⁶ Gantz, ‘Introduction’, p. 20.

²⁷ The *Lebor na hUidre* is considered only a ‘fragment’ for while 67 ‘leaves’ remain, it is thought just as much again has been lost. The Book of Leinster is much larger and contains 187 leaves.

²⁸ Gantz, ‘Introduction’, p. 20.

²⁹ The chief scribe of LU, a monk known as Máel Muire, was slain by raiders in 1106. See Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, pp. 20-21.

important tales as well as an acephalous version of Recension I of the famous *Táin Bo Cúailnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley).³⁰ The *Book of Leinster* (LL) dates to around 1160 CE and includes a more polished and complete version of the *Táin Bo Cúailnge* (Recension II) as well as complete and incomplete versions of other tales, some of which differ in substance from the LU versions.³¹ These and other surviving manuscripts containing the tales are not ideal in that they have obscure words, including some passages have been ‘obviously corrupted’ and are missing sections and, sometime, entire ‘leaves’.³²

Another manuscript which informs the tales to a certain degree is the *Dinnshenchas* (The History of Places). This twelfth-century compilation explains the name of well-known places in Ireland in what Peter O’Connor suggests is a sort of ‘mythological geography’.³³ Some supplementary information regarding the characters and the events of the cycles is contained in other medieval manuscripts including *Lebor Gabala Erenn* (The Book of the Taking of Ireland) which was compiled in the early Middle Ages and which outlines a ‘history’ of the Irish and of the peoples who occupied Ireland before them.³⁴

Of the four cycles of the Irish literary tradition, many tales contain some reference to sport-like activity in the form of games, contests and martial training. For instance the Mythological Cycle contains tales about the god Lugh, whose abilities in a range of areas, including supreme physical dexterity, is renowned.³⁵ The Fenian Cycle is a cycle of romantic and epic tales concerned with the exploits of Finn Mac Cumhail

³⁰ In the case of some tales, there exists more than one version of the action and in most cases these have come to be referred to as ‘recensions’. Normally, Celticists have been able to determine the earliest to the latest recensions. In the case of the longest and most famous tale, *Táin Bo Cúailgne*, there are three recensions.

³¹ Gantz, ‘Introduction’, p. 21.

³² Gantz, ‘Introduction’, p. 21.

³³ Peter O’Connor, *Beyond the Mist. What Irish Mythology Can Teach Us About Ourselves* (London: Allen & Unwin, 2001), p. 15.

³⁴ Other manuscripts, particularly legal tracts, which hail from various periods in Ireland’s history, are utilised by Celticists in the study of the Ulster tales. It is therefore important to note that this thesis accepts, albeit with caution, the conflation of ancient and medieval documents which inform this study. In this sense, this thesis takes lead from those Celticists who have contributed to the body of knowledge of the Ulster tales.

³⁵ An example of this is in the tale ‘Lugh Comes to Tara’, where Lugh’s abilities are attested when he takes an enormous flagstone that has been hurled through the wall of a fort and onto the plain (by another champion in challenge to Lugh) and hurls it back through the hole in the wall and into its original position. See Marie Heaney, *Over Nine Waves: A Book of Irish Legends* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 14.

who leads a band of ‘outlaw’ warriors (called the *Fiana*) operating on the fringe of society. These tales include references to physical activity and contests including instances of wrestling, chess-like games and a rather famous ‘entry’ task into the *Fiana* under Finn’s captaincy which, among other things, involved several physical tasks and challenges.³⁶ The Ulster Cycle, however, presents a high number of tales in which the principal characters are involved in sport-like activity as a critical part of the action and for this reason the thesis focuses on this particular cycle of tales.

It would be advantageous at this early point in the thesis to provide a summary of the narrative of the *Táin* and the basic outline of Cú Chulainn’s life and exploits as many readers will not be familiar with the content of this cycle.

Synopsis of the Tale *Táin Bo Cúailnge*

Queen Medb of Connacht decides to raid Ulster to capture the Donn Cúalnge, the great bull of Ulster. The story begins with Medb and Ailill (Medb’s husband) in bed together arguing about who has greater wealth and status in their marriage. They find that their possessions are equal except that Ailill has a bull for which Medb has no equal. Medb tries first to borrow the Donn Cúalnge, but when she does not succeed she decides to take him by force. She and Ailill ready their armies and, joined by Fergus, an exile of Ulster, begin a great cattle raid. When Medb invades, the curse of Macha³⁷ is activated (which inflicts the Ulstermen with pains akin to labour pains) and the men of Ulster are unable to fight. Cú Chulainn, whose unusual parentage renders him immune to the curse, must defend Ulster. Cú Chulainn holds off Medb’s armies, killing many warriors in single combat and in groups, until the Ulstermen are finally able to rally. After the final battle, Medb and Ailill retreat, sending the bull that she has captured on ahead of her. Once the Donn Cúalnge arrives in Connacht, his bellows attract Ailill’s bull, Finnebennach. The two bulls fight, ultimately killing each other.

³⁶ Such challenges included: warding off spears; trials of agility, speed and endurance over difficult terrain; and, holding still his heavy weapons for a long period of time without his hand shaking. From the tale ‘Finn Joins the Fianna and Becomes Its Captain’, in Heaney, *Over Nine Waves: A Book of Irish Legends*, p. 168.

³⁷ See Appendix 2 for a synopsis of several other tales in the Cycle including the tale in which Macha invokes her curse (*Ces Noínden* – The Pangs of Ulster).

The Heroic Biography of Cú Chulainn

Cú Chulainn (the Hound of Culann) features heavily in many of the tales of the Ulster cycle. He is destined to have a short but brilliant and glorious warrior's life. Born under supernatural circumstances, the boy (known as Sétanta until age seven) leaves home at age five to join the king's troop at the capital Emain Macha. He outshines all in training and takes up arms much earlier than any other warrior. Cú Chulainn takes his 'adult' name after an incident with a guard dog which he slays. The story of Cú Chulainn's education in martial arts, with the warrior woman Scáthach, is told in the tale the Wooing of Emer, as is his pursuit and eventual marriage to Emer (despite having fathered a child with Aífe, a second warrior woman and one of Scáthach's rivals). The principle tale in which Cú Chulainn features is the *Táin Bo Cúailnge* where Cú Chulainn engages in the Connachta army in battle (generally by way of single combat). Cú Chulainn is around the age of 17 during the *Táin*. Cú Chulainn has one unusual characteristic, that being that in battle he is known for going into a 'warp spasm' or 'battle fury' (*ríastrad*) where he virtually turns into a monster. During a warp spasm Cú Chulainn's body contorts beyond recognition with his calves and hamstrings moving to the front of his legs and the feet and knees moving to the back. His neck muscles bulge and one eye is engulfed in his head while the other protrudes. His mouth meets his ears and foam pours from his jaws. A column of dark blood rises from his scalp and, finally, a projection like a horn emerges from his head signalling that he is ready to fight.

Cú Chulainn has close links to the underworld (fairy world) and in several tales he visits there. In one such tale he travels there, commits adultery and ends up in a 'wasting sickness' from which he barely recovers. Cú Chulainn's eventual death, however, is devised by Medb (of Connacht) and involves weakening Cú Chulainn by setting him up to break three of his taboos. Cú Chulainn is then mortally wounded in battle but ties himself up to a pillar post in order that he may die standing up. Cú Chulainn dies having been a great warrior and hero to the tribe but without heirs as he himself had killed his only son, Connla, under tragic circumstances in the tale 'The Death of Aífe's only son'.

1.3 Definitions

According to Warren Freeman:

sport history helps us to put the present into context. It shows us where we have been, how we got where we are today, and it may indicate where we are going and what we will see when we get there. It can illuminate sport problems that need to be solved.³⁸

While Freeman's statement may appear axiomatic, it should also be acknowledged that there may be benefit in extending the discipline of sport history to include studies which fall outside the 'accepted' versions of sport history. That is, the nature and scope of sport history itself must be addressed if Freeman's understanding of the historical significance of sport is to be fully realised. The brief historiographical overview of sport in the ancient world, outlined in chapter two of this work, supports this contention.

It is not the intention of this dissertation that the controversial issue of what counts as 'sport', or as a 'game' is debated. The purposes of this thesis do not extend to in-depth, definitional discussions of that kind. Much intellectual time and effort in sport philosophy circles has been spent fleshing out concepts and devising ever more intricate Venn diagrams to explain the theoretical connections between 'sport', 'game', 'play' and 'work' as well as more general terms like 'physical activity' and 'physical training' and 'performance'.³⁹

As important as that may be, it is not encompassed by the scope of this thesis. Given the nature of the extant Irish materials, for the purposes of this thesis the term 'sport' will be taken to mean any vaguely sport-like, physical activity that relates to humans which occurs in a public sphere.⁴⁰ It is a necessarily inexact definition. To arbitrarily

³⁸ W. H. Freeman, *Physical Education and Sport in a Changing Society* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1997), p. 31.

³⁹ For details of the ongoing philosophic discussions of such concepts see Bernard Suits, 'Tricky Triad: Games, Play and Sport', *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 15, Issue 1, May 1988, pp. 1-9; Klaus Meier, 'Triad Trickery: Playing with Sports and Games', *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 15, Issue 1, May 1988, pp. 11-30; Angela Schneider, 'Fruits, Apples and Category Mistakes: On Sport, Games and Play', *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 28, Issue 2, October 2001, pp. 151-159 and; Bernard Suits, 'Venn and the Art of Category Maintenance', *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 31, Issue 1, May 2004, pp. 1-14.

⁴⁰ A 'public sphere' encompasses arenas of war, training, festival, and court (as in the king's court).

limit the understanding of what may or may not be considered sport-like activity would certainly promote the possibility of missing something that is interesting and potentially useful. This thesis, therefore, loosely defines sport-like activity. That is, the definition includes martial training and the physical ‘show of force’ or posturing that precedes combat but does not extend to the more intimate forms of physicality such as health and hygiene and sex, although if a consideration of these things may contribute to a better understanding of how the sport-like activities might work in the tales then they will be discussed accordingly. For while acts of attending to health, hygiene and human intimacy are not normally considered sport-like, these acts can often be associated with practices and situations that are sport-like and are therefore discussed in terms of their relationship to sport.

The practice of war, however, is more problematic and there is the tendency to want to discard it from the definition since, on the face of it, the purposes and outcomes are different. However, this is not necessarily a fruitful approach in the case of the Irish tales concerning the Red Branch warriors. These tales are rich with combat descriptions which shift smoothly between the realms of what might be considered to be war-like behaviour and sport-like behaviour. These descriptions of combat, then, are included on the basis that within such descriptions the subtle relationships between combat and combat training are evidenced and, further, it is often the case that these descriptions of combat include behaviours that are enacted in other, non-combat situations. To exclude these war/combat passages from examination would severely limit any understanding that could be drawn from the tales.⁴¹ Additionally, it is not only the descriptions of action that are considered worthwhile but also the discussion of, and allusion to, sport-like activity or physical training. A more comprehensive discussion of the definitions of sport, both generally and in this thesis, are contained in Chapters Two and Five respectively.

⁴¹ For a more comprehensive discussion of appropriate definitions of sport in ancient times see Chapter Two.

1.4 Truth and History

The knowledge that is embraced from the threads that arrive through various channels from the past can be collectively called ‘history’, and history, specifically the history of sport, is of particular importance to this thesis. Sport’s history (if one takes the broadest categorisation of ‘sport’) is long. However, like many other histories, sport history is subject to manipulation. Historians ‘decide’ what will be recorded as history but such decisions are influenced by many factors. Novelist Kathleen McGowan, in her novel *The Unexpected One*, relates a passage where a lecturer of women’s history opens her first lecture by suggesting that women have been dramatically misunderstood and poorly represented by those individuals who have established the history of the Western world by committing their *opinions* to paper.⁴² The lecturer then follows this up by making the students take a vow, thus:

I solemnly vow, as a serious student of history to remember at all times that all words committed to paper have been written by human beings ... And as all human beings are ruled by their emotions, opinions and political and religious affiliations, subsequently all history is comprised of as much opinion as fact and, in many cases, has been entirely fabricated for the furthering of the author’s personal ambitions or secret agenda ... History is *not* what happened. History is what was written down.⁴³

Although this passage is from a fictional work, its message is one which is supported by postmodern philosophers and historians such as Richard Rorty, Keith Jenkins and Douglas Booth. Rorty claims truth is a function of human languages, that is, while the world exists, descriptions of it do not exist without human languages.⁴⁴ Jenkins employs such consideration to history in general,⁴⁵ and Booth looks more specifically at the sub-discipline of sport history.⁴⁶ Chapter Three explores, more thoroughly, the

⁴² In her novel, *The Expected One: A Novel*, Kathleen McGowan explores the notion that there may be a surviving line descending from Mary Magdalene and that the Church has intentionally misrepresented the significance of women, particularly Mary Magdalene, in the history of Christianity and the life of Jesus Christ. Kathleen McGowan, *The Expected One: A Novel* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

⁴³ McGowan, *The Expected One*, pp. 21-22.

⁴⁴ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

⁴⁵ Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*.

⁴⁶ Douglas Booth, *The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History* (London: Routledge, 2005).

relationships between and among the notions of truth, history, language, fiction and fact both as they apply in general and to this thesis.

In short, this thesis embraces a view of truth and reality which is essentially pragmatic and postmodern in its nature. Further, this thesis crosses several traditional disciplinary boundaries. It is based on stories, on tales, and, to a certain degree, it trusts the English translations of these tales. It can be considered a limitation of this study that it must rely on the English translations of the tales. However, it is beyond the capabilities of the author to attempt to translate and or comment on translations of others and as such this limitation must be accepted. This is not altogether uncommon as many Celticists do refer to translations without challenging the quality of such translations.

This thesis does not address every translation. However, the translations it does use are not belied by any determination of credibility of some over others. The argument is that all may have something valuable to contribute to the understanding of sport. Whenever possible, translations that seem to be ‘preferred’ by Celticists have been used. Many of these date back to the early twentieth century and beyond,⁴⁷ yet they are still commonly referred to by Celticists studying the content of the tales. Certainly some translations could be seen to overemphasise certain aspects or take what traditionalists might term ‘liberties’ with the text. It is the contention of this thesis that such embellishments and the products of these liberties may prove invaluable to the ability to understand sport in all its temporalities.

1.5 The Data

Any attempt to describe the ‘data’ of a study such as this would be rather misleading. A deconstruction and discussion of tales is involved so it could be said that the Ulster Cycle of tales comprises the ‘data’. Fortunately, as a result of much academic study, there are many versions, interpretations and differing translations of the tales. Perhaps the clearest way to encapsulate the ‘data’ of this study is to say that various versions, interpretations and translations of the early Irish Ulster Cycle of tales are consulted.

⁴⁷ The earliest translation used in this study is from 1890 and the most recent ones are from the 1990s. The translations used do hail from a wide range of time periods and it is certainly acknowledged that when translating the tales into English that the world view and time period of the translator will certainly factor into that translation in terms of terminology and phrasing.

This ‘body’ of works contains versions from the Irish Texts Society (and other ‘accepted’ orthodox, academic versions)⁴⁸ as well as those interpretations considered to be on the ‘fringe’ of traditional academic study, such as childrens’ and modern language versions.

The number of stories or tales contained in the Ulster Cycle runs to well over 40 although those that have been both translated into English and have reference to sport-like activity number considerably fewer. The number contained in any one volume or collection depends on the original manuscript source/s. Generally, the tales in any one collection can number between fifteen and 25 and range in length from barely two pages to the great epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*The Cattle Raid of Cooley*, or more simply, the *Táin*) which, translated, can run to 135 pages. The Ulster Cycle has been chosen as the focus of this dissertation because of all the early Irish ‘cycles’, the Ulster (or ‘Red Branch’) tales contain the most frequent and salient references to sport and games.⁴⁹

The principal tale of the Ulster Cycle, the *Táin*, takes place in the area of what is now County Louth. Cuailnge, of the title, is now Cooley. King Conchobar’s palace stood at Emain Macha, now known as Navan Fort. Navan Fort, where now stands the remains of a medieval fortress, lies about two and a half kilometres to the west of the present-day city of Armagh. The royal palace of Queen Medb and King Ailill stood at Crauchan in Connacht, now known as Tulsk in County Roscommon.⁵⁰

These tales are certainly not just a collection of a few children’s stories designed to entertain. As mentioned above, these tales occupy a privileged position in the national consciousness of Ireland. The tales represent the culture and history of a people who used storytelling as a method of recording their beliefs. They have been, and continue to be, studied by academics in such diverse fields as history, mythology, literature,

⁴⁸ The Irish Texts Society was founded in 1898 to promote the study of Irish literature. The Society publishes annotated texts in Irish with English translations and related commentaries.

⁴⁹ For a list of tales used in this thesis and a short summary of some of those more commonly referred to see Appendix two.

⁵⁰ Arthur Gribbin, ‘*Táin Bó Cuailnge*: A Place on the Map, A Place in the Mind’, *Western Folklore*, Vol. 49, No. 3, July 1990, pp. 279-280.

theology, linguistics and even psychology and medicine.⁵¹ William Sayers is the only author who considers the issue of sport and games in the tales in any detail.⁵² The present study further investigates Sayers' ideas and introduces potentially valuable links between sport history and the philosophy of present-day sport with regard to such timeless themes as the hero, masculinity in sport, competition, social status in relation to skilled performance and women in sport.

1.6 A Methodology

This thesis considers the world and truth from a postmodern and poststructural position. Relativism is accepted and is not considered problematic in the pursuit of understandings of human activity and sport. The production of this thesis lies in both constructionist and deconstructionist methods including both hermeneutics and deconstruction as methods. As a result, the aim of this dissertation is not to produce some irrefutable 'truth' which is to be taken as a permanent 'fact'.

The argument here is that such 'facts' do not exist or if they do exist they are not, at this time, knowable and therefore not worth pursuing. As Rorty explains, '[t]he suggestion that truth ... is out there is a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as a creation of a being who had a language of his own'.⁵³ As such, the view taken in this thesis is antifoundational in that it considers truth to be contingent and ever-changing. According to Guba and Lincoln, '[a]ntifoundational is the term used to denote a refusal to adopt any permanent, unvarying (or "foundational") standards by which truth can be universally known'.⁵⁴ It is the intention of this research to examine the nature and significance of sport and games in the early Irish tales based on an underlying principle which not only acknowledges, but celebrates, the

⁵¹ The reference here is to a short article published in the *Canadian Medical Association Journal* which examines the 'heroic perspective' in relation to illness. The full citation is: T. A. Hutchinson, 'Illness and the Hero's Journey: Still Ourselves and More?', *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, Vol. 162, No. 11, 30 May 2000, p. 1597.

⁵² William Sayers has published quite extensively in the areas of sport, games, military training and the Ulster Cycle. His extensive body of work includes: 'Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle' *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, June 1983, pp. 45-80; 'The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic', *Mongolian Studies*, Vol. 13, 1990, pp. 153-168; 'Cú Chulainn, the Heroic Imposition of Meaning on Signs, and the Revenge of the Sign', *Incognita*, Vol. 2, 1991, pp. 79-105; 'Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland', *Aethlon*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Fall 1992, pp. 105-123.

⁵³ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 5.

⁵⁴ Guba and Lincoln, 'Paradigmatic Controversies, Contradictions, and Emerging Confluences', pp. 270-1.

subjective, partial and contingent nature of all inquiry and knowledge. Methodology is a rather problematic, even misleading, term and is possibly not the best way to describe the processes at work in achieving the ends of this thesis. However, the following section will outline, as clearly as possible, the theory and processes at work in this dissertation. A ‘methodology’ has been employed that combines, or merges, aspects of historical and postmodern philosophic methods in an analysis of sport and games in the early Irish tales that is textual, contextual and conceptual in nature.

In 1989, Rorty, a noted philosopher and pragmatist, proposed a method for his preferred type of philosophy. On the face of it, the method seemed quite simple but its simplicity belied a complex attack on the foundations of truth that had been growing in acceptance for decades. The ‘method’ was to ‘redescribe lots and lots of things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behaviour which will tempt the rising generation to adopt it’.⁵⁵ Unlike traditional methods that work ‘piece by piece, analysing concept after concept’, this method works more holistically and offers the reader new and potentially useful possibilities. Rorty believed that this sort of philosophy says things like ‘try thinking of it this way’ – or more specifically ‘try to ignore the apparently futile traditional questions by substituting the following new and possibly interesting questions’.⁵⁶

Methods of deconstruction akin to those of Jacques Derrida, a postmodern philosopher of literature, are also utilised. Derrida’s notion of deconstruction stems from the idea that knowledge is constructed on the basis of conceptual oppositions, where one term is favoured over the other.⁵⁷ The result of this is that the ‘other’ becomes marginalised. A deconstruction of the descriptions of sport and games in the Ulster Cycle tales therefore exposes those ideas which are revealed by the text and those which are concealed, particularly with regard to women and the making of warriors. Such a deconstruction also indicates those groups or individuals who are empowered by the descriptions in the tales and those who are marginalised.

⁵⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 9.

⁵⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 9.

⁵⁷ D. F. Krell, ‘Derrida’, in J. O. Urmson and Jonathan Ree (eds), *The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy and Philosophers* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 72.

In the case of sport history in general, this could involve the privileging of ‘truth’ over ‘myth’ or ‘fiction’, and the privileging of the male over the female in descriptions and definitions of sport. The implication is that much of the current understanding of sport history has been shaped by the preference for, and privileging of, certain understandings of sport and that an examination and deconstruction of sport and games in the Ulster tales might offer new perspectives on these choices.

In a similar vein, Keith Jenkins writes of the ability of history to enable people to ‘go to the past, there to delve around and reorganise it appropriately to their needs’.⁵⁸ This kind of thought is characteristic of postmodernist thought which has, along with various other critiques, challenged the ‘traditional’ model of history over the past three decades. In the social sciences generally, and in the discipline of history specifically, these have variously been called the ‘cultural turn’, the ‘rhetoric attitude’, the ‘linguistic turn’, the ‘poetics of history’, ‘relativist history’, ‘deconstructivist history’ and the ‘narrative-linguistic character of history’.⁵⁹

Some historians, Jenkins says, believe that the past, or history ‘proper’, is ‘defined by reference to a putative objectivity’ and thus they claim ‘the’ truth of history by reference to ‘the facts’.⁶⁰ These historians Jenkins sees as attempting to ‘exercise hegemony over the field’.⁶¹ Most modernist, disciplinary methodologies aim to capture one reality and both define and promote that reality. Postmodernism demands ‘methodologies’ which are necessarily *not* disciplinary and *not* easily articulated prior to the study having been completed. The term ‘postmodernism’ has been used to denote many philosophical positions in regard to truth, all slightly different though based on similar principles. Genevieve Rail has suggested that postmodernism is:

... variously thought of as a revolt against modernism and structuralism, a radical break from the past that leans towards a deconstruction of linguistic systems, a distaste for disciplinary boundaries and a belief that the world is

⁵⁸ Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, p. 68.

⁵⁹ Murray Phillips, ‘Introduction’, in M. G. Phillips (ed.), *Deconstructing Sport History: A Postmodern Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 7.

⁶⁰ Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, p. 67.

⁶¹ Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, p. 65.

fragmented into many isolated and autonomous discourses that cannot be explained by any grand theory.⁶²

This connection between language, truth and history is further explored in Chapter Three. These grand theories are often referred to as ‘metanarratives’. Part of the postmodern ‘method’ includes challenging the worth of ‘grand theories’, prompting Doug Brown to suggest that the term ‘deconstruction’ with its notions of tearing down overarching ‘metanarratives’ in favour of a plurality of realities, has become synonymous with postmodern theory.⁶³

Scholars like Brown and Jenkins believe that history, as a written discourse, is as liable to deconstruction as any other. Adopting a view much like the philosopher Rorty, such historians believe that while historians write from various ideological positions none of these have any necessary permanence. As Jenkins writes:

What is clear is ... the utter contingency of readings and the recognition that interpretations at (say) the ‘centre’ of our culture are not there because they are true or methodologically correct ... but because they are aligned to the dominant discursive practices.⁶⁴

This thesis will utilise a methodology that recognises that there can be many desirable outcomes of history by as many people as wish to offer a version. Jenkins believes that it is possible for people to ‘make their own histories such that they can have real effects (a real say) in the world’.⁶⁵ Ultimately, argue Dwight Zakus and Synthia Slowikowski, there are ‘many approaches to observing and understanding reality. Each approach is limited and approximate; each must involve different levels of ordinary and non-ordinary observations and understandings’.⁶⁶ The value of ‘multiple

⁶² Cited in D. K. Wiggins and D. S. Mason, ‘The Socio-Historical Process in Sports Studies’, in D. L. Andrews, D. S. Mason and M. L. Silk (eds), *Qualitative Methods in Sports Studies* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), p. 48.

⁶³ Doug Brown, ‘Discourse and Discontinuity: Interpreting the Cultural History of Sport’, in K. B. Wamsley (ed.), *Method and Methodology in Sport and Cultural History* (Dubuque, IA: Brown & Benchmark, 1995), pp. 41-2.

⁶⁴ Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, p. 66.

⁶⁵ Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*, p. 67.

⁶⁶ D. W. Zakus and S. S. Slowikowski, ‘Alternative Research Theories and Methodologies for Sport History: From Mills and Carr, Through Hesse, to Non-Equilibrium Theory’, in K. B. Wamsley (ed.),

meanings' lies in the many possible descriptions and redescriptions of sport history, some of which help deconstruct the dominant conceptions of sport - past, present and future. Put simply, this thesis adopts a methodology whereby a version of the past is clearly and persuasively offered. The reader is then invited to consider the appeal, usefulness and potential worth of that history.

Specifically, this thesis employs the following 'guideline' approach to the examination of the tales. Each tale of the Ulster Cycle was searched for instances of sport-like activity. Individual tales were grouped into those containing instances of sport-like activity and those which did not. The latter group were set aside for possible later reference. Tales in the former group were then further scrutinised and alternate recensions and translations were sought. Finally, a small group of sport-like activity rich tales, in sometimes various versions, formed the basis of the examination for the latter chapters. As stated above, no versions or recensions were discarded because of the genre though some were set aside because they contained no identifiable instances of sport-like activity.

1.7 Structure of Thesis

Chapter Two is essentially a literature review which examines two important bodies of knowledge pertaining to this thesis, namely the academic study of sport in ancient societies and the scholarly literature surrounding the early Irish tales, particularly the Ulster Cycle. Chapter Two situates this study in the body of work that exists in the area of sport in the ancient world, and indeed sport in early Ireland.

The purpose of Chapter Three is to examine the notions of 'truth' and 'historical truth' and the application of these notions by historians, sport historians and academics studying the early Irish tales. While contributing little to the examination of the Ulster tales, Chapter Three establishes the philosophical foundations for that examination in the following three chapters. In Chapter Three it is asserted that history is dynamic, non-essential and open to interpretation and speculation and that this does not detract from the value of historical inquiry as a method of knowing and understanding ourselves and the world. Chapter Three concludes the 'introductory'

chapters and the next five chapters each examine an aspect of sport-like activity in the tales.

Chapter Four examines the nature and development of the principal hero of the Ulster tales, Cú Chulainn, by way of a biographical analysis. The information elucidated in Chapter Four is necessary to facilitate the examination of sport-like activity in the tales which occurs in the chapters following it. Chapter Five gives an overview of the scope and prevalence of sport-like activity in the tales with a particular focus on the importance of games and sports in early martial learning. Chapter Six examines the relationship of sport-like activity to combat and war in the tales and Chapter Seven forwards an understanding and analysis of the relationship between sport-like activity and social status in the tales. Chapter Eight discusses women in the tales, both in relation to previous chapters and also as a separate category. Each chapter, while not relying on those prior, is to some extent informed by what comes before them and the information is built upon or compared.

Chapter Nine, as the final chapter of this thesis, pulls together the threads of the previous examination of the sport-like activity of the tales. The primary points are reiterated in the process of summarising the chapters. Finally, suggestions are forwarded as to how and why the use of fiction might be valuable in order to gain a glimpse of sport in the past and possibly even inform sport in the present.

Ultimately, this is not a thesis which aims to address the nature and significance of the ancient Ulster cycle of tales as it pertains to the Irish. It is not intended as a criticism of, or even as an addition to, the body of knowledge and understandings that surround the Irish tales and the literary scholars and Celticists that study them. This thesis is primarily concerned with sport in many of its subsets and variations. It is concerned with conceptions of the past, present and future of sport and ultimately with the connections between these three. It is the contention of this thesis that an examination of the Ulster Cycle of tales might contribute to those conceptions.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

2.1 Introduction

It is important to situate this study in the body of work that exists on sport in the ancient world, and indeed sport in early Ireland. Additionally, a more thorough understanding of the nature and significance of the Ulster Cycle of tales itself is also critical to the present study. This chapter, therefore, examines two important bodies of knowledge pertaining to this dissertation. Firstly, the current understanding of sport in the ancient world will be discussed. Secondly, the scholarly literature surrounding the early Irish tales, particularly the Ulster Cycle will be examined. This section examines not only the ancient world but touches on the medieval world as well. This is important as the oldest extant manuscripts which contain the Ulster tales date from the medieval period.

The early part of this chapter will rely, in part, on some of the most notable and pre-eminent scholars in the field as a basis for examining the path that ancient sport history has taken over the past few decades to arrive at the ever-changing body of knowledge that exists at present. At times throughout this literature review, and indeed in other sections of the thesis, there is a heavy reliance on one or two authors and on secondary sources in certain fields. This is the result of a dearth of literature pertaining to those areas and it is this deficiency that this study aims to redress. Further, the specific contribution of those scholars who publish in the area of ancient Irish sport and sport in the early Irish tales will be examined. Finally, this chapter addresses a second large and specialist area of study, that of the early Irish Ulster Cycle of tales which forms part of the early Irish literary tradition. Understandably, any attempt to capture this corpus of material in the space of one chapter will elicit an unavoidably cursory treatment. It is the aim of this chapter, though, to examine these bodies of knowledge in enough detail and with enough scope for the current work to be situated within them.

One thing that needs to be clear from the outset is what is meant by the term ‘sport’ when dealing with the ancient world. It would be a mistake to believe that the peoples of ancient Sumer, China, Minoa or Egypt conducted ‘sport’ in a fashion that

is familiar to societies of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Sport in the ancient world covers a significant period and sport historians make reference to many societies and civilisations. While there may be great distances between these societies, both geographically and temporally, there seems to be several commonalities when it comes to the types and purposes of sport and physical activity. In summary, sport and physical activity is thought to have been used as: a preparation or readiness for war; as part of elaborate religious rituals; as a crucial element of fertility rites; or to honour the hero, aristocrat or important other in death both as funeral celebrations and in later remembrances. It was also used to: establish or reinforce the greatness of a ruler; as a practice for hunting; as a show of competency or excellence; and as entertainment or simply as an outlet or momentary diversion from the more tedious tasks in life.⁶⁷

Essential to the chapter and to the study in general, is the definition of sport and games as used in this thesis. In considering a definition of sport and games in the ancient and indeed the early medieval world, it is important to remember that the distinctions made today may not have been relevant in ancient times.⁶⁸ The word ‘sport’ will not be used to designate the activities of complex structure which represent modern sport, but instead will be used, along with the relatively synonymous terms of performance, contest, and athletic activity, to denote a range of physical activities. The preferred terminology for this concept in this thesis is ‘sport-like activity’ (although the terms ‘sport’, ‘game’ and ‘martial training’ will also be used). By way of explanation, Swanson and Spears use this term in relation to the activities of Africans who came to America.⁶⁹ They cite slaves who recall being ‘trained up’ for war as part of their early upbringing in Africa. This upbringing

⁶⁷ See Donald Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 24-37.

⁶⁸ As prelude to his paper, ‘Sport, War and the Three Orders of Feudal Society 700-1300’ (*Military Affairs*, Vol. 49, No. 3, July 1985, pp. 132–139) John Marshall Carter discusses the inappropriateness of certain definitions of sport for examining sport in medieval times. For instance, when it comes to the warrior classes, Carter is particularly critical of definitions which are based on sport being the antithesis of work. Carter suggests that for the warrior class, in this case the knights, one could suggest that they either did not ‘work’ as such or that the knight’s training, or at least the use of those skills, may have been conceived of as sport. Indeed, Carter argues that for the knight, the ‘peacetime diversions reflected the knight’s business’.

⁶⁹ Richard Swanson and Betty Spears, *History of Sport and Physical Education in the United States* (Fourth Edition) (Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark, 1995), p. 41.

included activities such as throwing javelins, playing with darts and using bows and arrows.⁷⁰

Although Swanson and Spears write specifically on the United States (and as a result include very little material on the ancient world), it could be argued that the accounts of ‘sport-like activity’ bear resemblance to the kind of ‘sport-like’ activity found in the Ulster tales. As such, the term sport-like activity (with the hyphen) is preferred here as it claims resemblance to the activities that are normally, in the 21st century, referred to as ‘sport’. As such, it can include such activities as martial learning and training, the pre-combat posturing antics of the warriors, games of hurley, and impromptu races as well as more obscure contests like the ‘beheading competition’.

This problem of definition is further exacerbated by the literary and mythological nature of some of the material in the Ulster Cycle. For instance, the tales regularly describe feats of physical dexterity which, by modern understanding, may be deemed impossible to perform. Such capacities stretch the limits of how sport might be defined.⁷¹ It is important, however, to examine many forms of physical activity. Thus, this dissertation looks at war and other forms of combat as well as the weapons that were used and the various types of training for these activities. The kind of activity one finds engaged in at a festival or feast may have a different purpose than the same actions engaged in within the more militarised setting of single combat or of combat training.

In this context, the work of sport philosophers such as Kenneth Schmitz⁷² and Bernard Suits⁷³ can provide insights into the nature of the modern relationships between play, games, sport and work. These authors also stress the importance of ‘seriousness’ or, more specifically, an internal seriousness in sport and games in order to distinguish

⁷⁰ Swanson and Spears outline carefully four of the terms used in their book: sport, physical education, exercise and dance. They do not include a section in the introduction to define ‘sportlike activities’ (without a hyphen) but do use this as a heading in the section dealing with the peoples that influenced American sport.

⁷¹ There are examples of this kind of ‘superhuman’ ability in the sport history texts, for instance the king’s run of the Assyrians and Egyptians. See, for instance, Wolfgang Decker, *Sports and Games of Ancient Egypt* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 34.

⁷² K. L. Schmitz, ‘Sport and Play: Suspension of the Ordinary’, in W. J. Morgan and K. V. Meier (eds), *Philosophic Inquiry in Sport* (First Edition), Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1988, pp. 29-38.

⁷³ Bernard Suits, ‘The Elements of Sport’, in W. J. Morgan and K. V. Meier (eds), *Philosophic Inquiry in Sport* (First Edition), Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1988, pp. 39-48.

these forms of activity from ‘work’. In the Irish tales it could be considered that, for the warrior, the act of sword fighting in single combat in order to defend the homeland would be ‘work’. The issue is more contentious when it comes to the performance of said sword skills under other circumstances. For instance, swordsmanship as a show of one’s skills to scare or frighten the opposing army might also be considered ‘work’ as might the use of such skills to battle a rival in love. The performance of sword skill as part of a festival may have political overtones but might not be strictly an example of work. However these might be labelled, the crucial point here is that these forms of sport, game and martial training and display are encompassed by the scope of this thesis.

Of course, as mentioned above, these instances of sport are not always clear cut. The same activity may at one time be considered sport-like and in the next instance not. Some activities, that might be said to be war-like, begin with shows of skill that are hardly war-like at all and which, in fact, are quite civil. Yet by the end of the encounter the action *becomes* more violent and injury and even death may occur. The purpose then becomes the termination of life and this can hardly be said to be the aim of sports and games. Having stated this, there are numerous accounts in history, many in ancient sport, of death being a final outcome in a sporting contest. Athletes at the ancient Olympic Games were known to have fought voluntarily and enthusiastically. In a culture unforgiving of those who ‘raise the finger’ and concede defeat, athletes fought with such determination, both not to lose and not to concede, and death was sometimes the result.⁷⁴

Whether death resulted by accident, by the strength of the tradition and commitment to victory or by design, such events still hold the interest of sport historians and are worthy of study. Reid, in discussing the gladiators of ancient Rome, states that many sport historians do not consider the Roman spectacles as ‘games’ or ‘sports’ based on the view that the participants rarely undertook the activity of their own free will.⁷⁵ However it could be argued that in more recent times the study of gladiatorial contests has taken its place in sport history. Perhaps the definitions of ‘sport’ have changed

⁷⁴ Michael Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World: Competition, Violence and Culture* (London: Yale University Press, 1987), p. 1.

⁷⁵ H. L. Reid, ‘Was the Roman Gladiator an Athlete?’, *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 33, Issue 1, April 2006, p. 37.

somewhat as more modern athletes find themselves sometimes ‘not free’ to decide whether or when to participate. The ultimate consequence though may be litigation or at worst incarceration but would unlikely result in athletes being put to death. Whatever the case, there has been a shift in the acceptability of including many more activities within the realm of interest to those who study sport. Perhaps it would not seem right to call events such as those that result in death ‘sport’ but these activities may still give great insight into the sporting events and contests of the ancient world.

2.2 The Academic Study of Ancient Sport History

The history of sport in the ancient world is a remarkably vast and specialised area of study. For the purposes of this dissertation, a clear understanding of the scholarship and preference for subject matter to date is critical. Such an understanding will reveal what this work considers to be an under-examined area of sport history, that of sport and games in the early Irish Ulster cycle of tales. The Ulster tales (although the extant manuscripts containing evidence of these tales date from no earlier than the eleventh century), can most readily be understood as pertaining to the ‘ancient’ world as these tales are set in and describe Irish culture and society in the Pre-Christian era.⁷⁶

An examination of the literature on ancient sport reveals that there is considerable knowledge of sport in the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Greece and Rome. However, very little is known of the nature, role and extent of sports and games in ancient Irish society. Indeed, to read many of the general sport history texts (even those which focus specifically on the ancient world) one could be forgiven for believing two things – firstly, that ancient sport begins and ends with the classical Greeks and, secondly, that males were the only participants.

The general sport history texts focus primarily on the Mediterranean basin. In most cases, the ancient civilisations of Minoa, Egypt, Sumer, the Etruscans, are usually skimmed over and the emphasis then shifts to the Greeks.⁷⁷ Ancient Greece with its

⁷⁶ The pre-Christian era in Ireland is considered to be prior to the establishment of Christian monasteries and missionaries to Ireland around the early sixth century BCE. See Williams and Ford, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, p. 3.

⁷⁷ Kyle’s *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World* is a recent study that reflects this imbalance between other civilisations and ancient Greece.

athletic facilities, Olympic Games and emphasis on the body stands out as a highly significant civilisation in sport history, not least due to the abundance of archaeological and extant manuscript materials surviving from this particular era. A substantial number of texts are also devoted to ancient Rome with its penchant for military order, its technological advancements and, of course, the use of ‘sport’ as entertainment to pacify a potentially unstable populous.⁷⁸

Other sources in the form of specialist books and journal articles are more varied in their subject material. Their number reflects once again the dominance of ancient Greece in this academic field, although Rome and Egypt are well represented. Many important civilisations are covered only in journal articles, conference papers or in cursory fashion in the more comprehensive general texts. William Baker, for example, mentions the sporting practices of the Aztec, Inca and Apache Indians,⁷⁹ the Eskimos of Greenland, and even some tribes of southern Africa, in his 1988 work *Sports in the Western World*.⁸⁰ While Baker claims his book is about the history of competitive sports ‘from ancient religious ritual and simple tribal contests to highly organised modern spectacles’,⁸¹ his treatment of the ancient world largely concentrates on the ancient Greeks and Romans. It is noteworthy, however, that Baker does write briefly about the Tailteann Games, an ancient Irish festival of sports and other amusements, making Baker one of the few general sport historians to do so.⁸²

In 1983, Donald Kyle published what amounts to be an extensive survey of academic literature on sport in the ancient world. In this account of ‘Directions in Ancient Sport History’, Kyle examines the scholarship of this area up to 1983 in 34 pages comprising over 100 citations.⁸³ What Kyle deduces is that from the earliest historians of ancient sport, beginning from around the late nineteenth century, until the early 1970s, there existed a virtually unchallenged ‘schema’ of ancient sport that suggested that ‘ancient sport rose to a brief golden age in early Greece only to endure

⁷⁸ Robert Mechikoff, *A History and Philosophy of Sport and Physical Education* (Fifth Edition) (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2010), pp. 92-93.

⁷⁹ W. J. Baker, *Sports in the Western World* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 7-8.

⁸⁰ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 6.

⁸¹ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. vii.

⁸² Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 10.

⁸³ Donald Kyle, ‘Directions in Ancient Sport History’, *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 Spring, 1983, pp. 7-34.

a long, regrettable decline through the rest of ancient times'.⁸⁴ Pleket charged that this period of scholarship promoted antiquarianism and had a classical bias which included, as Kyle puts it, 'an aversion to professionalism and a tendency to see "rise and fall" patterns'.⁸⁵

The seminal work representing this schema is E. Norman Gardiner's 1930 book, *Athletics of the Ancient World*. Kyle notes David C. Young's 'scathing criticism' of Gardiner in Young's portrayal of Gardiner as championing a 'delusive conspiracy' in order to frame what he (Kyle) sees as a social-elitist, idealist and possibly racist envisioning of ancient Greek athletics.⁸⁶ According to Kyle, Gardiner's view was shaped in no small part by his schooling, upbringing, social status and adoption of Humanistic Hellenism.⁸⁷ Among other falsehoods identified by Kyle, Gardiner pushed the myth of Greek amateurs and the decline and fall of 'pure' athletics as a result of his own distaste, even abhorrence, of professionalism in sport.

Another important work which could be said to fall into this schema is Deobold Van Dalen, Elmer Mitchell and Bruce Bennett's *A World History of Physical Education*.⁸⁸ Bruce Bennett suggests that historians of physical education like Van Dalen excelled under trying conditions (of little time release, heavy teaching and administrative loads, no access to the benefits of modern technology, fewer source materials and of course, very little financial support) through the decades leading up to 1970.⁸⁹ In fact, Bennett extols the contributions of historians of physical education at length in his paper, 'In Defense of the Historians of Physical Education' which outlines a great number of such historians and defends the criticisms of lack of scholarship and training in the methods of historical research.⁹⁰ While Bennett concedes that these charges are sometimes valid, he suggests that in an era when general historians looked

⁸⁴ Kyle, 'Directions in Ancient Sport History', p. 9.

⁸⁵ Kyle, 'Directions in Ancient Sport History', p. 9.

⁸⁶ Donald Kyle, 'E. Norman Gardiner and the Decline of Greek Sport', in D. G. Kyle and G. D. Stark (eds), *Essays on Sport History and Sport Mythology* (Arlington, TX: University of Texas, 1990), pp. 10-11.

⁸⁷ Kyle, 'E. Norman Gardiner and the Decline of Greek Sport', pp. 7-44.

⁸⁸ Deobold Van Dalen, Elmer Mitchell, Bruce Bennett, *A World History of Physical Education* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1953). See also the revised edition, Deobold Van Dalen, Bruce Bennett, *A World History of Physical Education* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

⁸⁹ Bruce Bennett, 'In Defense of the Historian of Physical Education', *Sport History Review*, Vol. 33, Issue 2, November 2002, pp. 138-144.

⁹⁰ Bennett, 'In Defense of the Historian of Physical Education', p. 39.

upon physical education and sport with disdain, historians of physical education took up this task with high motivation and, as mentioned by Van Dalen, with many factors working against them.⁹¹ Despite the critique though, *A World History of Physical Education* is an important work for historians of sport and it is briefly examined here.

The authors of *A World History of Physical Education* consider that the term ‘physical education’ is to be thought of as ‘all-inclusive’ incorporating health and recreation as well as physical education.⁹² Bennett further elaborates on the inclusivity of this term by suggesting that it was unnecessary to specify ‘sport’ in the definition of ‘physical education’ as it was commonly understood that sport was an automatic inclusion.⁹³ *A World History of Physical Education* examines, therefore, physical education, including sport, in the history of many civilisations and outlines the aims of education and physical education as well as the programmes, promotion and methods of physical education in each case. The ancient societies and regions examined include Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, India, Persia, Greece and Rome as well as Hebrew religious and civic ideals. As in other histories of sport, Greece and Rome, running to 35 and eighteen pages respectively, occupy much larger sections than do other civilisations (which average at around five to eight pages each). This brevity perhaps is indicative of the scope of the book, which covers ancient through to modern physical education across the world.⁹⁴ The second edition actually includes less material on ancient societies with the exclusion of Mesopotamia and Persia.⁹⁵

Another important influence on the development of the history of ancient sport, and one which traverses Kyle’s ‘schematic’ changeover period, is the ‘Alberta School’. From 1967 to 1975 six graduate studies came out of the University of Alberta on various aspects of ancient sport history. Encouraged by Maxwell Howell, these theses were part of what Peter Lindsay (Associate Dean in 1983 and himself a graduate student of Howell’s during this period) once described as Howell’s ‘master’ plan of

⁹¹ Bennett, ‘In Defense of the Historian of Physical Education’, pp. 140-141.

⁹² Van Dalen, Mitchell and Bennett, *A World History of Physical Education*, p. 1.

⁹³ Bennett, ‘In Defense of the Historian of Physical Education’, p. 139.

⁹⁴ *A World History of Physical Education* was published in 1953 and so the term ‘modern’ is used in relation to that date.

⁹⁵ Van Dalen and Bennett, *A World History of Physical Education*, p. 1.

filling the gaps of the jigsaw of ancient sport history.⁹⁶ These students were physical education graduates and had rarely undergone training in history or in ancient civilisations. The theses were what Howell described as ‘first-order’ and were largely collections of information presented in a chronological fashion. The theses covered several regions, periods and interests including the art of early civilisations (Sumer, Egypt, Near East, the Aegean and Greece), physical education and physical activity in ancient Rome, physical activities of the Etruscans, games and physical activity of the Sumerians and Hittites and the influence of war on the recreation of ancient Assyrians and Persians.⁹⁷

Kyle suggests that the schema, best represented by Gardiner but upheld by Van Dalen and, for the most part, the Alberta School theses, did not hold up well under the scrutiny it received during the 1970s and early 1980s. It was during this period that Kyle considers that the study of ancient sport history changed. Scholarship, says Kyle, came a long way quickly in this time through the discovery and publication of new sources and the re-evaluation of evidence and theories.⁹⁸ Ancient sport began to be seen as a dynamic study with significant issues and in need of a more multi-disciplinary approach. Donald Parkerson characterised this period as one of an emergence of new histories, those being economic, political and social histories.⁹⁹ The general field of history underwent a change and it came to encompass groups that were not previously included, such as women, ethnic groups, working people and the poor.¹⁰⁰ As a result, sport history also became influenced by the social sciences and the studies from this period, and as Kyle puts it the discipline began to have ‘a more

⁹⁶ Rob Hess, ‘Physical Activities in Ancient Civilizations as Reflected in Theses at the University of Alberta: Historiographical Issues’, Unpublished paper, Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1989.

⁹⁷ These six theses are all unpublished MA theses from the University of Alberta, Edmonton: Denise Palmer, ‘Sport and Games in the Art of Early Civilizations’, Unpublished MA thesis, Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1967; Peter Lindsay, ‘Literary Evidence of Physical Education Among the Ancient Romans’, Unpublished MA thesis, Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1967; Lorne Sawula, ‘Physical Education of the Etruscan Civilization’, Unpublished MA thesis, Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1969; Wayne Bishop, ‘The Role of Physical Activity in Ancient Rome’, Unpublished MA thesis, Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1970; Don Meikle, ‘Recreational and Physical Activities of the Sumerian and Hittite Civilizations’, Unpublished MA thesis, Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1971; and, David Spier, ‘The Influence of Warfare on the Recreational Activities of the Ancient Assyrians and Iranians’, Unpublished MA thesis, Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1975.

⁹⁸ Kyle, ‘Directions in Ancient Sport History’, p. 10.

⁹⁹ Donald Parkerson, ‘The New Sport History’, in J. M. Carter and A. Krüger (eds), *Ritual and Record: Sports Records and Quantification in Pre-Modern Societies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 14.

¹⁰⁰ Parkerson, ‘The New Sport History’, p. 14.

objective approach free of classicist or other biases that tend to see Greece as an ideal and Rome as a warning'.¹⁰¹ The trend, Kyle suggests, was revisionist and demythologising and, in Kyle's view, this made the future of the discipline more promising. Kyle then discusses the scholarship from 1972 to 1983 and concludes that if there is a bias it is that 'most studies have had a favourable attitude to sport as a basic and positive element in different cultures and periods'.¹⁰²

Even with the demythologising of ancient sport history, discussion of ancient Greek athletics and the ancient Olympic Games still feature prominently with historians of ancient sport. Greek athletics and a connection, however tenuous, with the ancient games at Olympia still appeals. Greek sport was competitive (agonistic) and organised and was viewed, discussed and written about. The Olympic Games, even minus the traditional schema, is attractive. Presented with a body culture and a penchant for athletics, Greek sport sits nicely with the belief systems of modern elite sport. Add to this the fact that the sources available for studying ancient Greek sport are legion and it should not come as a surprise that Kyle spends so much of his 'Ancient Sport History' review considering scholarly examinations of Greek sport.

The pattern has altered little in more recent times. The approaches, ideas, suggestions and conclusions about ancient Greek sport may have changed, but the 'object' of study has not. Of the various 'Journal Surveys' of the ancient world published in the *Journal of Sport History* from 1979 to 1990,¹⁰³ the overwhelming majority deal with aspects of ancient Greece and/or the ancient Olympic Games. A total of 42 of the 70 journal articles reviewed fall into this category. Of the remainder, eight deal with Roman sport and four each with the Etruscans and the Minoans. The rest of the

¹⁰¹ Kyle, 'Directions in Ancient Sport History', p. 10.

¹⁰² Kyle, 'Directions in Ancient Sport History', pp. 33-34.

¹⁰³ J. T. Jable (ed.), 'Journal Surveys - Antiquity', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, Summer 1979, pp. 37-39; J. T. Jable (ed.), 'Journal Surveys - Sport in Antiquity', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Summer 1981, pp. 76-78; J. T. Jable (ed.), 'Journal Surveys - Sport in the Ancient World', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Summer 1984, pp. 77-80; J. T. Jable (ed.), 'Journal Surveys - The Olympic Games Ancient and Modern', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Winter, 1984, pp. 79-87; Angela Lumpkin (ed.), 'Journal Surveys - Ancient and Medieval Sports', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Summer 1985, pp. 188-193; Angela Lumpkin (ed.), 'Journal Surveys - Classical Sport', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 12, No. 3, Winter 1985, pp. 284-286; Angela Lumpkin (ed.), 'Journal Surveys - Ancient and Medieval Sport', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 13, No. 1, Spring, 1986, pp. 54-55; Angela Lumpkin (ed.), 'Journal Surveys - Ancient Sport', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Winter 1987, pp. 345-347; John Schleppi (ed.), 'Journal Surveys - Ancient World', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Summer 1995, pp. 171-172.

articles (twelve in total) pertain to other geographical areas of the ancient world.¹⁰⁴ At a glance, Richard Cox's *International Sport: A Bibliography, 2000*, reveals only five articles on the ancient world from 1998-2000, two on Byzantium and three on Greece.¹⁰⁵ The above examples are representative of the limited spread of subject matter in regard to ancient sport history.

In his most recent publication on the ancient world *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*,¹⁰⁶ Kyle re-emphasises the shift that ancient sport history has undergone in moving from antiquarianism, collection and enumeration to contextualisation, collation and interpretation.¹⁰⁷ Kyle calls his 2007 work, 'a revisionist's survey of demythologising therapeutic trends in ancient sport studies' and suggests that it challenges old moralistic conventions such as the 'Eurocentric claim that there was no sport before the Greeks'.¹⁰⁸ However, a closer look at the structure of Kyle's book reveals that to some extent that convention does go unchallenged. Kyle's work has an introduction, fifteen chapters, and a conclusion. Of the fifteen chapters, Greece (throughout its various historical phases) features prominently in ten. Rome is allocated three chapters and the remaining chapters (Chapters 1 and 2) are concerned with sport in locations such as Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Minoa, as well as the civilisations of the Mycenaeans and the Hittites, are dealt with more generally under the rubric of the 'Sporting Mediterranean World'. While these featured civilisations are clearly not Greek or indeed Roman, they are exclusively Eurocentric with a dash of the Near East. So, while in Kyle's estimation, it would be 'hard to overstate the cultural significance of athletics to the Greeks',¹⁰⁹ it is also hard to overstate the penchant for the ancient Greeks by historians of ancient sport. Kyle's work, despite his protestations, does not go very far to challenging this convention.

While it could be said that for some historians of ancient sport, the definitions that they use determine what will or will not be included, Kyle's definition of sport as 'public, physical activities, especially those with competitive elements, pursued for

¹⁰⁴ These include China, Egypt, the Mayans and Turkey as well as several cross-cultural examinations of various sports or activities such as fighting arts and charioteering.

¹⁰⁵ See R. W. Cox, *International Sport: A Bibliography, 2000* (London: Frank Cass, 2003), p. 17.

¹⁰⁶ Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*.

¹⁰⁷ Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁰⁸ Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, p. 5.

¹⁰⁹ Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, p. 7.

victory or the demonstration of excellence',¹¹⁰ does not automatically (on definitional grounds alone) discount sport-like activity amongst the people's of ancient China, South America or indeed, Ireland.

Allen Guttmann, too, has had an illustrious career as a sport historian and has produced a number of excellent texts.¹¹¹ One of Guttmann's most recent contributions (although much is re-workings of previously published materials, as Guttmann himself admits) is *Sports. The First Five Millennia*, which presents Guttmann's views on modern (and most definitely not postmodern) sport and sport history. The book, as demonstrated by the title, covers an extensive period of time.¹¹² Refreshingly, Guttmann devotes space to cultures and peoples not regularly covered in generalist sport histories (such as Asian sport, South American sport and African sport) and draws on examples from many locations to support his arguments in discussing pre-literate societies and sport 'before the Greeks'.

Definitions, considers Guttmann, are tedious but essential to ensure clarity and are crucial to an understanding of sport that does not encompass activities like board and card games, dancing, cycling to work and window-shopping to name a few.¹¹³ Guttmann bases his working definition of 'sport' on play and from that, games and contests. Summarising his position economically, Guttmann defines sports as 'autotelic physical contests' but then proceeds to discuss the shortcomings and confusions that this definition might produce.¹¹⁴ Questioning each of his own definitional terms one by one, Guttmann concludes that sports must be competitive or at least involve a contest (here the contest may be between inanimate object and human as easily as between humans), must involve physical skill even to a small degree and be undertaken at least in part for the intrinsic satisfaction of the activity alone. Despite appearing a narrow definition, Guttmann allows much competitive, physical activity into it and suggests, somewhat ubiquitously, that these are

¹¹⁰ Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, p. 10.

¹¹¹ Allen Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978); Allen Guttmann, *Women's Sports: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); Allen Guttmann, *The Erotic in Sports* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) to name but a few.

¹¹² Allen Guttmann, *Sports. The First Five Millennia* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004).

¹¹³ Guttmann, *Sports. The First Five Millennia*, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ Guttmann, *Sports. The First Five Millennia*, p. 2.

undertaken ‘with at least a measure of intrinsic satisfaction’ by the participant. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, says Guttmann, the ‘benefit of the doubt’ is given.¹¹⁵ Armed with this deceptively wide-reaching definition, Guttmann proceeds to discuss the pre-literate societies and the ritualistic and religious nature of their ‘sports’.

Despite these examples of attention to ‘alternate’ societies of the ancient world, that is, those not Greek or Roman, there is scant coverage, particularly in the general texts, of Ireland and even of Celtic sport. William Baker is an exception. Baker claims his book *Sports in the Western World*, is about the history of competitive sports ‘from ancient religious ritual and simple tribal contests to highly organised modern spectacles’.¹¹⁶ Baker’s treatment of the ancient world, though, largely concentrates on the ancient Greeks and Romans. As mentioned above, Baker does write briefly about the Tailteann Games, an ancient Irish festival of sports and other amusements, making Baker one of the few general sport historians to do so.¹¹⁷ Even E. Norman Gardiner, who is considered the doyen of sports historians and, as mentioned above, writes specifically on the ancient world in *Athletics of the Ancient World*, fails to mention the Irish Tailteann Games. Nor does Gardiner discuss the contribution that the early Irish tales might make to sport history, despite dedicating an entire chapter to Homer’s semi-fictional works the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*.¹¹⁸ Gardiner chooses to focus primarily on the Greeks, with considerably less information on other civilisations. Gardiner even goes so far as to say that ‘the story of ancient athletics is the story of Greek athletics’.¹¹⁹ This seems to sum up the attitude of many sport historians who write on the ancient world and reflects the fact that Gardiner’s seminal work has underpinned most academic thought on, and inquiry into, sport in the ancient world.

Given Gardiner’s influence on the writing of ancient sport history, it is hardly surprising that sport historians have followed his lead. Indeed, Kyle suggests that the

¹¹⁵ Guttmann, *Sports. The First Five Millennia*, p. 3.

¹¹⁶ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. vii.

¹¹⁷ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 10.

¹¹⁸ Gardiner makes a short reference to the ‘Highland Clans’ and the heroes of the ‘Sagas [who] delight in contests and feats of physical strength’, but this reference is not supported by a citation and may or may not refer to the Irish Ulster cycle tales. See E. N. Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World* (London: Oxford University Press, Ely House, 1930), p. 27.

¹¹⁹ Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World*, p. 1.

traditional studies of ancient sport downplay or ignore cultures before the Greeks and then proceed to ‘applaud Greek sport as admirable, pure, participatory, amateur, graceful, beautiful, noble and inspirational’.¹²⁰ He observes that the authors of these studies then go on to describe Roman sport, in less positive terms, as ‘decadent, vulgar, spectatory, professional, brutal, inhuman and debasing’.¹²¹

However, there are several reasons why Gardiner and his successors in ancient sport history have focussed on the Greeks (and to a lesser extent, the Romans). Firstly, the ‘western’ world has long clung to the traditions of the ancient Greeks (revisited during the Renaissance) for all manner of academic inquiry. Indeed, it is from the Classical period that many of the ideas, practices and institutions that exist today have their roots.¹²² Secondly, the Greeks and Romans had methods of recording these notions and practices in the way of written language in books, manuscripts and on reliefs, as well as in drawings, art works, architecture and through depictions on everyday items such as water vessels. As a result, much literary and archaeological evidence hail from this period.¹²³ The following section examines the function of sport-like activity in the ancient world by way of select examples utilising some of the sport histories mentioned above.

2.3 Sport and Games in the Ancient World

Sport and games in the ancient world can be related to three principal ‘needs’ of ancient societies: religion, hunting and war. Of course there are other reasons why the ancients ran, jumped, drove chariots, danced and turned somersaults. For instance, in order to remember deceased monarchs, heroes or loved ones, many forms of funeral games were held, sometimes at the time of death, in many instances a year later, and occasionally continuously, year after year, as remembrance games. Additionally, ancient societies, much like contemporary societies, used games, sports and other forms of physical activity as a means of amusement, pastime or entertainment. The activities, however, largely came from the pool of activities that can be seen to have

¹²⁰ Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, p. 5.

¹²¹ Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, p. 5.

¹²² For example, most western conceptions of art, science, philosophy, democracy and, more specifically to this study, notions of health, athletics and physical education as part of an education ‘system’, have their roots in ancient Greek society.

¹²³ Wolfgang Decker would claim just as much for ancient Egypt in the way of continuous record of sport and games. See Wolfgang Decker, *Sports and Games of Ancient Egypt*.

religious, hunting or military origins. The activities, which for the most part evolved for these reasons, were also utilised for other purposes at times. In fact, often one instance of sport would serve many varied purposes within one society. The following sub-sections outline some of the suggested possible origins of sport-like activities and their suggested function in the ancient world. This will be of considerable use to the examination of sport-like activity which occurs in Chapter Four.

Many sports and games in the ancient world served religious purposes. Some retained this connection while others became more secular and began to serve other purposes, for instance, to entertain others or to flaunt the political power of a ruler. Additionally, competitive games were used in funeral celebrations for important people. As Baker suggests ‘competitive games began primarily as religious rituals designed to win the favour of the gods or to honour the memories of heroic leaders’.¹²⁴ Winning the favour of the all-powerful god or gods was of supreme importance to early civilisations. The threat of natural disaster and crop failure, as well as the need to give thanks for, and celebration of, the life giving sun, moon, water and animals for food, meant that pleasing the gods was paramount to the continued existence of the civilisation. It is not surprising, therefore, to see that some ancient societies devoted much time and effort to such things as fertility rites and sun worship and devised elaborate rituals in order to honour, appease and satisfy their gods.

What, perhaps, requires more explanation is the connection between religious ritual and physical display or contest. Baker notes the symbolism and mythology which surrounded the use of physical contest in ancient times: ‘[to] the primitive mind the universe seemed divided between opposite elements: sickness and health, warmth and cold, fertility and barrenness, life and death’.¹²⁵ As humans became increasingly dependent on crops, so too the dualisms of summer and winter, rainfall and drought and, crucial to these, the sun and moon became important.¹²⁶ From these notions developed the idea that these things were competing with each other in the world.

¹²⁴ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 1.

¹²⁵ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 6.

¹²⁶ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 7.

Lévi-Strauss, among other anthropologists, suggests that this dualistic conception of the natural order is an inevitable facet of primitive thinking (*la pensée sauvage*).¹²⁷ Human rituals took on the element of contest not only that they might acknowledge this but also that they might have some influence. Baker makes the connection clearly, '[f]rom this mythology of dual forces at war in the world, religious ritual emerged in an attempt to encourage the good and defeat the bad, to win the favour of the gods'.¹²⁸

Of course, it mattered that the gods were watching and, indeed for some time, the gods were the only ones watching. Some religious rituals were performed in order that the gods be entertained. Olivova suggests that the gods were the first spectators of the ancient world and that the ancients employed festivals as a means of achieving closer contact with their gods.¹²⁹ In ancient Greece, facilities for spectators were initially constructed close to places of religious significance. This, believes Guttmann, is due to the close connection between the Greeks and their gods. The festivals, such as those at Olympia, were conducted close to the altars of gods such as Zeus and Hera. In the process of levelling the ground to ensure a flat competition surface, the earth removed was formed into an embankment for spectators.¹³⁰ By entertaining the gods, early societies hoped to gain their favour and safety. Thus, claims Olivova, many festivals included sacrifices and libations to ensure the gods sufficient amounts of food and drink as well as the performances of human beings that served as entertainment.¹³¹ For example, there are references to animal and human sacrifice as well as a series of contests to honour the fallen Patroclus in Book 23 of the *Iliad*.¹³²

Strong links between physical contest and religion have been noted of ancient Greece and Egypt. In Greece, athletes imitated the feats of heroic gods and goddesses and ran races at specially organised celebrations such as the Olympic Games. Indeed there were many festivals throughout ancient Greece each of which celebrated a

¹²⁷ Cited in Guttmann, *From Ritual to Record. The Nature of Modern Sports*, p. 17.

¹²⁸ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 7.

¹²⁹ Vera Olivova, *Sports and Games in the Ancient World* (London: Bloomsbury Books, 1984), p. 16.

¹³⁰ Allen Guttmann, 'Sports Spectators from Antiquity to the Renaissance', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Summer 1981, p. 18.

¹³¹ Olivova, *Sports and Games in the Ancient World*, p. 16.

¹³² Homer (E. V. Rieu - Translator), *The Iliad* (London: Penguin, 1950), pp. 412-413.

particular deity. The Greeks thought their gods to be ‘perfect’ in all ways and this included bodily perfection. Believing the gods to be more appreciating of, and sympathetic to, humans who emulated them, the Greeks ensured that they themselves resembled their image of their gods. Carrying little excess fat and being in good physical condition in the way of visible, even prominent musculature, Greek male athletes were the finest specimens and were employed to compete in the presence of the gods to demonstrate society’s deep religious commitment. As Mechikoff writes, ‘[t]he cultural nourishment and support of athletic competitions, along with the desire to resemble the gods through the attainment of physical beauty, promoted an athletic culture and sporting heritage of unprecedented proportions’.¹³³

In ancient Egypt, there was also a strong culture of physical activity linked to religion. The Egyptians of the predynastic era engaged in dancing as a spiritual practice.¹³⁴ Dancing assisted in the evocation of ‘good will, helping the deities and demons, exorcising evil spirits, healing the sick, and celebrating various ceremonies’.¹³⁵ There is little evidence, though, to suggest that these religious celebrations or rituals involved the kind of competitive athletic contests that the Greeks favoured. An interesting twist, however, lies in the relationship that developed between athletic prowess and the ruling pharaohs.

The pharaohs of the early Egyptian Old Kingdom were considered, through considerable effort on their own part, to be gods.¹³⁶ Initially king-gods, the emphasis on divine origin was replaced with notions of ‘the son of a god’ borne of a human mother, so that by the New Kingdom¹³⁷, the pharaoh was mortal.¹³⁸ Mortal, but exceptional, displays of ability, particularly physical ability were used as a way of demonstrating the ruler’s power and right to the throne. Sport, for the Egyptians, ‘played a significant role in the framework of royal dogma’.¹³⁹ The Egyptians believed that the pharaoh was the ‘guarantor’ of the lives of his people and that his

¹³³ Mechikoff, *A History and Philosophy of Sport and Physical Education*, p. 64.

¹³⁴ The pre-dynastic era occurred from around 5500 to 3000 BCE.

¹³⁵ K. S. Abdou, ‘Sports and Games in Ancient Egypt’, in E. F. Zeigler (ed.), *A History of Sport and Physical Education to 1900 (Selected Topics)* (Champaign, IL: Stipes, 1973), p. 59.

¹³⁶ The Old Kingdom dates from around 2700 to 2200 BCE.

¹³⁷ The New Kingdom dates from around 1600 to 1100 BCE.

¹³⁸ Olivova, *Sports and Games in the Ancient World*, p. 44.

¹³⁹ Decker, *Sports and Games of Ancient Egypt*, p. 5.

actual physical strength was equal to a warrior and hunter as well as an athlete. This connection between physical capability and the king was paramount to the long-lived success of the society. Decker suggests that the physical capabilities of the pharaoh protected the people, the land and cosmos. He cites by way of example, the Jubilee run, required of rulers from the time they had completed 30 years in ‘office’. The monarch was required to prove his worth and renew his claim to the throne by completing this run, ritualistically every three years. In completing the run (a run sometimes called the ‘Seizure of Possession Run’), the king’s might and power were ‘magically’ renewed.¹⁴⁰ Throughout Egypt, as well as for the Pharaoh, there were high aesthetic standards and obesity was ‘not only considered repugnant but a sign of stupidity’.¹⁴¹

The use of hunting, also, as a show of physical skill, power and superior status was not uncommon in the ancient world and was particularly common for royalty. Indeed there was great power and prestige to be gained in being a successful hunter.¹⁴² The principal purpose of the royal hunt was to hunt down and kill the most dangerous of animals, beasts such as lions, bulls, boars and leopards. In China too, hunting was a popular pastime for the wealthy and noble. The royal hunt in ancient China was, according to Mechikoff, ‘a grand occasion’ and men were often used as ‘beaters’ to flush out game in the hunting area.¹⁴³ This was to ensure success for the royal ‘hunters’. Mechikoff tells of an anecdote regarding a Chinese ruler by the name of Shih Hu who adored the hunt but who had gained so much weight that the task was virtually impossible. Improvising brilliantly, Shih Hu had himself carried to the hunting ground where he sat on a revolving couch that allowed him to shoot in any direction.¹⁴⁴ This, perhaps, demonstrates the enjoyment that Shih Hu experienced in this activity, or the importance of his being seen to be a great hunter for political reasons, or both.

Success in war, as well as in hunting, could serve as a show of aristocratic strength and power and in ancient Mesopotamian society it was only in war and hunting that

¹⁴⁰ Decker, *Sports and Games of Ancient Egypt*, p. 34.

¹⁴¹ Olivova, *Sports and Games in the Ancient World*, p. 44.

¹⁴² Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 4.

¹⁴³ Mechikoff, *A History and Philosophy of Sport and Physical Education*, p. 38.

¹⁴⁴ Mechikoff, *A History and Philosophy of Sport and Physical Education*, p. 38.

the theocratic rulers would compete. In war and in hunting the king was competing against equals, be they enemy kings, the king of beasts or other dangerous animals.¹⁴⁵ The agonistic principle required for social competition ran contrary to the sort of image the king desired and certainly would undermine his political stance.¹⁴⁶ In short, it was not ‘kingly’ to set oneself up against a human adversary against whom one might struggle or, indeed, fail to overcome.

Chariots occupy a prominent position in warfare in areas around the Mediterranean from as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries BCE, when, according to Bennett, the armies of Sumer, Egypt, Ur and the Hittites increasingly relied on the abilities of charioteers in battle.¹⁴⁷ The leisure activities of hunting or shooting from the chariot, according to Bennett, had little to do with what he would call ‘real competitive sport’, but they certainly played an important role as imperial propaganda by the Persian, Hittite and Egyptian rulers.¹⁴⁸

Chariots, a mode of transportation in both war and hunting, may also have been important in sport-like activities. Whether or not chariots were raced in Mesopotamia and Egypt at this time is questionable. Bennett looks to Greece and the islands of the Aegean (the Minoans and Mycenaeans) during the fourteenth to twelfth centuries BCE to find the origins of chariot racing and suggests that it is not until the addition of chariot racing at the Olympic Games that there is a turning point in the social history of chariot racing as more and more professional drivers were employed to race.¹⁴⁹

It is suggested that much of modern sport had its roots in primitive hunting and military skills. For instance, Baker notes that it is scarcely

... mere coincidence that primitive stones clubs and spears
form the elementary shape of modern athletic equipment:
balls of all shapes and sizes, baseball and cricket bats,

¹⁴⁵ Olivova, *Sports and Games in the Ancient World*, p. 33.

¹⁴⁶ Olivova, *Sports and Games in the Ancient World*, p. 33.

¹⁴⁷ Dirk Bennett, ‘Chariot Racing in the Ancient World’, *History Today*, Vol 47, No. 12, December 1997, p. 41.

¹⁴⁸ Bennett, ‘Chariot Racing in the Ancient World’, p. 42.

¹⁴⁹ Bennett, ‘Chariot Racing in the Ancient World’, p. 42.

hockey sticks, and tennis rackets, as well as the discus and javelin, which have changed little over the centuries.¹⁵⁰

In discussing war and games in the ancient world, Cornell suggests that the link between these two is highly pronounced.¹⁵¹ Speaking generally about this connection, Cornell goes as far as saying that ‘competitive sport represents a form of combat’ and he proceeds to examine the resemblances between war and sport:

Both entail contests of physical strength and skill.
Both tend to reinforce group solidarity and identity ('us' against 'them'). Both arouse strong emotions among participants and interested non-participants (spectators or fans in a sporting context, non-combatant civilians on the 'home front' in war). The qualities that are admired in both are similar (e.g. courage, loyalty, stamina and discipline), and both confer honour and prestige on their heroes.¹⁵²

Moreover, the conduct of war resembles that of sport in that it can be seen to be, at least to some extent, as artificial, regulated and ritualised. Cornell argues that the more ritualised and artificial it is, the more war resembles a form of play.¹⁵³ This is an important consideration in an examination sport-like activity in the Irish tales as many of the instances of such activity occur in the preparation for, or initial engagement in, combat.

The focus in this brief overview of ancient sport-like activity now shifts to the activity of wrestling. There are several references to wrestling in the Ulster cycle tales, both on land and in water. However, it is useful to first examine wrestling activities in the ancient world more generally. Scott Carroll explored wrestling in Nubian culture in his paper, ‘Wrestling in Ancient Nubia’.¹⁵⁴ Before considering the wrestling feats of the Nubians, Carroll reiterates Kyle’s point that the history of ancient sports

¹⁵⁰ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 3.

¹⁵¹ T. J. Cornell, ‘On War and Games in the Ancient World’, in K. B. Wamsley, R. K. Barney and S. G. Martyn (eds), *The Global Nexus Engaged: Past, Present, Future Interdisciplinary Olympic Studies* (London, ON: International Centre for Olympic Studies, 2002), pp. 29-40.

¹⁵² Cornell, ‘On War and Games in the Ancient World’, p. 29.

¹⁵³ Cornell, ‘On War and Games in the Ancient World’, p. 29.

¹⁵⁴ S. T. Carroll, ‘Wrestling in Ancient Nubia’, *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Summer 1988, pp. 121-137.

traditionally begins and ends with the classical Greeks and Romans and that this is based on both the abundance of sources about these civilisations and the ‘... naïve assumption that Greek sports were without antecedents in their Mediterranean environment’.¹⁵⁵ According to Carroll, several authors have contributed to help counter this ‘insularity’ and his paper ‘Wrestling in Ancient Nubia’ adds to this body of knowledge.¹⁵⁶ As stated above, wrestling features quite prominently in the Ulster tales so a closer look at Carroll’s assertions is warranted.

Several centuries before Homer's wrestling accounts, wrestling was a prominent and important activity in ancient Nubia. All evidence for Nubian wrestling comes from the Egyptians. Although Egyptian records show that Nubia had economic interaction with Egypt from the period of the Old Kingdom right through to the Persian conquest of Egypt in 525 BCE, the trade was apparently one way with Egyptian goods not common in Nubia while ‘exotic’ Nubian wares in Egypt were more plentiful.¹⁵⁷ The interaction between Egypt and Nubia then took a different tack. As Carroll puts it:

[t]he frequency of punitive campaigns increased during the New Kingdom (1564-1085 BC). Egypt sent expeditions deep into Nubia with the hope of circumventing the traditional middlemen in Egypto-Nubian trade ... The Egyptians divided and controlled Nubia. The New Kingdom Pharaohs demanded items that they had formerly purchased from the Nubians as tribute. Exotic goods, animals, minerals and slaves were presented as tribute to the Pharaoh. The New Kingdom conducted a policy of formal imperial exploitation in Nubia.¹⁵⁸

It was in this political climate that the records of Nubian wrestling come to light. Several reliefs show competitions which took place in ‘tribute games’ in front of the Pharaoh. As Carroll explains, ‘the presentation of tribute was celebrated with festivities which included sports competitions’.¹⁵⁹ These games were an orchestrated show of political dominance over subjected enemies which took place before the Pharaoh, his court, nobles, soldiers and ambassadors from foreign lands.¹⁶⁰ One relief

¹⁵⁵ Carroll, ‘Wrestling in Ancient Nubia’, p. 121.

¹⁵⁶ Carroll, ‘Wrestling in Ancient Nubia’, pp. 121-137.

¹⁵⁷ Carroll, ‘Wrestling in Ancient Nubia’, p. 122.

¹⁵⁸ Carroll, ‘Wrestling in Ancient Nubia’, p. 122.

¹⁵⁹ Carroll, ‘Wrestling in Ancient Nubia’, p. 123.

¹⁶⁰ Carroll, ‘Wrestling in Ancient Nubia’, p. 123.

showing tribute games clearly shows a referee warning the Egyptian (who is wrestling a Nubian) about an illegal move, reminding him that he is in the presence of the Pharaoh.¹⁶¹ As Carroll notes, '[w]hile the games were intended to be a portrayal of Egyptian power over their enemies, this strikingly illustrates that the contests were conducted in fair play (or at least under the illusion of fair play)'.¹⁶²

Deane Lamont also challenges the Greco-centric nature of ancient sport history with his paper examining the ‘running phenomena’ in ancient Sumer, an activity which was closely akin to Egypt’s ‘Jubilee Run’ outlined above. Sumer was a collection of city-states which was located in Mesopotamia about 3000 BCE to about 1800 BCE.¹⁶³ Three texts from the ‘waning’ period of Sumerian civilisation tell of organised running events. Two are administrative documents that outline offerings to be made on ‘city race’ days in the Sumerian city of Umma. The other is a legal document that specifies the time for foot-races. Additionally, Lamont refers to a royal hymn that describes a (possibly fictional) long-distance run by King Shulgi, the ruling monarch.¹⁶⁴

It appears the city-races had religious connections with one text describing animal offerings from the king and a second, high-ranking individual that are to be sacrificed to the god and goddess on the day of city ‘race-making’.¹⁶⁵ There are only three texts that mention the ‘race-making’, notes Lamont, and these represent the entirety of the references to city-racing, yet from these one thing is clear, foot-racing was common enough for it to be used in legal and economic documents and these footraces seem to have had religious and ritual significance.¹⁶⁶

There is another document, a royal hymn, which celebrates the alleged running feat of the king. Lamont says ‘allegedly’ because the trip, of almost 200 miles, was said to have occurred in the space of a day. Such a run, if possible, surely pushed the limits

¹⁶¹ Carroll, ‘Wrestling in Ancient Nubia’, p. 127.

¹⁶² Carroll, ‘Wrestling in Ancient Nubia’, p. 127.

¹⁶³ Deane Lamont, ‘Running Phenomena in Ancient Sumer’, *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 22, No. 3, Fall 1995, p. 207.

¹⁶⁴ Lamont, ‘Running Phenomena in Ancient Sumer’, p. 210.

¹⁶⁵ Lamont, ‘Running Phenomena in Ancient Sumer’, p. 211.

¹⁶⁶ Lamont, ‘Running Phenomena in Ancient Sumer’, p. 211.

of human performance.¹⁶⁷ The hymn may, of course, been subject to exaggeration as no doubt it was used to extol the importance of the king. However, regardless of whether the run actually occurred or not, it is clear that long-distance running was a well-known phenomena in ancient Sumer.

Articles such as those by Carroll and Lamont are useful in the context of the study of sport in the early Irish tales as they examine sport-like activity and its close relationship to, firstly, the principles of fair play and, secondly, to the posturing nature and status-building possibilities of sport, as these are critical to the fabric of the society depicted in the ancient Ulster tales. The following section now moves to examine the role and significance of literature and myth in the body of scholarly work devoted to sport in the ancient world.

2.4 Sport, Literature and Myth in the Ancient World

The influence (even dominance) of science has led to archaeological materials being considered the only valid sources worth studying when it comes to understanding life in the ancient world. Literature and myth are not generally believed to be worthy of serious academic, historical study. There are several notable exceptions to this in the study of ancient sport history. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, among others, are semi-fictional works containing elements of mythology and are well regarded by sport historians. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are considered to be important milestones in the history of sport for, as Baker points out, these works are the 'oldest surviving books in the Western world',¹⁶⁸ and, upon examination, both works include sections on organised sport and games. Particularly notable is book 23 of the *Iliad* which outlines the athletic events held as part of funeral celebrations.¹⁶⁹

Perhaps one of the earliest discussions of the contribution to ancient sport history of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* is Gardiner's treatment of the subject in *Athletics of the Ancient World*. Gardiner devotes an entire chapter of ten pages to Homer. Predictably perhaps, given his penchant for the 'amateur' spirit and 'pure' athletics, Gardiner states from the outset that 'in Homer we first find the true spirit of sport, the

¹⁶⁷ Lamont, 'Running Phenomena in Ancient Sumer', p. 213.

¹⁶⁸ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 10.

¹⁶⁹ Homer, *The Iliad*, pp. 412–436.

desire to be ever the best and to excel all other men, the joy in the effort'.¹⁷⁰ In linking the athletic events to both the training of boys and to the 'natural recreation of men', in his use of certain phrases such as 'the sheer joy of sport has never been surpassed' and a discussion of sportsmanship, Gardiner's agenda is clear.¹⁷¹ Focussing predominantly on the *Iliad*, the chapter is largely descriptive with little analysis although connections are made to archaeological finds and artistic works.¹⁷²

Several other authors have utilised material from the *Iliad* to examine not only the contests within Book 23 but also as a way of examining, in whole or in part, the sport and contests of the Homeric Greeks. As early as the 1960s, there are examples of articles in sport-related journals that glean information about sport through the pages of the *Iliad*.¹⁷³ More numerous are the several North American Society for Sport History (NASSH) conference presentations which discuss Homer and the *Iliad* and/or the *Odyssey*.¹⁷⁴ There have also been many journal articles that discuss the content of the Homeric poems and other ancient literature and mythologies in the pursuit of interesting and useful information about sport and sport in history. Matthew Dickie's article, 'Fair and Foul Play in the Funeral Games of the *Iliad*', delves into the then perceived 'win at all costs' mentality attributed to the Mycenaean Greeks.¹⁷⁵ Dickie argues persuasively that winning was not everything in Greek athletics and that there are numerous examples of 'fair play' and goodwill in Book 23. However, Dickie is cognizant of treading on what he calls 'uncertain grounds' with the 'evidence' of the *Iliad*. It seems clear that Dickie expects criticism of his use of this source. He writes, 'I am fully aware that even if I succeed in making my case for the *Iliad* there will be those who will rule the evidence out of court and will declare that it is illegitimate to

¹⁷⁰ Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World*, p. 18.

¹⁷¹ Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World*, p. 18.

¹⁷² Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World*, p. 27.

¹⁷³ For example, G. A. Stull, 'The Funeral Games of the Homeric Greeks', *Quest*, Vol. 11, Winter 1968, pp. 1-13.

¹⁷⁴ Anthony Papalas, 'Sport in the *Odyssey*', in Steven Reiss (ed.), *Proceedings and Newsletter* (La Crosse, WI: North American Society for Sport History, 1985), pp.7-8; Anthony Papalas, 'Sport Spectators in Ancient Greece', in D. K. Wiggins (ed.), *Proceedings and Newsletter* (Vancouver: North American Society for Sport History, 1986), pp. 6-7; Darrell Simko, 'Was Achilleus the First Director of Athletics?', in Synthia Slowikowski (ed.), *Proceedings and Newsletter* (Tempe, AZ: North American Society for Sport History, 1988), pp. 47-48; Kenneth Kitchell, 'But the Mare I Will Not Give Up', in Nancy Bouchier (ed.), *Proceedings and Newsletter* (Long Beach, CA: North American Society for Sport History, 1995), pp. 52-53.

¹⁷⁵ Matthew Dickie, 'Fair and Foul Play in the Funeral Games of the *Iliad*', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Summer 1984, pp. 8-17.

extrapolate from the lesson that the Funeral Games have to teach ...'.¹⁷⁶ Dickie counters this expected response with the assertion that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* do not stand apart from the rest of Greek literature and life and, more tellingly, that the concerns, attitudes and values of post-Homeric literature do not differ much from those of Homer's works.¹⁷⁷

Virgil's *Aeneid* also includes a chapter on funeral games and in his thorough examination of Book V of the *Aeneid* Peter Lindsay asserts that Virgil 'provides a window into the Augustan era'.¹⁷⁸ The Funeral Games described in Book V not only bear some resemblance, and therefore warrant comparison, to Book 23 of the *Iliad* but they are at the same time characteristically Roman in their nature and performance. Indeed Lindsay spends much of the paper drawing out the links between not only Virgil's tale and Homer's *Iliad* but also the connections between the *Aeneid* and the Roman setting in which it was written.¹⁷⁹

Betty Spears also utilises fiction in the pursuit of sport history.¹⁸⁰ Spears examines women's sport in ancient Greece and, in order to draw as accurate a picture as possible, uses literary as well as archaeological and epigraphical evidence.¹⁸¹ In examining the Archaic Period (800-500 BCE), Spears contends that the evidence of women's lives comes largely from Homer.¹⁸² In outlining the games and sport-like activities of women during this period, Spears uses the example of Nausicaa as the only well-known female character in either the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad* to engage in such activity.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁶ Dickie, 'Fair and Foul Play in the Funeral Games of the *Iliad*', p. 9.

¹⁷⁷ Dickie, 'Fair and Foul Play in the Funeral Games of the *Iliad*', p. 9.

¹⁷⁸ Peter Lindsay, 'The Funeral Games of Virgil's *Aeneid*', *Canadian Journal of History of Sport*, Vol. 22, No. 2, December 1991, p. 1.

¹⁷⁹ Nancy Reed also utilises evidence from Virgil's *Aeneid* in her examination of the antecedents of a particular horse race that supposedly dates from the early Roman period in her 'Research Notes: The Equestrian Standing Race and its Antecedents', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 23, No. 2, Summer 1996, pp. 157-164.

¹⁸⁰ Betty Spears, 'A Perspective of the History of Women's Sport in Ancient Greece', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Summer 1984, pp. 32-47.

¹⁸¹ Spears, 'A Perspective of the History of Women's Sport in Ancient Greece', p. 32.

¹⁸² Spears, 'A Perspective of the History of Women's Sport in Ancient Greece', p. 33.

¹⁸³ While on a picnic, Nausicaa makes a 'match' of the laundry and later plays a ball game with the other girls. See Spears, 'A Perspective of the History of Women's Sport in Ancient Greece', p. 34.

There are other scholars who have broached the boundaries of myth and legend in sport history. Reet and Maxwell Howell's article 'The Atalanta Legend in Art and Literature' does just that.¹⁸⁴ The paper analyses the Greek myth of Atalanta, a formidable female sporting talent and warrior. Howell and Howell recognise the 'obvious inferences ... related to the female athlete in culture, and the conflict which ensued where there is societal stereotyping of the female and the female athlete in a patriarchial society'.¹⁸⁵ That Howell and Howell consider that this information is relevant to sport historians is evident because, as they write, 'it illuminates broader issues surrounding the cultural depiction of the gendered "person-hero"'.¹⁸⁶ Clearly Howell and Howell are not dissuaded by the mythic nature of the tales when connecting it to aspects of the modern (perhaps postmodern) condition. As they note, '[a]ncient, and for that matter, more modern writers, obviously encountered difficulties creating a heroine out of the female Atalanta who surpassed males in the masculine domain of athletic physical prowess'.¹⁸⁷

However, the respect given to these works is not afforded to the Irish tales. Marginalised by sport historians, there is little mention in the literature of the Irish contribution to sport history. Furthermore, what little information there is on the study of sport and games in the early Irish tales is not well represented in sport history journals. Necessarily, then, these issues are further explored later in this chapter. Having established, at least to some degree, the relevant academic materials pertaining to sport in the ancient world generally, the next section is devoted exclusively to the scholarly studies of sport-like activity in Ireland and in the Ulster Cycle of tales.

2.5 Sport in Ancient Ireland and the Ulster Cycle of Tales

As explained in Chapter One, the Ulster Cycle of tales and in particular the central tale, the *Táin*, have achieved what Williams and Ford suggest is a 'pre-eminent position in the literary history [of Ireland].'¹⁸⁸ According to Jeffery Gantz, the Ulster

¹⁸⁴ Reet Howell and Maxwell Howell, 'The Atalanta Legend in Art and Literature', *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 16, No. 2, Summer 1989, pp. 127-139.

¹⁸⁵ Howell and Howell, 'The Atalanta Legend in Art and Literature', p. 127.

¹⁸⁶ Howell and Howell, 'The Atalanta Legend in Art and Literature', p. 139.

¹⁸⁷ Howell and Howell, 'The Atalanta Legend in Art and Literature', p. 139.

¹⁸⁸ Williams and Ford, *The Irish Literary Tradition*, p. 15.

Cycle tales clearly favour the Ulriad (those from Ulster) over the Connachta (those from Connacht) but the tales do not depict Ulster at its zenith but in fact describe a society in decline.¹⁸⁹ The Ulster tales also often show the Ulstermen to be weak and sometimes petty, bickering and quarrelling and, surprisingly enough, there are clear instances of parody.¹⁹⁰ The Ulster tales are captivating to read and it is no wonder they hold a nation by its communal heartstrings. More importantly for this thesis, though, the cycle provides a rich array of sport-like activities upon which to draw and examine. A more thorough exposé of the history of both the tales and the scholarly studies of them follows.

The pre-Christian Irish, in obeying an ancient law that forbade writing, kept no written record of their culture. If there were those that may have ignored or circumvented these laws, they remain unknown in the early twenty-first century. Irish history and culture was, therefore, originally ‘recorded’ in various myths and legends which were handed down through the generations by rigorously trained, professional storytellers.¹⁹¹ Williams and Ford suggest that the one figure of importance was the *fili*.¹⁹² The word is usually translated into English as ‘bard’ or ‘poet’ but preference is given for using the word *fili* (*filid* in the plural) as the functions of the *fili* are greater than the conception of the poet and the term ‘bard’ in Irish denotes an inferior grade of *fili*. *Filid* enjoyed a high status, on an even footing with a ‘lord’.¹⁹³ Sources, say Williams and Ford, agree that the training of the *filid* was long and thorough, though there is little consensus on the actual length of time.¹⁹⁴ It seems that a minimum of seven years training was required before the candidate was permitted to undertake critical instruction including divination and magical arts.¹⁹⁵ Instruction was given orally and the *fili* was expected to learn 50 *ogams* each year during the early years of his schooling.¹⁹⁶ According to Joseph Nagy, although the *fili* had relied on oral transmission in pre-Christian times, after the coming of Christianity and the Latin

¹⁸⁹ Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, p. 25.

¹⁹⁰ Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, p. 25.

¹⁹¹ Frank Delaney, *Legends of the Celts* (Suffolk: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), p. ix.

¹⁹² Williams and Ford, *The Irish literary Tradition*, p. 21.

¹⁹³ Williams and Ford, *The Irish literary Tradition*, p. 22.

¹⁹⁴ Williams and Ford, *The Irish literary Tradition*, p. 25.

¹⁹⁵ Williams and Ford, *The Irish literary Tradition*, p. 25.

¹⁹⁶ According to Williams and Ford, *ogams* is a rather unwieldy system of writing consisting of notches. This is suitable for short inscriptions but the modern novel would require a surface over a mile long. For more information on this and on the role of the *fili* see Williams and Ford, *The Irish literary Tradition*, pp. 11-63.

alphabet, they relied increasingly on literacy and book learning to ‘articulate their learnedness’.¹⁹⁷

Many of the scholars writing on ancient Irish society attest to the importance of physical activity, games and contests in the social and martial fabric of their society. Writing generally about the lifestyle of the Irish Celts, authors such as Alwyn and Brinley Rees, Anne Ross, Hugh Dan MacLennan and Nora Chadwick illustrate this passion for physical entertainment and contest with examples from the Irish tales, particularly the Ulster Cycle tales.¹⁹⁸

O’ Cathasaigh suggests that the Irish literary works are contained in texts which are essentially anonymous as the authors are not known by name.¹⁹⁹ None of these early texts survives in a manuscript written before the latter part of the eleventh century. Moreover, Ó Cathasaigh suggests that the processes of composition and transmission are ongoing, making the texts living documents of a sort. According to Ó Cathasaigh:

[T]he composition in writing of early Irish narrative can be seen as a continuous process, comprising the expansion and contraction, reshaping and redaction of matter, much of which must have been received into the literature from indigenous oral tradition, but some of which is learned ecclesiastical provenance.²⁰⁰

Much scholarly work has been done by Celticists in studying the early Irish tales and indeed their relationship to pre-Christian ‘Iron Age’ society and culture in Ireland. The oral tradition and its influence on the narrative texts is significant, yet Ó Cathasaigh notes that despite this intimate connection there does not exist one single pre-ecclesiastical text. The monasteries, however, did have a hand in composing the secular literature. Ó Cathasaigh considers the question of the relationship between the

¹⁹⁷ Joseph Nagy, ‘Orality in Medieval Irish Narrative: An Overview’, *Oral Tradition*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1986, p. 273.

¹⁹⁸ Alwyn Rees and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage. Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1978); Anne Ross, *The Pagan Celts* (Ruthin, Wales: John Jones, 1998); H. D. MacLennan, ‘Shinty and the Celtic Celebration of New Year’, in Grant Jarvie (ed.), *Sport in the Making of Celtic Cultures* (London: Leicester University Press, 1999), pp. 83-99; Nora Chadwick, *The Celts* (London: Penguin Books, 1971).

¹⁹⁹ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, ‘Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative’, in Próinséas Ní Chathain and Michael Richter (eds), *Ireland and Europe. The Early Church* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1984), p. 292.

²⁰⁰ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative’, p. 293.

texts that were written out in the manuscripts and the oral tradition itself. Despite the fact that Irish literature contains remnants from the Celtic and Indo-European cultures, and even though it is clear that these elements must have been transmitted orally until they were written down, the texts cannot be considered to give direct access to those pre-Christian times.²⁰¹

Some authors, like Watkins, would disagree suggesting that the ancient oral tradition is decidedly strong in the texts. Watkins claims that:

Ireland has the oldest vernacular literature in Europe; our earliest monuments go back to the sixth century. And it is not the beginning of a literature that we see then, but the full flowering of a long tradition, pre-Christian, pre-literate and uninfluenced by the Graeco-Roman world.²⁰²

Watkins here, however is commenting on the old poetical tradition contained within the tales. These are archaic passages written in a kind of metrical composition known as *rosuada*. It is believed that while the monastic compilers of saga texts generally adopted the linguistic techniques of the glossators of late Latin texts, they also transcribed archaic passages derived from oral tradition.²⁰³

Ó Cathasaigh notes that this question of the nature of the Irish oral tradition and the amount and influence it had on the early manuscripts is a topic of contention amongst Irish literary scholars. According to Nessa Ní Shé, scholars up until 1955 generally held the view that the early Irish sagas had their roots in ancient oral tradition.²⁰⁴ The publication of James Carney's *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, which regarded the sagas as 'literature' in the literal sense as composed by Irish monks familiar with both classical and Christian literature of Ireland, began an ongoing discussion which prompted Ó Coileán to suggest that 'it has probably received more attention than any other question relating to the early literature without approaching anything resembling consensus'.²⁰⁵ Ó Cathasaigh feels justified, on the basis of this lack of consensus, to

²⁰¹ Ó Cathasaigh, 'Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative', p. 294.

²⁰² Watkins, 'Indo-European Metrics and Archaic Irish Verse', p. 294.

²⁰³ Binchy cited in Ó Cathasaigh, 'Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative', p. 295.

²⁰⁴ Nessa Ní Shé, 'Foreword', in Gerard Murphy, *Saga and Myth in Ancient Ireland* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1961), p. 5.

²⁰⁵ Ó Coileán cited in Ó Cathasaigh, 'Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative', p. 295.

offer his own view and he makes the observation that the comparative evidence shows that much of the early Irish narrative originates in Celtic and Indo-European culture and that the written literature had its beginnings in the monasteries and flourished in them throughout the early medieval period.²⁰⁶ In summary, Ó Cathasaigh suggests that:

[e]arly Irish narrative literature owes much to the vigorous oral tradition which not only preceded it but continued unabated alongside, and that the creation and survival of that literature show that the early Irish churchmen were not only open to, but deeply involved in, the extra-ecclesiastical lore of their country.²⁰⁷

Aitchison offers a critical evaluation of the argument that the literature of the Ulster Cycle is derived from orally composed and transmitted epics that originated in the Iron Age. He argues that the form of the tales is more consistent with literary composition and suggests that the arguments supporting the existence of an ‘oral tradition’ are weak.²⁰⁸ Aitchison revisits the claims that Kenneth H. Jackson puts forward about the ability of Irish epic literature to inform one of Celtic life during the Iron Age. Aitchison’s paper reappraises the social and historical context of the Ulster cycle.

Aitchison begins by outlining the difference between mythology and legend. Mythology, claims Aitchison, can be defined as tales which have a social function within the society in which they were composed and originally transmitted. These tales stress the unity of a population group of common descent and legitimises the position of those dominant elements within society. ‘Myth’ says Aitchison ‘is essentially a mediator of social relations’.²⁰⁹

In contrast, legends have a basis in historical reality, no matter how much they may have embellished. This is, suggests Aitchison, where Jackson’s claims are questionable. According to Aitchison, Jackson distinguishes between the cycles

²⁰⁶ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative’, p. 295.

²⁰⁷ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative’, p. 296.

²⁰⁸ N. B. Aitchison, ‘The Ulster Cycle: Heroic Image and Historical Reality’, *Journal of Medieval History*, Vol. 13, Issue 2, June 1987, p. 87.

²⁰⁹ Aitchison, ‘The Ulster Cycle: Heroic Image and Historical Reality’, p. 89.

which are predominantly mythological and the allegedly legendary Ulster cycle.²¹⁰ However, Aitchison disagrees and states that the mythology in the Ulster Cycle is not to be underestimated. In fact, according to Aitchison, mythology ‘pervades the very fabric of the tales’.²¹¹ Aitchison does not deny that many of the practices and the social structures found in the Ulster Cycle are evidenced in other sources, annals and law tracts, but he does suggest that the Ulster Cycle alone should not be used to support the existence of any of these practices in Celtic Iron Age society.

Aitchison goes on to show how, in his view, many of the premises which form the foundation of Jackson’s argument are questionable. For instance, Jackson’s comparison of Irish and Gaulish literature used as a means to date the Irish literature as pre-Christian is not justifiable, claims Aitchison, as the change in religion in Ireland was slow and peaceful and elements of paganism were acceptable to Christianity and adapted into it.²¹² Aitchison also suggests that the understanding of Irish epic literature has suffered because the social and historical contexts of the Irish literature’s composition and transmission have been neglected. Barbara Hilliers puts a different spin on these notions and suggests that:

The Ulster cycle is pure literature, not in the sense that it does not bear any relation to history or reality, but because it is an artistic creation ... The make-believe world of the Ulster cycle seems to have been a collaborative effort, involving a large number of narrators, redactors, and copyists. Discrepancies, inconsistencies, alternate versions and recensions indicate that this effort was at no point a one-man show ... Whether the sagas are oral compositions, taken down by scribes, or self-conscious literary creations by the learned *literati*, they do not represent the work and imagination of any single author.²¹³

Ó Cathasaigh also considers the world, or ‘universe’ as he calls it, of the early Irish narratives. He identifies three main orientations to this question and calls these, respectively, the mimetic stance, the mythological stance and the textualist stance. The mimetic stance is adopted by those who believe that the literature reflects events

²¹⁰ Aitchison, ‘The Ulster Cycle: Heroic Image and Historical Reality’, p. 89.

²¹¹ Aitchison, ‘The Ulster Cycle: Heroic Image and Historical Reality’, p. 89.

²¹² Aitchison, ‘The Ulster Cycle: Heroic Image and Historical Reality’, p. 89.

²¹³ Barbara Hilliers, ‘The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle’, in J. P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (eds), *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Belfast and Emain Macha: December Publications, 1994), p. 101.

which really happened or a state of affairs which actually existed.²¹⁴ According to Ó Cathasaigh, this type of criticism has as devotees those authors who treat the Ulster Cycle as ‘a celebration of a lost Heroic Age’.²¹⁵ He suggests that this belief can be attributed to the likes of authors such as H. M. Chadwick and Nora Chadwick, Eleanor Knott and Gerard Murphy, as well as Kenneth Jackson. While there is some justification, says Ó Cathasaigh, for viewing the Ulster Cycle in this way, there is also a great deal of mythological elements and he believes that the proponents of the mimetic stance tend to apply the theory in somewhat of a reductionist way, ignoring, for instance, these mythological components.

Ó Cathasaigh believes that overestimating the historicity of the literature is another pitfall of the mimetic stance. While he concedes that while it may be true that when there is heroic literature that a Heroic Age preceded it, it cannot be readily extended to give evidence of the length of that Heroic Age.²¹⁶ Summing up on the mimetic stance, Ó Cathasaigh suggests that:

while the historian can cast light on the early texts by virtue of his knowledge and interpretation of other (non-literary) sources, there are strict limits to the amount of historical information which may be extracted from what are, after all, literary texts.²¹⁷

Ó Cathasaigh then discusses the ‘mythological stance’ which is the mythological interpretation of Irish pre-history attributed chiefly to T. F. O’Rahilly who forwarded his theory in his 1946 book, *Early Irish History and Mythology*.²¹⁸ The O’Rahilly ‘historical model’ was based in part on a critical analysis of Irish mythology as represented in the early Irish narrative. According to Ó Cathasaigh, others who have

²¹⁴ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative’, p. 296.

²¹⁵ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative’, p. 296.

²¹⁶ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative’, p. 297.

²¹⁷ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative’, p. 298.

²¹⁸ T. F. O’Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1946).

published within the realms of this stance are Gerard Murphy,²¹⁹ Georges Dumézil,²²⁰ and Alwyn and Brinley Rees.²²¹

The third approach, the textualist approach as Ó Cathasaigh calls it, treats the literature as an autonomous body of work. The literary criticism may be intra-textual or inter-textual. As an example, Ó Cathasaigh cites Thurneysen, whose study of the Ulster Cycle ‘treats the manuscript tradition of Irish narrative as a closed system, and the extant texts of the cycle are described in terms of their relationship to one another’.²²² Inter-textual criticism comes in the form of comparison of motifs and tale-types as well as discussions concerning differing recensions and versions of a given text, although Ó Cathasaigh prefers to assign these to the rubric of the work.²²³

The account and analysis of the sports and games and related themes of the Ulster Cycle that this dissertation advances is, to some extent, party to both the mimetic and textualist stances. While this dissertation does not assert that the Ulster tales are to be taken as historical fact in their entirety, it is certainly argued that there is some truth to them.²²⁴ Likewise, while this thesis does acknowledge the different versions of these tales and will, to some extent, consider the place of motifs and tale-types, it is not the intention of this work to look at the tales in isolation. Some comparison between these and other epic tales, as well as the law tracts, historical writings and even archaeological works are deemed useful and interesting and therefore worthy of inclusion.

The reluctance of historians to investigate ancient Irish sporting culture may stem from a perceived lack of ‘reliable’ primary sources. If it can be suggested that Gardiner’s reference to the sagas of the ‘Highland clans’ encompasses the Irish Ulster cycle, then the short paragraph in *Athletics of the Ancient World* may be the first of very few references to such literature in sport history.²²⁵ Gardiner himself admitted

²¹⁹ Gerard Murphy (ed.), *Duanaire Finn, Vol. III* (Dublin: Irish Texts Society, 1953).

²²⁰ Georges Dumézil was a French philologist and historian, best known for his research in the field of Indo-European mythology.

²²¹ Ó Cathasaigh notes that Rees and Rees apply Dumézil’s theories more extensively to the Irish tales in *Celtic Heritage. Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales*.

²²² Ó Cathasaigh, ‘Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative’ p. 300.

²²³ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative’, p. 299.

²²⁴ See Chapter Three on the limits of truth and reality.

²²⁵ Gardiner, *Athletics of the Ancient World*, p. 27.

that little was known of these societies and stopped far short of using the sagas as the basis of a discussion of sport and games in the British Isles. Other scholars, though few sports historians, believe that one can gain much insight into the lives of the ancient Irish by examining their myths and legends. Delaney, for instance, suggests that if ‘novelists and poets, while reflecting the values and mores of their society, may also be seen to describe their world, then why not Celtic storytellers?’.²²⁶

As mentioned above, William Sayers has carved something of a niche for himself on the topic of sports and games in early Irish literature.²²⁷ Most notable is his ‘Games, Sport and Paramilitary Exercises in Early Ireland’, where Sayers uses examples from the early Irish tales to give credibility to the translation, and interpretation, of an old Irish legal text concerning sport and games called *Mellbretha (Sports Judgements)*.²²⁸

Sayers suggests that the evidence from *Mellbretha* leads him to believe that there was a rather strict categorisation of sports and games in early Ireland, one which employs several different criteria. Those criteria, as is evidenced by the categories in *Mellbretha* include: ‘age of the practitioners; media/instrumentation; inherent risk to participants and others; and, as a consequence of the latter, legal status and degree of attendant legal liability’.²²⁹ The activities outlined in *Mellbretha* are arranged into three categories attendant to the above criteria, those being those involving ‘total immunity’, those of a para-military nature which require the provision of ‘sick-maintenance’ but no other penalty, and the third category, that of what Sayers suggests are illicit though not suppressed activities of a highly dangerous nature and which carry full liability in the way of substantial financial penalties.²³⁰

²²⁶ Delaney, *Legends of the Celts*, p. ix.

²²⁷ For instance: Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’; Sayers, ‘The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic’, pp. 153-168 and; Sayers, ‘Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland’.

²²⁸ Sayers, ‘Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland’, pp. 105-123.

²²⁹ Sayers, ‘Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland’, p. 118.

²³⁰ The term sick-maintenance originally referred to the actual caring and attending to those injured at the hands of another. The term later referred to a fixed fee paid to the injured party. See both D. A. Binchy, ‘Mellbretha’, *Celtica*, Vol. 8, 1968, pp. 44-54, and Sayers, ‘Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland’, pp. 105-123, for more on ‘sick maintenance’ and financial penalties in the early Irish legal system.

A second important essay by Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’,²³¹ examines the various forms of *cles* (martial feats) in the Ulster tales.²³² In the tales, *cles* often appear in lists with little explanation of the skills referred to. To a large extent, Sayers is interested in challenging other translations and in developing his own translations and categorisations. Sayers also notes the feasibility of whether the martial feats could actually have been performed by humans. However, in this second essay, Sayers moves beyond translations to a discussion of things such as the literary purpose to which the feats were put, the role of women in teaching the feats (especially to the hero Cú Chulainn), and the importance of martial feats in a society marked by inter-tribal raiding where the warrior hero was an essential element in the protection of the king and his territory. These last two issues – the place of women in sport, games and the teaching of martial skills, and sport’s role in the making of heroes and warriors – are of particular importance to this study.

This section now moves to examine two specific aspects of sport-like activity in ancient Ireland (which are also represented in the tales of the Ulster Cycle). These are, firstly, the Irish ‘fair’ or *aonach* and secondly, the use and significance of horses and chariots.

a) The Irish *Aonach* and the Importance of Sports and Games

The *aonach* is regularly translated as a ‘fair’ or ‘assembly.’ These festivals, which invariably included physical contests, sports, games and displays of physical prowess, played a crucial role in the political, social and judicial stability of ancient Irish society. These fairs were held in large centres as well as in smaller province capitals. Stanaland suggests that ‘Irish history is rich with accounts of fairs and assemblies’,²³³ and she argues that the significance accorded these fairs is one of the unique features of Irish history.²³⁴ Stanaland also notes that the present-day countryside of Ireland is ‘generously populated’ with landmarks that indicate the site of an ancient place of

²³¹ Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, pp. 45-80.

²³² The term *cles* is a generic term for martial exploits. Whether ‘performed on the battlefield, on the exercise and parade ground, and even in the aristocratic social, but still militarised setting of the king’s hall’, the term was still *cles*. See Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 46.

²³³ Peggy Stanaland, ‘The Fair of Carman: A Further Reflection of Ancient Ireland’s Affinity to Sport’, in D. K. Wiggins (ed.), *Proceedings and Newsletter* (Manhattan: North American Society for Sport History, 1982), p. 6.

²³⁴ Peggy Stanaland, ‘Ancient Irish Fairs and the Preservation of Irish Sport’, in D. K. Wiggins (ed.), *Proceedings and Newsletter* (Mont Alto, PA: North American Society for Sport History, 1983), p. 39.

gathering.²³⁵ Such places include wells, cemeteries, on mountain tops, and beside rivers and waterways. Additionally, Stanaland observes that these traditional assemblies have been meticulously recorded in the ancient manuscripts.²³⁶

Ross notes that the Celts celebrated certain fundamental calendar festivals. In Ireland the Celtic year was divided into four parts. Each part of the year was preceded by a great festival. Ross explains that '[t]he festival was accompanied by feasting and merry-making, by fairs and marketing, games and sport, and by solemn religious observances'.²³⁷ *Lughnasa*, occurring on 1 August, was a festival of great significance in Ireland. The *Aonach Tailteann* (also referred to as the Tailteann Games) and the *Aonach Carman* (Fair of Carman) as well as the assemblies held at Emain Macha in Ulster were *Lughnasa* festivals.

Sean Egan dates the Tailteann Games back to around 1896 BC. Legend has it that Lugh of the Long Arm (who is also connected to Cú Chulainn in the Ulster cycle) instituted the games in memory of his foster mother Tailte.²³⁸ Egan notes that many of the old Irish history books mention the games. The dating of these games comes from history books that indicate that Tailte's husband, King Eocaidh Mac Erc, was killed in the battle of Moytura in 1896 BC. As Egan suggests, '[s]uch dating, if accurate, would, of course, place these games centuries before the first Olympic games in Greece'.²³⁹

Stanaland writes that there are some underlying similarities between the kinds of fairs seen in ancient Ireland and the athletic festivals of the Greeks such as the ancient Olympic Games.²⁴⁰ Sport historians, suggests Stanaland, tend to emphasise the athletic contests of the Olympic Games but there were indeed many other elements. The Greek festivals did more readily reflect the cross-cultural interests of the populous. In addition to the athletic contests there were 'ventures in crafts, arts,

²³⁵ Stanaland, 'The Fair of Carman', p. 6.

²³⁶ Stanaland, 'The Fair of Carman', p. 6.

²³⁷ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 151.

²³⁸ Sean Egan, 'The Spirit of the Celts in Sport', in J. W. Molloy and R. C. Adams (eds), *The Spirit of Sport. Essays about Sport and Values* (Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall, 1987), p. 36.

²³⁹ Egan, 'The Spirit of the Celts in Sport', p. 37.

²⁴⁰ Peggy Stanaland, 'Some Commonalities of Two Ancient Fairs: Aenoch Tailteann and the Olympic Games', in R. A. Smith and J. A. Lucas (eds), *Proceedings and Newsletter* (Windsor, ON: North American Society for Sport History, 1977), p. 10.

entertainment and commercial enterprises.²⁴¹ At the Tailteann Games, which are perhaps paradigmatic of Irish fairs and assemblies, the *Ard Righ* (High King) used the occasion to announce new laws, parents used the occasion to marry off their eligible sons and daughters, craftsmen used it as a time to display their works and talents and warriors and athletes used it as a time to put their athletic and martial skills on show.²⁴² Egan adds literacy, musical, oratorical and story-telling competitions to the list of activities.²⁴³

Stanaland's study of these ancient fairs revealed some persistent similarities. As well as these gatherings being religious in nature, at both these fairs:

there was a designated area for the festival, there was a presiding figure or body for the affair, the festivals were well-attended by the populace, there was an expected code of behaviour for all, and there were auxiliary activities [apart from the sporting elements] occurring at the gathering.²⁴⁴

Rees and Rees suggest that an armistice similar to that which suggested a form of safe passage to those who attended sacred assemblies in Greece, such as the Olympic Games, was declared in order that all eligible could attend the event.²⁴⁵ Egan suggests a difference between the two in that women were not excluded from the Tailteann Games (or indeed any of the Irish gatherings of this sort) in the way they were at the Olympic Games and the other Greek festivals.²⁴⁶

The Fair of Carman, which Stanaland suggests were to the Tailteann Games what the Pythian or Nemean Games were to the Olympics, was also originally a funeral games.²⁴⁷ According to an eleventh century poem (from which historians know the most about the Fair of Carman), the fair was staged in an open space with a special area for horse racing. On each day of the fair, participants engaged in designated events. The poem gives special recognition to the games and races. Along with the

²⁴¹ Stanaland, 'Some Commonalities of Two Ancient Fairs', p. 10.

²⁴² Stanaland, 'Some Commonalities of Two Ancient Fairs', p. 10.

²⁴³ Egan, 'The Spirit of the Celts in Sport', p. 37.

²⁴⁴ Stanaland, 'Some Commonalities of Two Ancient Fairs', p. 10.

²⁴⁵ Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, p. 168.

²⁴⁶ Egan, 'The Spirit of the Celts in Sport', p. 37.

²⁴⁷ Stanaland, 'The Fair of Carman', p. 6.

sport of hurling, which, as mentioned above, occupied a prominent place in the earliest fairs, there were ‘seven horse races, military shows and athletic contests, mainly with warriors’ implements’.²⁴⁸

The *aonach* of ancient Ireland provides a wealth of rich possibilities for sport historians. As mentioned above, some of the more popular and important aspects of the contests that were held at the fairs involved the racing of horses and chariots and it is this aspect of pre-Christian Irish sport that is now considered.

b) Horse Riding and Chariots in Iron Age Ireland

There is much evidence in existence for the prolific and varied use of horses and chariots by Celtic peoples,²⁴⁹ as well as the social status accorded to such activities. Miranda Green, discussing the European Celts in general, notes that often chariots operated as a symbol of wealth and standing by the military elite.²⁵⁰ Barry Raftery adopts a different approach however, and discusses chariotry and horses in ancient Ireland from a mostly archaeological perspective. In examining the significance of horses and chariots to early Ireland, Raftery notes that horse-bits are the ‘single most numerous metal artefact type from Iron Age Ireland’.²⁵¹ This, claims Raftery, shows the importance of horses to this period, be they as transport or as draught animals. Examination of skeletal remains in Ireland from this period indicate that these horses were roughly the size of a Shetland pony at just over twelve hands (123.7 cm) and therefore somewhat smaller than their modern counterparts.²⁵²

There is evidence of roads from the second century BCE in Ireland which, says Raftery, suggests the existence of wheeled vehicles. Significantly, Raftery claims that ‘the horse must have acquired an increasingly high status in society and the mounted warrior would have enjoyed an exalted position in the contemporary social hierarchy’.²⁵³ This is certainly consistent with the accounts from the early literary

²⁴⁸ Stanaland, ‘The Fair of Carman’, p. 7.

²⁴⁹ Miranda Green notes that the many burial sites which contain two-wheeled chariots throughout Europe are unmistakeably those of warriors. See Miranda Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p. 56.

²⁵⁰ Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 55.

²⁵¹ Barry Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland. The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1994), p. 107.

²⁵² Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland. The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age*, p. 108.

²⁵³ Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland. The Enigma of the Irish Iron Age*, p. 111.

traditions. The extent to which such accounts are currently deemed worthwhile in the study of ancient Irish sport and life is discussed below in a section which examines the relationship between literature and myth.²⁵⁴ The following section examines the scholarly study of the hero in myth and legend, focussing first on the primacy of the male in ancient sport and then on the predominance of males as heroes in the Irish tales.

2.6 The Hero in Myth and Legend: Men, Masculinity and Ancient Sport

Lin Foxhall begins the introductory chapter of her co-edited book, *When Men Were Men: Masculinity, Power and Identity in Classical Antiquity*, by stating that the ‘history of classical antiquity is a history of men, though it is never taught that way. We have been taught to see it as the history of Western civilisation, not simply as a history’.²⁵⁵

That classical Greece and Rome are the two societies on which ancient sport historians choose to focus, further serves to imply the dominance of males in sport, for as Paul Cartledge suggests, ‘manhood and masculinity has always been ... right at the centre of Greek history and historiography’.²⁵⁶ Foxhall notes the fact that most of the sources regarding classical Greece and Rome represent the views of men. As she explains, ‘almost every piece of evidence we possess, whether literary, epigraphical, iconographical or material, is the product of men’s thoughts and actions’.²⁵⁷ This being the case, why should the sporting activities of the Greeks and Romans be any different?

In fact, for the main part, ancient sport was predominantly for males. Baker notes that as well as being excluded from social practices such as war, politics and business, women played almost no part in early sports.²⁵⁸ Sport, and the rituals and practices which are thought to precede it, were the domain of men. While young girls

²⁵⁴ See below.

²⁵⁵ Lin Foxhall, ‘Introduction’, in Lin Foxhall and John Salmon (eds), *When Men Were Men: Masculinity, Power and Identity in Classical Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 1.

²⁵⁶ Paul Cartledge, ‘The *Machismo* of the Athenian Empire – or the Reign of the *Phaulus*?’, in Lin Foxhall and John Salmon (eds), *When Men Were Men: Masculinity, Power and Identity in Classical Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 54.

²⁵⁷ Foxhall, ‘Introduction’, p. 1.

²⁵⁸ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 2.

participated in some of the rituals and to a smaller extent in ancient Greek athletics (in the Heraean Games for instance), sport was predominantly an all-male affair.²⁵⁹ Borne out of practicing hunting techniques and rituals to ‘win’ a woman’s hand in marriage, the competitive instinct was considered to be a male instinct. In many ancient cultures the rite of passage for a young male reaching puberty included participating in some form of physical test or contest. Baker notes, for example, that the Apache Indians held an elaborate relay race to initiate their young men into adulthood.²⁶⁰ Similarly, it is predominantly men who occupy the status of ‘hero’ status in the tribe, as it is males who are the traditional warriors and protectors of these ancient civilisations.²⁶¹ It is also often males who are the key figures of mythological contests and battles.

According to O’Connor, the hero is a mortal who embodies the ideal qualities of the race.²⁶² This assessment is somewhat widespread amongst authors writing about mythology. It has been suggested that much of the world’s mythologies follow a similar pattern and that the centrality of a ‘hero’ is common to most.²⁶³ For instance, Rosenberg suggests that:

Heroes are the children of gods who have an unusual birth, possess extraordinary strength, kill monsters with the help of special weapons, embark on an arduous journey, descend into the Underworld as part of their tasks, and have an unusual death.²⁶⁴

Despite this formulaic assessment, Rosenberg is quick to note that heroes are not the same throughout the world. This is primarily because they come from cultures that permit them to express their individuality.²⁶⁵

²⁵⁹ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 2.

²⁶⁰ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, pp. 7-8.

²⁶¹ The reluctance of modern, particularly Western, armed forces to employ women in active duty or on the front line indicates that little may have changed in this respect.

²⁶² O’Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 125.

²⁶³ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949).

²⁶⁴ Donna Rosenberg, *World Mythology: An Anthology of Great Myths and Epics* (Second Edition) (Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Publishing Group, 1994), p. xvi.

²⁶⁵ Rosenberg, *World Mythology*, p. xvi.

Barbara Hilliers' paper 'The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle' examines the 'circle of heroes' that remain constant throughout the various tales attributed to the Ulster cycle.²⁶⁶ Often, says Hilliers, these men do not play a particularly large or important role in the stories and she suggests that perhaps their presence has more to do with the 'invocation of the heroic world of Emain Macha' than being a requirement of the plot.²⁶⁷ Hilliers acknowledges that 'the idea of a circle of heroes, gathered around the central figure of a king to defend his honour and drink his wine, ever ready for adventures of a military, chivalric, or amorous kind, is not confined to Ireland'.²⁶⁸ Hilliers cites sagas from French and Germanic literature that demonstrate this as well as the most obvious of heroic cycles, the stories of King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table. In all cases, says Hilliers, 'a historical or quasi-historical figure is surrounded by a cast of champions; the king is the convenient centrepiece and figurehead for a more or less stable group of actors'.²⁶⁹ Hilliers also notes that the heroes of the Ulster cycle are not just names but they have:

families, heroic biographies, and often individual stories attached to them. For the most famous heroes, such as Conchobar, Cú Chulainn, or Fergus, we can reconstruct complete biographies, as we possess tales about their births, childhood deeds, wooings, heroic exploits, and deaths.²⁷⁰

It is clear then, that the fabric of the mortal conception of family is woven into the Ulster Cycle tales. But what of the connections that, at times, are so clear, between the mortal world and the immortal world, between god and man? Tomás Ó Cathasaigh makes the general observation that:

Irish myth is concerned above all with the relationship between man and the gods, and that the myth of the hero is used as a vehicle for exploring this relationship ... The situation can be stated in structuralist terms: a basic opposition in Irish myth

²⁶⁶ There have been several academic conferences devoted to the study of the Ulster Cycle. The first was held in Belfast and Emain Macha in 1994. There was then a gap of several years until the second conference held in Maynooth in 2005. The third and most recent conference on the Ulster Cycle of tales was held in Coleraine in 2009. There have been proceedings of the first and second conferences, published in 1994 and 2009 respectively. Barbara Hilliers' paper was one of many presented at the first of these conferences.

²⁶⁷ Hilliers, 'The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle', pp. 99-106

²⁶⁸ Hilliers, 'The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle', p. 99.

²⁶⁹ Hilliers, 'The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle', p. 100.

²⁷⁰ Hilliers, 'The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle', p. 101.

is between man and god, and this is mediated in the person of the hero.²⁷¹

This is not unique to Irish myth of course, and as Ó Cathasaigh points out, all myth systems have opposites which are mediated by a third category which is ‘abnormal or anomalous’.²⁷² According to Ó Cathasaigh, the hero in Irish tradition belongs to that third category of being. He is neither human nor god but lies between the two. ‘He is at once the son of a god and of a human father; he is mortal and lives out his life among men, but Otherworld personages intervene at crucial moments of his life’.²⁷³

O’Connor emphasises the importance of the hero in Irish mythology also, with particular emphasis on the relationship between humans and gods. Like Ó Cathasaigh, O’Connor sees the hero as the ‘third position’ lying between gods and humans and suggests that the relationship between gods and humans can be explored via the specific image of the hero.²⁷⁴

Ó Cathasaigh identifies two types of hero, the king-hero and the martial-hero. He examines these two types of hero in Irish tradition by examining Cú Chulainn as martial-hero in the tale ‘*Compert Con Culainn*’ (*The Conception of Cú Chulainn*) and Conaire Mór (Conaire the Great) as a king-hero in the tale *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (*The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel*).²⁷⁵ Ó Cathasaigh suggests that Conaire’s fecundating role as king ensures the fertility of the land, the people and the beasts by the wise and judicious way he rules.²⁷⁶ This is evidently desirable in a kingship and it seems the king’s heroic nature is a function of his ability to secure peace and prosperity rather than to be physically able to help defend the province. Sometimes the king-hero is known to have exquisite warrior skills but is, by virtue of his position as king, unable to utilise these in actual conflict. Eleanor Hull discusses such a monarch in the king-hero, Conchobar MacNessa, who reigns over the Ulaid in the Ulster Cycle tales. Hull suggests that Conchobar is an unusual king in that he is not able to pass judgement of any kind because he must not, by way of a taboo against

²⁷¹ Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology’, in Richard Kearney (ed.), *The Irish Mind. Exploring Intellectual Traditions* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1985), p. 80.

²⁷² Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology’, p. 80.

²⁷³ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology’, p. 80.

²⁷⁴ O’Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 126.

²⁷⁵ This second tale is from the early Irish Mythological Cycle rather than the Ulster Cycle.

²⁷⁶ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology’, p. 83.

him, utter a false judgement despite it being known that his wisdom surpasses all others. Likewise Conchobar is frequently not permitted to enter battles or be put in any danger although he is considered to be the bravest on earth.²⁷⁷ In a sense, his wisdom and bravery are givens and there is no need or want for these to be displayed. The same cannot be said for the martial-hero, who must display, and display prominently, the skills of his trade.

This dissertation is primarily concerned with what Ó Cathasaigh terms ‘the martial-hero’ as it is he (and rarely she) who most regularly and visibly utilises sport-like activity and martial training in his development as a warrior. Cú Chulainn is the quintessential martial-hero, exemplifying the vigorous youth, well trained in all manner of combat techniques and accomplished protector of land and people. Despite this parentage, Cú Chulainn is not able to use any ‘magical’ powers to achieve his ends. While he may take the occasional trip to the Otherworld, the fame and honour that is bestowed upon him he gains in the real world. As O’Connor puts it, ‘while divine figures achieve victory in battle through magic, the hero achieves it through physical prowess and will-power’.²⁷⁸

Both types of hero tales have an anthropocentric theme or ‘world-view’ which is, according to Ó Cathasaigh, explained by the following:

Man is the centre of the cosmos, and the fruits of the earth and the workings of the elements are contingent upon the physical and moral excellence of the king – and, in texts where the martial ethic prevails, upon that of the champion. But the hero is subject to constraints from within and without and Otherworld personages intervene at all the crucial moments in his career. These interventions may be benevolent or malevolent, reflecting the contradictory aspects of the Otherworld.²⁷⁹

Although there may be influence from the Otherworld on both the king and the martial hero, the status of the martial hero needed to be both achieved and maintained through physical activity. Martial feats and the prominent display of such physical

²⁷⁷ Eleanor Hull, ‘Old Irish Tabus, or “Geasa”’, *Folklore*, Vol. 12, No. 1, March 1901, p. 54.

²⁷⁸ O’Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 125.

²⁷⁹ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology’, pp. 89-90.

skill were crucial to the status and respectability of the warrior-hero. The martial feats that the hero, Cú Chulainn, had learned were so important to him that he practised them every morning so as not to forget or ‘disremember’ them.²⁸⁰ Not only were these feats essential in overcoming adversaries in battle, they were also necessary as pre-battle showmanship.²⁸¹ As a way of maintaining, or improving, rank and status, the demonstration of martial feats in a social (non-combat) setting was indispensable. As William Sayers writes, ‘[on] the battlefield, as well as in the hall, the element of honour-enhancing ostentation is essential in both appearance and behaviour ... [The] feats would complement the boasts, taunts and challenges’.²⁸² In fact, Sayers notes that there are some martial feats which would have only been useful for display and intimidation.²⁸³

Nora Chadwick also suggests that the display of feats of arms for show was one of several ways to attain prestige and notoriety. In her view, the practice was widespread even though this ‘non-essential’ fighting carried with it certain risks. As she explains, ‘[this] non-essential form of warfare was considered more of a sport than true warfare, despite the very real risk of death for those concerned in it’.²⁸⁴

In Chapter Four, this study looks further into the relationship between sport and games and the training and status of heroes. Also, the contingent nature of the ‘reign’ of the hero evident in the brief, but luminous, life of the Ulster champion Cú Chulainn is examined.

2.7 Women in Ancient Sport and Military History

Patricia Vertinsky believes the issue of gender is not just about difference, but power and sexual hierarchy.²⁸⁵ Elaine Showalter brings home this point by noting that in ‘looking at the history of gender relations we find sexual asymmetry, inequality and

²⁸⁰ From Sayers’ translation of a passage from TBCII, cited in Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 67.

²⁸¹ Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 68.

²⁸² Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 68.

²⁸³ Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 68.

²⁸⁴ Chadwick, *The Celts*, p. 131.

²⁸⁵ Patricia Vertinsky, ‘Gender Relations, Women’s History and Sport History: A Decade of Changing Enquiry, 1983-1993’, *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 21, No. 1, Spring 1994, pp. 1-24.

male dominance in every known society'.²⁸⁶ While this statement may be valid, there certainly seems to be some societies which come closer to an equality of sorts with women playing an active and respected role, not just in social and economic life but in the typically male dominated arenas of sport, games and warfare as well. To some degree, the Ireland depicted in the Ulster tales may have been such a society.

Some of the earliest accounts of strong and/or warring females are the Greek and Roman tales of Amazon women.²⁸⁷ Amazons, suggests Nancy Dickson, have both a fundamental antipathy towards men and have a concomitant goal of an all-female society.²⁸⁸ Relying heavily on Mary Lefkowitz's *Women in Greek Myth*, Dickson further characterises the Greek Amazon society as the antithesis of the normative Greek world. In doing so, she further exposes the negative Greek message regarding the consequences of an all-female rule.²⁸⁹ As a result, Dickson questions the connection between the warrior women in the Irish tales and Amazons. While warrior women in the Irish tales are often referred to as 'Amazons', the construction and function of these women in the Irish tales show the correspondence to be superficial and the differences to be significant.²⁹⁰ These aspects of warrior women will be examined further in Chapter Six.

If women did engage in strenuous physical activity or sport *en masse* (and perhaps in lower classes), their literate and artistic contemporaries, who were almost certainly male, found these sports unworthy of their notice. Catriona Parratt argues that it is possibly the acceptance of male-dominated and male-defined scholarship in sport history that has amounted to the little information available on women's sport history. Parratt suggests that a redefinition of the framework in which historians operate is

²⁸⁶ Cited in Vertinsky, 'Gender Relations, Women's History and Sport History', p. 3.

²⁸⁷ The Amazon society, as depicted primarily in Greek mythology, was an all-female, man-hating tribe of women and female children who, according to various accounts, engaged in self-mutilation (removing a breast), infanticide of male newborns and the pragmatic use of males in neighbouring tribe for procreation reasons only. For an account of the way the accounts change over time through the ancient period see Tim Newark, *Women Warlords: An Illustrated Military History of Female Warriors* (London: Blandford, 1989), pp. 9-20.

²⁸⁸ Nancy Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Maryland, 1999, p. 155.

²⁸⁹ Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', p. 155.

²⁹⁰ Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', p. 155.

necessary to allow research into the history of women's sport.²⁹¹ Despite great strides towards different understandings of women's sport history the body of academic literature on women's sport in the ancient world has not grown very much in the last few decades.

Vertinsky suggests that there has been a gradual inclusion within sport history of a focus on gender. This has permitted a deeper and wider version of sport history and physical education to be celebrated. Additionally, notes Vertinsky, the conflation of feminism and certain elements of postmodernism have stimulated new approaches to sport history. Indeed, as Vertinsky noted of her 1994 review of the previous decade of women's sport history, the shift from scientific to literary paradigms presented fresh lines of enquiry. Postmodernism has, then, allowed a 'fuller appreciation of those historically banished to the margins, such as women'.²⁹² By admitting different versions of sport history are possible, and desirable, it becomes clear that the history of sport for women might require that one search elsewhere for both evidence and influence. However, it is sufficient to say that for the most part ancient women (with the possible exception of the Spartan women)²⁹³ were not afforded much freedom of opportunity to engage in practices in the traditional domains of males.

When one moves to the Celtic world in general, even in approximately the same historical era, it seems there is slightly more room for women to manoeuvre. David Bellingham, however, suggests that 'high ranking Celtic women enjoyed a degree of power unknown to their classical counterparts'.²⁹⁴ Using classical Greece society and mythology as a contrast to illustrate his point, Bellingham admits that while the Celtic myths were probably always told from a male viewpoint, 'the human female

²⁹¹ For a complete understanding of how this might be achieved see Catriona Parratt, 'From the History of Women in Sport to Women's Sport History: A Research Agenda', in D. M. Costa and S. R. Guthrie (eds), *Women and Sport. Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1994), pp. 5-14.

²⁹² Patricia Vertinsky, 'Time Gentlemen Please: The Space and Place of Gender in Sport History', in Murray Phillips (ed.), *Deconstructing Sport History: A Postmodern Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 231.

²⁹³ See A. C. Reese and Irini Vallera-Rickerson, *Athletries: The Untold History of Ancient Greek Women Athletes* (Oklahoma City: Nightowl Publications, 2002), pp. 97-99 and T. F. Scanlon, *Eros and Greek Athletics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). For a view on women's involvement in sport in ancient Rome, see H. M. Lee, *Athletics and the Bikini Girls from the Piazza Armerina, Stadion*, Vol. 10, 1984, pp. 45-76.

²⁹⁴ David Bellingham, *An Introduction to Celtic Mythology* (Rochester, Kent: Shooting Star Press, 1990), p. 9.

characters in Celtic myth are rarely the downtrodden or faceless figures of the Greek myths'.²⁹⁵ Bellingham goes on to say that this might indicate that freeborn Celtic women may have formed part of the bard's audience, which, he says, was certainly not the case in classical Athens.²⁹⁶

Sayers makes a point of saying that many of the martial skills or 'feats' in the Ulster tales were learned from female teachers and notes that the 'status accorded women in the legal texts of the period are mirrored in early Irish literature'.²⁹⁷ Sayers claims that the Ulster Cycle 'contains a great number of references to the hero Cú Chulainn's relations with a variety of women presented essentially as equals'.²⁹⁸

Rosalind Clark goes further and says that not only are women essential (important because of their supernatural powers) in the tales but they are the most interesting characters and she notes that there are a surprising number of women in the Ulster cycle.²⁹⁹ Kinsella would agree, stating that:

Probably the greatest achievement of the Táin and the Ulster cycle is the series of women, some in full scale and some in miniature, on whose strong and diverse personalities the action continually turns: Medb, Derdriu, Macha, Nes, Aífe. It may be as goddess-figures, ultimately, that these women have their power; it is certainly they, under all the violence, who remain most real in the memory.³⁰⁰

Reynolds uses these figures from Irish history and myth to dispel the 'myth' of the Irish 'Colleen' – 'the gentle, modest creature with a shawl over her head and the limpid trusting eyes'- which was a sentimental nineteenth century notion.³⁰¹ On the contrary, Reynolds sees the Irish women of legend and literature as women of

²⁹⁵ Bellingham, *An Introduction to Celtic Mythology*, p. 9.

²⁹⁶ Bellingham, *An Introduction to Celtic Mythology*, p. 9.

²⁹⁷ Sayers, 'Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle', p. 67.

²⁹⁸ Sayers, 'Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle', p. 67.

²⁹⁹ Rosalind Clark, *The Great Queens: Irish Goddesses from the Morrígan to Cathleen Ní Houlihan* (Savage, MD: Barnes and Noble, 1990), pp. 11-12.

³⁰⁰ Thomas Kinsella (Translator), *The Tain: Translated from the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. xiv-xv.

³⁰¹ Lorna Reynolds, 'Irish Women in Legend, Literature and Life', in S. F. Gallagher (ed.), *Women in Irish Legend, Life and Literature* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth, 1983), p. 12.

'formidable character and tenacious will.'³⁰² Medb,³⁰³ for example, is depicted as a 'masterful, boastful, wilful, power-loving, uninhibited woman who regards herself as the equal of any man, and one who must be seen to be equal'.³⁰⁴

There are many stories of warrior women in the tales of Northern Europe. For instance, one of the most dramatic of the Old Norse tales concerning 'maiden-warriors' is the story of Hervör.³⁰⁵ Carol Clover relates the story of Hervör who, as a young girl, shows more proficiency with a bow, a shield and a sword than with a needle and after a stint as a petty thief joins up with, and eventually becomes the head of, a band of Vikings.³⁰⁶ She visits her dead father to claim her father's sword (against his wishes) and continues her masculine ways until one day she settles down, marries and has two sons. Some folklorists see the story as just another case of masculinity complex, the subsequent resolution of the phallic conflict and the resignation of femaleness.³⁰⁷ However, Clover looks at it from the point of view of continuity through the generations and how, in this case, they must be linked by a female since no male exists. That is, Hervör is the sole representative of the intermediate generation. The essential male qualities, particularly those concerned with courage and martial skill, must manifest themselves in Hervör in order for her sons and grandsons to inherit them.³⁰⁸

Women in war and martial service often must assume the role of men or, in extreme circumstances, become men, to succeed. The requirement for many women, then, having either succeeded or failed, is to resume their feminine role. In many ways the Irish tales do not deviate from this pattern. However, contrary to the tales of many societies, once 'defeated' by rape or marriage, the viragos of the Irish tales often do

³⁰² Reynolds, 'Irish Women in Legend, Literature and Life', p. 12.

³⁰³ Medb, Queen of Connacht, is a strong female character who features heavily in the *Táin* as Cú Chulainn's principle adversary.

³⁰⁴ Reynolds, 'Irish Women in Legend, Literature and Life', p. 13.

³⁰⁵ The category of 'maiden-warrior' is a subtype of the 'shield-maiden' which according to Clover is used to refer to 'any and all women who take up the sword or associate themselves with warfare [or behave in unfeminine ways] however briefly and for whatever reason'. Other subtypes include the valkyrie, the avenging mother and the maiden king. See Carol Clover, 'Maiden Warriors and Other Sons', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, January 1986, pp. 34-36.

³⁰⁶ Clover, 'Maiden Warriors and Other Sons', p. 38.

³⁰⁷ Clover, 'Maiden Warriors and Other Sons', p. 38.

³⁰⁸ Clover, 'Maiden Warriors and Other Sons', p. 39.

continue on in the role they have chosen for themselves; that of the strong, and sometimes martial, woman.

Peggy McCracken takes a fascinating look at the gendering of ‘the blood of war’ and the concept of military heroism that legitimates violence in war *only* as that of males. She suggests that ‘legitimate violence, authorised by a higher good that requires heroic sacrifice, is traditionally the domain of men in most cultures: Only men should die in combat; the blood of war is men’s blood’.³⁰⁹ While women may be hurt, raped, wounded and even killed in war, it is usually as the result of ‘illegitimate’ violence that takes place outside the battlefield.³¹⁰ In essence then, ‘war and soldiering … have been an exclusive male preserve’.³¹¹

Rosalind Clark asks whether it was the custom, in real life as in the tales, for women to become warriors.³¹² Clark suggests that there may be ‘some legal evidence that women at one time fought in wars’.³¹³ She cites ‘evidence’ of a Saint Adamán who is credited with ‘putting a stop to conscription for women when he saw two women killing each other’ in battle although Clark surmises that this may be legend. She notes that in the historical annals there is no mention of women as fighting in important combats or as having been slain in battle and goes on to suggest that warrior women may be a literary motif – enjoyable to the audience of a male-dominated society as part of the world of make-believe or the world of the far-distant past.³¹⁴

Megan McLaughlin, discussing the Middle Ages, argues that warfare was not an exclusively male bastion.³¹⁵ Women warriors in medieval sources are so numerous that McLaughlin finds it surprising that relatively little attention has been paid to

³⁰⁹ Peggy McCracken, ‘The Amenorrhea of War’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2003, pp. 625-644.

³¹⁰ McCracken, ‘The Amenorrhea of War’, p. 625.

³¹¹ McCracken, ‘The Amenorrhea of War’, pp. 627-8.

³¹² Clark, *The Great Queens*, p. 26.

³¹³ Clark, *The Great Queens*, p. 27.

³¹⁴ Clark, *The Great Queens*, p. 27.

³¹⁵ Megan McLaughlin, ‘The Woman Warrior: Gender, Warfare and Society in Medieval Europe’, *Women’s Studies*, Vol. 17, 1990, p. 196.

them.³¹⁶ McLaughlin examines the nature of medieval European military organisation in relation to the capacity of females to participate in warfare.³¹⁷

McLaughlin argues that although warfare has been seen as a masculine activity in virtually all periods of human history, women had an increased opportunity to be involved during the early medieval period because warfare was organised inside the domestic arena and therefore in the female domain.³¹⁸ Women and girls, who might be called up at a moment's notice to support their husbands and fathers in war, had to be prepared for these duties. McLaughlin surmises that girls may have even received some instruction in this along with their male counterparts.³¹⁹ On the occasion that women took the lead and commanded such 'armies' that these were small groups of most probably family and friends and would know her and therefore afford her more tolerance in a role not typically for females.³²⁰

In summing up, McLaughlin concludes that the presence of women on the battlefield cannot only be explained by claiming individual forceful personalities or unusual family circumstance but that the structures of warfare during this period made it less difficult for women to be participants. Yet in the Ulster Cycle, women did play an important role. The next section is a critical review of the body of literature which examines how it was that women did occupy such a prominent position in the early Irish Ulster Cycle. The contention is that the early Irish conception of women in general in the pre-Christian era may have been a factor.

2.8 The Women of Pre-Christian Ireland

Pre-Christian Ireland was a patriarchy. It was male-dominated, stratified according to wealth and inheritance and family honour was handed down through the male line. Further it was a barbaric, agricultural society which had a slave population.³²¹ The opportunities, then, for women to play a significant role were few. Rosalind Clark suggests that although early Irish society was male-dominated, women had a

³¹⁶ McLaughlin, 'The Woman Warrior', p. 196.

³¹⁷ McLaughlin, 'The Woman Warrior', pp. 193-209.

³¹⁸ McLaughlin, 'The Woman Warrior', p. 201.

³¹⁹ McLaughlin, 'The Woman Warrior', p. 202.

³²⁰ McLaughlin, 'The Woman Warrior', pp. 203-4.

³²¹ Williams and Ford describe the society depicted in the Táin as 'a barbaric one' and give examples. See Williams and Ford, *The Irish literary Tradition* pp. 12-13.

prominent role in the literature, but she stresses that they were ‘often not like the actual women of the society, but emanated from the world of the imagination through the media of religion and folklore’.³²²

However, Lorna Reynolds claims that Ireland had once participated in that Bronze-Age culture in which the dominant divinity had been female, the great, all-powerful Mother Goddess.³²³ In fact, Reynolds also suggests that the Red Branch stories (the Ulster cycle of tales) deal with the period in time in Ireland when ‘a matriarchal organisation of society had not long yielded to a patriarchal one’.³²⁴ In fact, according to Ó Corrain, only the coming of the Norman laws quashed the flowering of gender symmetry, so rare among early medieval Europeans.³²⁵

For Dickson the stories of the viragos ‘depict a society in which being male is an advantage; however, while masculinity is mandatory for those who would fight for political, social and military supremacy, being male is not’.³²⁶ However, this does not necessarily translate as a multitude of women participating in the domains of men. In fact, Lisa Bitel takes particular issue with what she sees as ‘romantic’ depictions of women in early Ireland.

Bitel makes it clear that her account of women in early Ireland will be free of the romanticism that engulfed the Irish folklorists, poets and playwrights.³²⁷ Convinced that early Ireland had been a golden age in every way, these authors idolised Medb, Grania and the golden-haired Deirdre and they touted early Ireland as a Celtic paradise of warrior queens and fairy women, unique in ancient Europe. Bitel believes that these Celts circle around in their arguments and see the female characters of the Irish sagas and king-tales as archetypes for real women with sexual, martial and sacral powers over men. To counter this, Bitel does not concern herself exclusively with the tales and believes that the poems tell us very little about the real women who lived in Ireland at that time.

³²² Clark, *The Great Queens*, p. 2.

³²³ Reynolds, ‘Irish Women in Legend, Literature and Life’, p. 12.

³²⁴ Lorna Reynolds, ‘Irish Women in Legend, Literature and Life’, p. 12.

³²⁵ Lisa Bitel, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 1-2.

³²⁶ Dickson, ‘Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature’, abstract.

³²⁷ Bitel, *Land of Women*, pp. 1-2.

Bitel looks to the legal (and other) texts for her information on women's lives in early Ireland. The rights of women were enacted in a very small space, usually the home. If women left this area they risked assault and murder.³²⁸ Women always belonged to someone – father, husband, sons, kin, church, and so on. Meyer suggests that women were socially inferior and had few or no independent rights.³²⁹

Bitel responds by noting that while it is true that women held very few legal rights, there are contradictions within the legal texts that suggest that women had room to manoeuvre within these.³³⁰ For every law circumscribing women there was another that allowed them considerable liberties.³³¹ The intellectuals, be they poets, lawyers, scholars or clergy did not always agree on the status of women. In fact, the literati disagreed about everything including women.³³² No early Irish writer articulated a definition of 'woman' or attempted to define the ultimate dichotomy of human society according to Bitel: man-woman.³³³ The literati did not define women directly, but in relation to themselves.³³⁴ Bitel suggests that many Celts and historians now do not believe that the eighth and ninth century scribes merely copied the tales but, in fact, recreated, used and retold the stories.³³⁵ According to Bitel, the men who produced the texts were 'writers, intellectuals, and artists highly conscious of their own authorial voices, not simply scribal automatons'.³³⁶ Although some religious women were literate, there is no evidence to suggest that women wrote the texts.³³⁷

According to Clark, early Irish literature was constantly being moulded into the new Christian system of thought.³³⁸ As the tales were committed to writing in the Christian period, it is suggested that the goddesses of the original stories were

³²⁸ Bitel, *Land of Women*, pp. 7-8.

³²⁹ Meyer cited in Bitel, *Land of Women*, pp. 8-10.

³³⁰ By this Bitel is referring to the Old Irish legal texts concerning contracts, specifically to Neil MacLeod, *Early Irish Contract Law* (Sydney: Series in Celtic Studies I, 1992), pp. 71-80.

³³¹ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 10-11.

³³² Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 13.

³³³ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 13.

³³⁴ By this, Bitel means that women did not exist, for men at least, as independent entities but in relation to the woman's relationship to him, for instance, as 'lover, wife, mother, daughter, kinswoman or stranger'. For more detail see Bitel, *Land of Women*, pp. 13-15.

³³⁵ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 12.

³³⁶ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 12.

³³⁷ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 14.

³³⁸ Clark, *The Great Queens*, p. 2.

either euhemerised (made into pseudo-historical queens and tribal ancestors) or became fairies or saints.³³⁹ Clark believes this is because ‘historical queens, fairies, and saints were all accepted as part of the new Christian conception of the world; goddesses were not’.³⁴⁰

Women in early Ireland were no goddess-queens, but neither were most of them prisoners or slaves. They were not the social or political equals of men, but, as Bitel intimates, equality was not a concept comprehensible to the early Irish.³⁴¹ As Bitel suggests:

What the texts reveal are several well-defined, well-articulated social roles for women – lover, wife, mother, economic partner, holy woman, warrior woman – each with its own behavioural code and symbolic meanings. Yet the texts also repeatedly announce variations on these roles, the violations of their boundaries.³⁴²

What is clear is that early Ireland had a set of gender relations that were as flexible and as complex as any which exist today.³⁴³ Importantly for this thesis, the flexibility afforded women in the Irish tales has produced a number of strong and sometimes militant women. Such women occupy roles normally reserved for males such as educating heroes in martial arts and leading great armies into battle. Chapter Eight of this thesis examines the connection between such women and sport-like activity in the Irish tales. The following chapter examines the tradition of scholarly study of the early Irish tales, in particular the various ways the literature has been interpreted and understood. Additionally, information is given on the current understanding of the composition and transmission of the Ulster Cycle tales.

2.9 Conclusions

This chapter has provided a necessarily brief but important overview of several bodies of academic thought. Current understandings of sport in the ancient world were

³³⁹ Clark, *The Great Queens*, pp. 2-3.

³⁴⁰ Clark, *The Great Queens*, p. 3.

³⁴¹ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 11.

³⁴² Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 16.

³⁴³ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 16.

discussed. Additionally, the scholarly literature surrounding ‘heroes’ and women and the early Irish tales, particularly the Ulster Cycle, was examined. Along the way, this study has been situated within these bodies of work that exist in the area of sport in the ancient world, and indeed sport in early Ireland. In ancient sport history there was shown to be an overwhelming pre-occupation by scholars with the traditions and civilisation of the Greeks. It was shown how this pre-occupation helps to explain why there has been so little research dealing with the games, competitions and sporting festivals of ancient Ireland. Despite this, several scholars have produced work on sport in ancient Ireland and sport, games and martial training in the Irish tales. This thesis will find its place among such scholarships adding to both the areas of ancient sport history and the study of the Ulster Cycle of tales.

In Chapter Three the conceptual understandings of truth which underpin this thesis are espoused. The notion that ‘truth’ can not be discovered or uncovered will be forwarded along with the postmodern view that ‘truth’ and ‘rightness’ are products of the human need to understand their world by describing it. ‘Truth’ will be shown to be made, rather than found, and will be shown to be a function of language. Chapter Three also examines the nature and significance of history (and sport history) as well as literary interpretation given such notions of truth.

Chapter Three

Truth and History

3.1 Introduction

One typical charge against the use of myth or narrative in the pursuit of understanding in sport history is that such accounts do not constitute reality or adhere sufficiently to the notion of a rigorous quest for truth. This chapter explores the notion of truth and the relationship between it and what is proposed in this thesis, that is, the reliance on tales, narrative and, in some part, myth as the basis of an inquiry into an understanding of sport-like activity in ancient Ireland. In essence this chapter places the present study within the understandings of what is to count as truth and fact according to several prominent philosophers and historians, a debate which still continues in academic circles.

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to examine the notions of ‘truth’ and ‘historical truth’ and the application of these notions by philosophers and historians in general and by sport historians and academics studying the early Irish tales in particular. This chapter will claim history as dynamic, non-essential and open to interpretation and speculation, without this in any way detracting from the value of historical inquiry as a method of knowing and understanding ourselves and the world.

History, like most academic disciplines, relies heavily on a concept of ‘truth’ in order to be seen as legitimate. The quest for ‘truth,’ be it scientific, philosophical or historical, presupposes an essential nature to the world, to humans and to human actions and beliefs. This dissertation rejects the notion that ‘truth’ can be discovered or uncovered and instead adopts the postmodern view that ‘truth’ and ‘rightness’ are products of the human need to understand their world by describing it. ‘Truth’ is, in this sense, made and not found.

The connotations surrounding the word ‘truth’ are, on face value, quite simple and forceful. ‘Truth’ is an important notion in Western liberal democracies where ‘truth-telling’ is highly valued in the moral make-up of society.³⁴⁴ It is considered morally ‘right’ to tell the truth and it is a concept that one comes to understand from an early age. Even small children are encouraged to see the perceived polarity of the terms ‘truth’ and ‘lie’ and that praise and reward are in store for the bearer of truth while punishment and disrespect await those who would give ‘false’ information.

It is, perhaps, a human need to wish to ground one’s ideas about oneself and the world in something both tangible and concrete. Flimsy and uncertain foundations do not seem to satisfy this need. A belief in a universal ‘Truth’ allows the building of safe and seemingly permanent individual and social foundations. Descriptions of the world provide the framework by which one can understand the environment and the complexities of societies. Although such descriptions can offer the foundations which are craved, these descriptions are necessarily contingent. Some descriptions become out-dated or less useful for our purposes, others are more durable, while still others are currently being ‘invented’.

This chapter will examine the concepts of truth and language from a postmodern perspective. Additionally, the role and significance of truth and language in the production of historical truth and truth in sport history, particularly in regard to this thesis, will be explored. Finally, the early Irish Ulster cycle of tales will be situated in this debate and this will form the foundations of the following chapters as various aspects of sport and games in the tales are examined.

3.2 Truth, History and Language

Richard Rorty, a noted pragmatist and philosopher, claims truth is a function of human languages. He believes that while the world exists, descriptions of it do not exist without human languages.³⁴⁵ Rorty expounds this view by suggesting that:

³⁴⁴ The concept of ‘truth-telling’ is valued even if in practice there are those in these societies who would deceive intentionally. One need look no further than the political arena to see these deceptions in action.

³⁴⁵ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 5.

To say that the world is out there, that it is not our creation, is to say, with common sense, that most things in space and time are the effects of causes which do not include human mental states. To say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages and that human languages are human creations.³⁴⁶

Keith Jenkins, a philosopher of history, applies such notions to history.³⁴⁷ In his view, '[h]istory is one of a series of discourses about the world. These discourses do not create the world ... but they do appropriate it and give it all the meaning it has'.³⁴⁸ Jenkins uses the example of seeing a landscape through a window frame to illustrate this point further. The landscape is rural in nature. There are several roads and houses, with roads in the distance and farmhouses and fields and a market in the middle distance. A sky of watery blue hangs above the whole scene. Jenkins notes that there is nothing in the landscape that says 'geography' but that a geographer could easily account for it geographically – for instance, the land could be seen to have specific field patterns and farming practices; or contour maps could chart the terrain.³⁴⁹

Similarly, says Jenkins, the view could be constructed sociologically. The sociologist could see the landscape in terms of population distribution, or the people of the town could become data for the size of family units. Historians, also, can 'turn the same landscape into their discourse. For example field patterns today could be compared to those pre-enclosure; population now to that of 1831, 1871'.³⁵⁰ Historians, geographers and sociologists do not create the landscape. According to Jenkins they construct the 'analytical and methodological tools to make out of this raw material their way of reading and talking about it: discoursing'.³⁵¹

Jenkins goes on to argue that it is in this sense that one reads the world as a text. These readings are necessarily infinite. However, Jenkins is also quick to clarify that

³⁴⁶ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 5.

³⁴⁷ Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

³⁴⁸ Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, p. 5.

³⁴⁹ Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, p. 8.

³⁵⁰ Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, p. 8.

³⁵¹ Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, p. 9.

he does not mean that we just make up stories about the world and the past. His claim is ‘stronger’: [The] world/the past comes to us always already as stories and … we cannot get out of these stories (narratives) to check if they correspond to the real world/past because these “always already” narratives constitute “reality”³⁵².

Nelson Goodman holds a similar view in that he believes correspondence to the world is not a factor when considering truth.³⁵³ This is because truths differ for different ‘worlds’ or ‘frames of reference’. None of the ‘versions’ or descriptions of the world can be taken to be *the* truth. Neither is it possible to ask what something is like without any frame of reference. As he explains, ‘We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described’.³⁵⁴ So the world itself can neither confirm nor deny the truth of a description under any frame of reference. As Rorty puts it:

Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot.³⁵⁵

Only sentences can be true or false, the world itself cannot. When applied to history, the idea of ‘truth’ becomes even more intangible. Historical events, people, societies and beliefs are quite obviously elements of the past. The past can *only* be understood in terms of language. Any truth which is afforded to history must be understood in terms of the sentences which are used to describe these events, people, societies and beliefs. It is the sentences, rather than the events themselves, that have truth value or not.

It is along these lines that Jenkins is careful to outline the difference between ‘history’ and ‘the past’. In the English language, claims Jenkins, the word ‘history’ covers both history (that which has been written/recoded about the past) and the past itself. Jenkins explains: ‘The past has occurred. It has gone and can only be brought back again by historians in a very different media, for example in books, articles,

³⁵² Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, p. 9.

³⁵³ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking* (London: Harvester Press Limited, 1978).

³⁵⁴ Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*, p. 3.

³⁵⁵ Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 5.

documentaries, etc., not as actual events'.³⁵⁶ It is the work of historians that comprises 'history', which is embodied in books and periodicals that one reads when one 'does' history. According to Jenkins, then:

What this means is that history is quite literally on library and other shelves. Thus, if you start a course on seventeenth-century Spain, you do not actually go to the seventeenth century or to Spain; you go,³⁵⁷ with the help of your reading list, to the library.

Thus, in his view, '[h]istory is an inter-textual, linguistic construct'.³⁵⁸ One learns how to 'read' it, and it is not, according to Jenkins, a spontaneous or natural reading, but a learned one that is informed and made meaningful by other texts. In a similar vein, Rorty shows that reading a text is not only about the text, but also about the needs and purposes of the reader.³⁵⁹ He states:

Reading texts is a matter of reading them in light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens. What happens may be something too weird and idiosyncratic to bother with ... Or it may be exciting and convincing ... It may be so exciting and convincing that one has the illusion that one now sees what a certain text is *really* about. But what excites and convinces is a function of the needs and purposes of those who are being excited and convinced.³⁶⁰

Thus, Rorty's point is not that something is 'right' or 'true' or interpreted correctly, but that an interpretation must be useful, exciting and convincing. Jenkins' contribution to this argument is that this is a learned process. We learn how to read texts and our learning (of texts and other things) functions to *make* things interesting and convincing and worthy of being a valid version of history. This process, it has been argued, is not reliant on any form of correspondence to reality, in fact, according to both Rorty and Jenkins, no such correspondence is even possible.

³⁵⁶ Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, p. 6.

³⁵⁷ Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, p. 7.

³⁵⁸ Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, p. 7.

³⁵⁹ Rorty, 'The Pragmatist's Progress', in Stefan Collini (ed.), *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 89-108.

³⁶⁰ Rorty, 'The Pragmatist's Progress', p. 105.

Behan McCullagh holds an alternative position to that of Rorty and Jenkins on the subject of truth in history (and in any other discipline). McCullagh states that ‘[in] many cases inferences from historical evidence are so reasonable that there is no dispute about them at all’.³⁶¹ However, this statement is contentious for (at least) two reasons. Firstly, there is only no dispute about historical evidence for as long as one retains the current amount of facts and they are interpreted the same way. Secondly, if this were all that ‘historians’ did, that is, collect and collate historical evidence that is indisputable, there would still be some concern about the truth of such evidence. This is because such ‘facts’ never stand alone, divorced from the historian and the prejudices of the time. These facts are grouped and ordered in a certain way. Such a construction leads the historian, or the reader of these collected facts, to assume or believe certain things.

These assumptions and beliefs are related intimately to the reader/historian’s own historio-social position. The view or reading of the facts is informed by, and therefore a product of, the reader/historian. As an historical fact, the statement that ‘There was a war that began in 1939 and ended in 1945’, does not inform the reader of much. One may not have experienced war but one may have seen snippets of it from old news reels or be familiar with the wars in the Gulf of more recent times via television coverage, but still the historical ‘fact’ tells us little. The interpretations, the assumptions, the suggestions and the possibilities of the history of the Second World War are the interesting bits; a concept of the past, a view or vision to inform, warn, excite, amuse or incite. It could be said that if one learns nothing but historical facts from history then it is meaningless. In order for one to learn from it, history must make sense. With this in mind, one might advocate that history could and should be re-written in order to reflect the needs and historic situation of the current historian and reader. It is not that the past has changed but rather that the questions that are asked, and the understandings that are sought, have. Those looking back can never understand the past in the way that those who lived it as a present could. No one can divorce themselves from the time, culture and background that are a unique part of each and every individual. In order to make sense of history, it must be couched in

³⁶¹ C. B. McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 14.

experiences and concepts that are familiar. As a result, the experiences of the reader/historian are necessarily a feature of any historical description/ interpretation.

The interaction of history and philosophy provides a framework for forwarding the Ulster tales as a useful and even valuable source for an understanding of sport. However, there are limitations to this approach. As with any framework, the questions asked and the direction taken in answering those questions is invariably dictated, at least to some degree, by the framework itself. In the case of this thesis, to adopt this approach, decisions regarding the contribution of materials from various authors, conceptualisations and methodologies come into play.

To use Richard Rorty, for instance, as a primary philosophic influence underlying this thesis may prove advantageous in some respects but ‘blinkered’ and exclusionary in others. For example, Rortian pragmatism may allow for the inclusion of sources, descriptions and, ultimately, conclusions which may not be evident under more prescriptive philosophical methods. However, the use of Rorty may also negate the need for a rigid and externally validated methodology as it relies heavily on responses to the usefulness of conclusions and to whether the arguments made in support of those conclusions are sufficiently compelling.

This methodological counterpoint can be argued of any method or philosophy. It is the contention of this thesis that the framework adopted here best allows for an address of the key research questions given the nature of the primary sources and the conceptual leap that this thesis asks the reader to perform. Indeed, a pluralistic, even all-encompassing understanding of both truth and the concept of a methodology is necessary.

Hatab, writing on the importance of a pluralistic understanding of truth, suggests that the term ‘fact’ itself is not very useful when viewed as a term to connote a fixed truth, especially when other forms of disclosure are measured against it.³⁶² It is useful, believes Hatab, ‘when used as something that is shown in accordance with the criteria

³⁶² L. J. Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy. A Contest of Truths* (La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing, 1990), p. 7.

and methodological assumptions of science'.³⁶³ Thus, according to Hatab, the term 'fact' should take into account the rational and scientific methods by which a 'fact' claims its truth-value. That is, a 'fact' is only a form of truth under one description of the term 'truth'. Taking a similar view to Rorty and Hatab are Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin who believe that any search for truth may inevitably prove fruitless, not least because they see 'truth' as applicable only to verbal statements. For this reason, Goodman and Elgin consider truth to be an 'excessively narrow notion'.³⁶⁴ Goodman and Elgin prefer the concept of 'rightness' that, in their view, has greater scope and 'reach' than does truth. Unlike truth, 'right' and 'wrong' apply to all symbols, not just verbal ones. In their view, '[r]ightness pertains to all the ways that symbols function'.³⁶⁵

'Rightness' is far more complex than truth. In fact, it shows very clearly the triviality of what is called 'truth' in some instances. Goodman and Elgin discuss the statement 'Snow is white', which, although snow is white, may not be right. As an answer to a question on how dense granite is, it is wrong, because it is irrelevant. The statement 'Granite weighs one pound per cubic foot' is also wrong but this is because it is false.³⁶⁶ The determining factor on whether something is right or wrong is the set of circumstances and context of its having been said or done. Generally, say Goodman and Elgin, rightness is a matter of fitting and working. '[The] fitting here is not a fitting *onto* – not a correspondence or matching, or mirroring of independent Reality – but a fitting *into* a context or discourse or standing complex'.³⁶⁷ Fitting is tested by working. The new concept or work or piece must arrive on the scene, so to speak, at a time when circumstances will allow it to be accepted. It is not only its ability to fit theoretically that allows this acceptance to occur but is also dependent on the receptiveness of those working in the field.

In the case of history, and sport history, a new interpretation of the past will be 'accepted' if it both fits in with the prevalent theoretical framework (or, in the case of an overwhelmingly popular new theoretical framework, displaces it) and if historians

³⁶³ Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy. A Contest of Truths*, p. 7.

³⁶⁴ Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and other Arts and Sciences* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 154.

³⁶⁵ Goodman and Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and other Arts and Sciences*, p. 156.

³⁶⁶ Goodman and Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and other Arts and Sciences*, p. 156.

³⁶⁷ Goodman and Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and other Arts and Sciences*, p. 158.

working in that area are receptive to the change or idea. Inevitably the process is an active one, with both the new interpretation and the old structures needing to undergo some adjustment. Old, traditional structures and concepts (in this case, histories) have a certain degree of inertia which often takes some doing to amend or dislodge. But what should be remembered is that these structures, in the postmodern world, are never fixed. An interpretation that works cognitively, fits into the structure and which may inspire further inquiry is not expected, or even intended, to ‘work’ forever or everywhere. As Goodman and Elgin put it, ‘the advancement of understanding is more like carpentry than computation’.³⁶⁸

Hirsch states that there can be no *science* of interpretation. No one can ‘test’ interpretations and subject them to ‘scrutiny in the light of the relevant evidence’ in order that ‘objective conclusions can be reached’.³⁶⁹ This idea, however, is a purely utopian one. Despite the lack of objective certainties, interpretation can be a rigorous discipline, ‘an art in the proper sense of the term’ and one can rationally *evaluate* interpretations. Madison suggests that the ultimate validation of an interpretation lies in the future and argues that Hirsch does not see the difference between *demonstrative* or theoretical reasoning and *persuasive* or practical reasoning when it comes to evaluating interpretations.³⁷⁰ Madison believes it is the rules of the latter, rather than the former, which ought to serve as the method of interpretation.³⁷¹

According to Madison, ‘persuasive reasoning is a method for arriving at what people like to call “the truth”’.³⁷² Madison suggests that what ‘the truth’ means here is ‘*agreement* or *consensus* as to what will be held to be true’.³⁷³ It is persuasive or practical reasoning which is responsible for justifying or legitimising decisions. Additionally, Madison notes that the principles one appeals to in practical reasoning need not, like logical principles, be universally or externally valid. ‘All that is required of them is that they be generally accepted by those with whom one is

³⁶⁸ Goodman and Elgin, *Reconceptions in Philosophy and other Arts and Sciences*, p. 163.

³⁶⁹ Cited in G. B. Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity, Figures and Themes* (Indianapolis: Midland Books, 1990), p. 31.

³⁷⁰ Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity, Figures and Themes*, 1990, p. 30.

³⁷¹ Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity, Figures and Themes*, p. 31.

³⁷² Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity, Figures and Themes*, p. 31.

³⁷³ Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity, Figures and Themes*, p. 31 (Emphasis in the original).

arguing'.³⁷⁴ As such, practical or persuasive reasoning both ‘aims at agreement on a specific subject and presupposes a prior agreement on certain basic norms … Practical reasoning, therefore, bases itself on recognised, commonly accepted norms and seeks, through argumentation, to legitimate new, concrete decisions’.³⁷⁵ These principles, say Madison, are adequate and sufficient for arbitrating between conflicting interpretations.

The question then remains, what happens when two or more interpretations can be agreed upon? These interpretations may or may not conflict, yet, each, when appealed to with satisfactory agreement, may claim to be a legitimate interpretation and those with whom one is arguing may agree. To understand how this situation can arise, it is necessary to look at the multitude of ways one might interpret a text as this dissertation concerns itself primarily with texts.

Umberto Eco takes a somewhat reserved view of the way in which texts can and should be interpreted.³⁷⁶ Eco believes that there should be criteria put in place to limit interpretation. Despite such reservation, Eco also points out that to say that interpretation ‘is potentially unlimited does not mean that interpretation has no object and that it “riverruns” merely for its own sake’.³⁷⁷ However Eco qualifies this comment by suggesting that just because a text has potentially no limits ‘does not mean that every act of interpretation can have a happy end’.³⁷⁸ This idea is not necessarily in opposition to the concept of persuasive reasoning outlined above. If an interpretation is forwarded and those engaged in the discussion disagree on either the presupposed norms or on that particular subject then that interpretation will not be considered legitimate.

Eco distinguishes between what he calls ‘sane interpretation’ and ‘paranoiac interpretation’ of a text.³⁷⁹ He argues that ‘from a certain point of view everything

³⁷⁴ Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity, Figures and Themes*, p. 32.

³⁷⁵ Madison, *The Hermeneutics of Postmodernity, Figures and Themes*, p. 32.

³⁷⁶ Umberto Eco, ‘Interpretation and History’, in Stefan Collini (ed.), *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 23-44.

³⁷⁷ Eco, ‘Interpretation and History’, p. 23.

³⁷⁸ Eco, ‘Interpretation and History’, p. 24.

³⁷⁹ Umberto Eco, ‘Overinterpreting Texts’, in Stefan Collini (ed.), *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 48.

bears relationships of analogy, contiguity and similarity to everything else'.³⁸⁰ The difference between sane and paranoiac interpretation is that in sane interpretation one can identify when a relationship between two things is minimal, whereas paranoiac interpretation is an overestimation of the importance of the relationship which leads to too deep an exploration into the supposed mysterious motives regarding the connection between two minimally related things.³⁸¹ While the designation of what counts as paranoiac or sane interpretation may not be as clear-cut as Eco perhaps suggests, certainly the choice to explore a connection which is rather tenuous has some value in academia. Jonathan Culler defends overinterpretation in general by suggesting that 'extreme' interpretations have a better chance of bringing to light connection or implications not previously noticed or reflected on than if they strive to remain sound or moderate.³⁸² In fact, Culler suggests that paranoiac interpretation (or overinterpretation) is, in the academic world, essential to the just appreciation of things.³⁸³ Culler furthers this by suggesting that what Eco calls overinterpretation may in fact be a practice of asking precisely those questions which are not necessary for normal communication but which enable one to reflect on its functioning.³⁸⁴

This idea of infinite interpretations and their validation, or not, via persuasive reasoning privileges the opinions and beliefs of the reader or readers of the text above that of the author and of the text itself. And well may it might, especially in the case of historic documents and, indeed, the Irish texts themselves, for these authors are, rather unfortunately, long deceased and access to the thought-processes that informed the construction, revision and eventual writing down of the Irish tales is not possible from a vantage point in the twenty-first century. Even if it were, the richness of understanding and illumination that might unfold were a so-called paranoiac interpretation of the texts to be forwarded should not necessarily be curtailed by a blind adherence to seeking out 'what the author meant'.

³⁸⁰ Eco, 'Overinterpreting Texts', p. 48.

³⁸¹ Eco, 'Overinterpreting Texts', p. 49.

³⁸² Jonathan Culler, 'In Defence of Overinterpretation', in Stefan Collini (ed.), *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 110.

³⁸³ Culler, 'In Defence of Overinterpretation', p. 113.

³⁸⁴ Culler, 'In Defence of Overinterpretation', p. 114.

3.3 The Power of Myth and History

The above subtitle incorporates the title used by Joseph Campbell, one of the most well-known proponents of mythology and its links to religion and psychology. *The Power of Myth* was both a television series and a best-selling book.³⁸⁵ In *The Power of Myth*, Campbell discusses various mythological archetypes which he believes can help make sense of many seemingly unrelated myths and mythologies.³⁸⁶ The use of this subtitle is to place emphasis on the idea that there can be a certain power in the stories, tales and myths and that these have an effect on the way one understands the myths and, by extension, the world.

Hatab takes this notion further and explores the link between mythology and rationality. Hatab's study of myth, philosophy and truth focuses on the change in ancient Greece from mythology to rationality as a way of understanding the world.³⁸⁷ Hatab refers specifically to the truth that can be gained from myth and the fact that, even though many of Greece's greatest philosophers of the time had embraced the idea of rational thought, much of the truth found in pre-philosophic thought could not be replaced by philosophy.³⁸⁸ In fact, despite the importance of rational thought to the Greek philosophers, mythology in one form or another continued to be important to Greek society and culture. The result being that the supposedly antithetical processes of philosophy and myth existed, side-by-side, not only in the ancient Greek world but beyond. What later occurred was a widening in the perceived value, particularly the truth-value, of the philosophic processes. This resulted in the institutional privilege of rational and scientific thought over other forms of knowledge such as myth, despite myth still playing a crucial role in the cultural and social aspects of society.

Hatab argues for a pluralistic conception of truth and it is this historical displacement of myth at the hands of philosophy that is the setting for his argument. He considers that his work can provide a background for important trends in contemporary thought

³⁸⁵ Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers with Betty Sue Flowers (eds), *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988). The television series arising from this book, comprised of six, one hour episodes, was first aired in the United States by PBS in 1988.

³⁸⁶ Specifically, Campbell noted that in myths about heroes, the majority of myths from all over the world and at differing times in history could be seen to follow a similar pattern. Campbell identified these motifs and then examined many more heroic myths in terms of their adherence (or not) to these motifs.

³⁸⁷ Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy. A Contest of Truths*.

³⁸⁸ Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy. A Contest of Truths*, p. xi.

where the ‘strict distinction between fact and value, fact and interpretation, science and non-science, philosophy and literature and philosophy and rhetoric’ are challenged.³⁸⁹ Hatab aims to ‘analyse myth in terms of its *truth* and its legitimate role in culture’.³⁹⁰

To Hatab it is important that the ways in which myth is a form of truth is understood. To begin with, Hatab believes that the ‘idea that philosophy “corrected” the ignorance of the past or represented “progress” is not warranted’.³⁹¹ Myth, claims Hatab, does not mean something false or fictional.³⁹² Myth has an important role in existential philosophy, where the concrete situations and the challenges that characterise human existence are neither susceptible to, nor able to be adequately explained by, rational or abstract formulas. According to Hatab, matters of life and death, success and failure, limits and uncertainties and the struggle to find meaning in a world that can block human aspirations, are just some of the human concerns that are not served by the dominance of rationality and science.³⁹³

Hatab believes that the existential philosophy of Nietzsche and Heidegger in particular, amount to the admission that there were, and are, important elements of culture which traditional philosophy had overlooked, rejected or pushed aside.³⁹⁴ He suggests that:

[if] existential thought has called philosophy to task for abandoning or misinterpreting certain important elements of culture, then perhaps pre-philosophic culture (myth) can be understood as having presented those elements in an authentic manner.³⁹⁵

Hatab sees what he calls a modern ‘crisis’ owing to the ‘demythification of thought and an overconfidence in rationality and science’.³⁹⁶ Such crises include alienation, intellectual, social and personal rootlessness, threats from technology, worries about

³⁸⁹ Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy: A Contest of Truths*, pp. xi-xii.

³⁹⁰ Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy: A Contest of Truths*, p. 3.

³⁹¹ Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy. A Contest of Truths*, p. xi.

³⁹² Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy. A Contest of Truths*, p. 3.

³⁹³ Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy. A Contest of Truths*, p. 2.

³⁹⁴ Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy. A Contest of Truths*, p. 2.

³⁹⁵ Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy. A Contest of Truths*, p. 3.

³⁹⁶ Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy. A Contest of Truths*, p. xii.

'regressive' antirational developments, and the conflict between science and religious, moral and aesthetic values. Any solution to these crises would, according to Hatab, necessarily involve the restoration of myth or mythical meaning.³⁹⁷

Wendy Doniger explores a framework which may shed light on how myth and narrative might further inform. Doniger offers a metaphor as a way of looking at different narratives.³⁹⁸ She suggests that all narratives constructed of words can be placed on a continuum. Doniger uses the microscope and telescope metaphors to epitomise the extreme ends of this continuum. The continuum runs from one end, as the entirely personal narrative (the microscope) to the other, where narrative represents the abstract and entirely general (the telescope). Doniger suggests that myth 'vibrates' in the middle of this continuum between the personal and the abstract. It is possible, then to look at myth from either lens. 'Through the microscope end of a myth, we can see thousands of details that each culture ... uses to bring the story to life ... But through the telescope end, we can see the unifying themes'.³⁹⁹ When related to the Irish tales, the metaphors of microscope and telescope may be useful. To the readers of the tales, the 'microscopic' descriptions of the Irish heroes and the aristocratic warrior society in which they lived give details as to the kind of clothing, the customs, the weapons and, important in relation to this thesis, the rules of games. These details give insight into the world as described in the tales. These details in a sense make the situations, and particularly the characters, real (in the sense of believable).

Using a 'telescopic' lens may provide more general and, possibly, universal understandings of the tales. The Irish tales can thus be seen to exemplify timeless (and perhaps overarching) notions such as social status, social and filial connections, and gender relations. Both approaches elicit ideas and descriptions which can be used to give insight into the sport-like occurrences in the tales and possibly inform sport historians.

³⁹⁷ Hatab, *Myth and Philosophy. A Contest of Truths*, p. xii.

³⁹⁸ Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theory in Myth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 7.

³⁹⁹ Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theory in Myth*, p. 10.

3.4 Myth and Truth: The Ulster Cycle

Some of the most interesting things about sport are discussed in the past tense, as histories, and sometimes as myth. One talks of the legends of the game in a time past, often perceived as a simpler time. One loves reminiscences and remembrances. One revels in the retelling of one's own stories, of one's father's and grandfather's stories. One tells, increasingly, the stories of one's mother and grandmothers. Stories are told and retold, and the action becomes distorted somehow, over time. But how might one seek out a truth to such stories, to myths? This section will look at the insight and understanding that can be gained from myths and stories and the value of such information. 'Truth' again is the theme. Can truth be found in myths and stories? This dissertation holds that *a* truth in myth and stories can be found and that one can offer an interpretation of the world and the human condition that stems in part from ancient myths and stories. In particular, this section focuses on the Old Irish tales and explores what, if any, truth value can be attributed to such tales.

Peter O'Connor suggests that '[a] myth believed in becomes *the* truth'.⁴⁰⁰ The truth of modern myths such as economic rationality and scientific truth have necessarily required that other myths, including ancient ones, 'have to be dismissed as false – or "irrational", something to be disregarded'.⁴⁰¹ Rees and Rees note, similarly, that while 'the storytellers and their unlettered listeners found no difficulty in believing the wonders of the tales, modern scholars, conditioned by a factual and rationalistic education, cannot accord them the same naïve faith'.⁴⁰² In fact, Rees and Rees claim that it is arrogance that drives some scholars to believe that sacred tales or 'myths' have little or no significance to modern humanity.⁴⁰³

According to O'Connor, this is particularly true of oral traditions, where, with the coming of written languages, the emergence of abstract language and linear, logical reasoning, overshadowed the poetic and imaginative quality of that earlier, oral tradition.⁴⁰⁴ It is a 'shift from influence and an "as if" language that frees and opens up possibilities to a logical discourse that defines, settles things, proves things and

⁴⁰⁰ O'Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 2.

⁴⁰¹ O'Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 2.

⁴⁰² Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, p. 21.

⁴⁰³ Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, p. 23.

⁴⁰⁴ O'Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 3.

argues for conclusions'.⁴⁰⁵ Clearly, the intangibility and presumed illogical nature of such myths precluded them from being considered as useful sources of knowledge.

It is strange then, that the western world has witnessed a renewed interest in mythology. O'Connor believes that it may be a response to the one-dimensionality and commodification of the world of economic rationality. As he explains, 'It is as if we are returning to the source and discovering the nourishment that lies in stories, the ancient stories, that we call myths'.⁴⁰⁶ Further, O'Connor makes it clear that the things that can be learned through myth are by no means less useful than modern, more 'rational' knowledge. As he states, 'Myths provide us with an alternative, not inferior, way of apprehending the world and of knowing things'.⁴⁰⁷

It is clear that many authors dealing with the Irish Celts consider the Irish tales to have at least some use when it comes to examining the past. Anne Ross, in a subsection of her book entitled 'The Archaeology of the Celtic World', outlines the archaeological finds which suggest the movement patterns of the Celts through Europe and into Britain and Ireland.⁴⁰⁸ During this chapter, Ross uses classical writings by authors such as Strabo to put her point across.⁴⁰⁹ Similarly, Ross uses 'evidence' from the early Irish tales to support the archaeological findings.⁴¹⁰ Ross goes on to say that the early Irish literary tradition 'does much to augment the evidence of archaeology and to illuminate some parts of the everyday lives of at least a section of the early Celtic peoples'.⁴¹¹ In the subsection following this, 'Classical References to the Celtic Peoples', Ross refers to the Roman and Greek writers and again quotes sections of the Irish tales to corroborate their claims.⁴¹² In all sections of her book, Ross compounds and corroborates information largely by reference to the Irish tales. It is clear that Ross has no hesitation in treating the Irish tales with as much respect, in terms of knowledge and information, as she does the archaeological

⁴⁰⁵ O'Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 3.

⁴⁰⁶ O'Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 2.

⁴⁰⁷ O'Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 3.

⁴⁰⁸ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*.

⁴⁰⁹ Strabo was a Greek stoic philosopher, historian and geographer who lived from approximately 63 BCE to 24 CE.

⁴¹⁰ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 26.

⁴¹¹ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 28.

⁴¹² Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 29.

evidence and the accounts of the classical writers such as Strabo, Caesar and Poseidonis.

Jeffrey Gantz also claims there is valuable information on the Celts to be found in the early Irish tales.⁴¹³ This is due, claims Gantz, to the fact that Ireland remained free of Roman invasion and colonisation. Thus,

Irish society did not change appreciably until the advent of Christianity (in the fifth century) and the arrival of Viking raiders (some time thereafter). Consequently, the culture of the Iron Age Celts survived in Ireland long after it had been extinguished elsewhere. It is this conservation that makes the early Irish tales, quite apart from their literary value, such a valuable repository of information about the Celtic people.⁴¹⁴

The information gleaned from sources such as the classical authors,⁴¹⁵ from the Irish annals, genealogies and law tracts can be coupled with the evidence of the stories give a clear account of what Irish life was like during the period.⁴¹⁶

Kenneth Jackson in the opening paragraph of his book *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age* states that the Irish tradition has material of great diversity. ‘There are lyric and panegyric poems, historical and pseudo-historical and antiquarian texts, stories of pure entertainment, a great deal of religious matter, and much else’.⁴¹⁷ Jackson discusses the ‘heroic’ tales telling of wars and adventures and claims that although these stories are told with a ‘straightforward realism’ that sounds like they may have really happened, Jackson argues that there are at least two ‘non-realistic’ elements to these tales. Firstly, some of the characters are clearly supernatural and some of the scenes involve supernatural events and motifs. Secondly, ‘the realism is often apt to be submerged in a burst of exaggeration, in deliberate fantasy’.⁴¹⁸ It seems such things must have been to the tastes of the early Irish audience.

⁴¹³ Gantz, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

⁴¹⁴ Gantz, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

⁴¹⁵ Gantz cites Posidonius – via Diodorus, Siculus and Strabo – and Caesar.

⁴¹⁶ Gantz, ‘Introduction’, p. 8.

⁴¹⁷ Kenneth Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age* (Cambridge: The Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, 1964), p. 1.

⁴¹⁸ Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*, pp. 2-3.

While Jackson does not intend to imply that any of the people or the events described in the tales are historical, he does maintain that ‘the immediate setting of the oldest Irish hero tales … belong to a period some centuries earlier than the time they were first written down – belong in fact to “*pre-historic*” Ireland’.⁴¹⁹ For instance, the state of endemic warfare between Ulster and the rest of Ireland and various other features of Irish political construction, material civilisation and way of life, suggests Jackson, are all ‘archaic, circumstantial and consistent’.⁴²⁰ It is these features of the tales which lead Jackson to state that ‘the stories provide us with a picture – very dim and fragmentary, no doubt, but still a picture – of Ireland in the early Iron Age’.⁴²¹ In fact, Jackson’s entire work is focussed on what can be learned from the Ulster cycle about life in Ireland during the Iron Age. Jackson, like so many other authors, also uses the Irish law tracts, archaeological evidence and the work of classical writers on the European Celts to back up his claims.

Jackson’s view has formed part of an ongoing discussion amongst Celticists who debate the truth value of the Irish tales generally and the Ulster tales in particular. Utilising the Irish tales by re-telling them in a contemporary form, psychoanalyst Peter O’Connor explores the links between the tales (which he prefers to describe as myths), dreams and modern daily life.⁴²² O’Connor outlines this debate before offering Jean Markdale’s understanding of the significance of myth. In Markdale’s words, ‘There is no need to establish whether myth is true or false, real or unreal, since its very existence suggests that there is a reality and the different aspects under which these realities appear can only be evaluated in their own context’.⁴²³ O’Connor then adds his view to this claiming that, ‘the reality of myth is by and large a psychic reality’.⁴²⁴ O’Connor does not go any further to explaining what he means by this but, given his profession and the reasoning behind his book, it is fair to suggest that by this he means that myth, and the things that can be learned from them, can be considered individual as well as communal.

⁴¹⁹ Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*, p. 4.

⁴²⁰ Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*, p. 4.

⁴²¹ Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*, p. 5.

⁴²² O’Connor, *Beyond the Mist*.

⁴²³ Cited in O’Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 14.

⁴²⁴ O’Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 14.

Ann Dooley's recent work, *Playing the Hero*, examines various aspects of the *Táin* by way of a number of thematic essays which deal with the martial hero Cú Chulainn. By her own admission, Dooley has adopted a circumspect approach as she does not wish to 'foreclose too soon on issues of *what* texts mean', suggesting that a reductionist treatment would not allow her to achieve her goal of looking at 'all the complex and varied aspects of *how* texts ... reveal themselves, of how it is they *come to mean*'.⁴²⁵ Additionally, Dooley does not order her chapters according to any overarching rubric, preferring to present 'local' or microcosmic studies in the text rather than trying to fit the understandings into the larger literary 'whole'.⁴²⁶ In a sense this is what the present study aims at also. The chapters and sub-sections give glimpses into the ways that certain aspects of the tales have been understood and proceed to offer up extensions, revisions and other interpretations given the purposes of this thesis, that is, the connections to sport and games in the tales.

Dooley also comments on the function of the 'reader' on a text and like Jenkins and Rorty suggests that the reader imposes their own understandings upon the text. As Dooley puts it, 'the reader too acts on the text; he completes it, catalyzes it, and, even as I do now, rewrites it, or allows it to come into the contemporary conditions of its existence'.⁴²⁷ Though there are many perspectives about the relationships between and among the author, text and reader, it is Dooley's contention that, for her work, she biases the idea of the 'open text' and of 'reading things into texts'.⁴²⁸ Dooley suggests that 'play' is a feature of treating the work as an open text and she terms it 'a ludic approach',⁴²⁹ something that the present study can appreciate. As in play (and games and sport), some of the most exciting of versions come from those who are not afraid to take chances, who go beyond the expected, stretch the rules and try something hitherto unknown. Dooley cites Jonathan Culler to great effect claiming that 'it would be sad indeed, if fear of "over-interpretation" should lead us to avoid or repress the state of wonder at the play of texts'.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁵ Ann Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), pp. 5-6. Emphasis in the original.

⁴²⁶ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 5.

⁴²⁷ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 7.

⁴²⁸ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 7.

⁴²⁹ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 7.

⁴³⁰ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 8.

3.5 Truth and Sport History

In recent decades, there has been much debate regarding the premises underlying history and sport history. Some historians and sport historians have been excited, even enthusiastic about a pluralist understanding of history. Others, however, have been incited by the suggestion of a pluralist understanding of history and see the relativist position of ‘made’ history (including sports history) as somewhat threatening, not only to the ‘foundations’ of history but to what may be seen as an already tenuous academic position in many universities. According to Phillips, the two ‘poles’ of thought regarding both history and the sub-discipline sport history in terms of postmodernism, are not quite so polar. Phillips suggests that Gertrude Himmelfarb’s position, portraying the postmodern view of history as ‘revolutionary’ and ‘leading to the demolition of history’, is extreme.⁴³¹ Ironically, says Phillips, there are some historians at the other end of the ‘epistemological scale’ (antifoundationalists like Keith Jenkins)⁴³² who agree with Himmelfarb. As Phillips points out, Jenkins suggests that ‘in a really tangible sense postmodernism … seemed to … to signal the end at of least these sorts of conceptualisations of history and, maybe, even the end of thinking historically at all’.⁴³³ There are, according to Phillips, readings of postmodernism between these two poles, readings which are neither as demonic or as cataclysmic, ones that ‘promote critical reflection and analysis as well as significant change but not total destruction of the discipline’.⁴³⁴ It is here that Phillips situates himself.

In a sense, truth and reality in regard to history can be made, can be created. For instance, where binary opposition could prevail between modernist and postmodernist history, Appleby, Hunt and Jacobs have created new conceptions of how their sort of history might work. They have, according to Phillips, ‘enunciated positions on realism, truth and objectivity to create concepts such as “qualified objectivity” and “practical realism”’.⁴³⁵

⁴³¹ Cited in M. G. Phillips, ‘Conclusion’, in M. G. Phillips (ed.), *Deconstructing Sport History: A Postmodern Analysis* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), p. 245.

⁴³² According to Phillips, after exploring the postmodern view of history over three books and advocating postmodern approaches as the best way to represent the past, Keith Jenkins then contended (in *Why History?: Ethics and Postmodernity*, London: Routledge, 1999) that history may have little to offer contemporary culture. Phillips, ‘Conclusion’, p. 245.

⁴³³ Cited in M. G. Phillips, ‘Conclusion’, p. 245.

⁴³⁴ Phillips, ‘Conclusion’, pp. 245-6.

⁴³⁵ Cited in Phillips, ‘Conclusion’, p. 249.

Phillips does, however, admit that there are limits to historical representation. In his view, Holocaust denial is a celebrated example, and anarchic nihilism is not the end point of postmodernist history.⁴³⁶ Phillips gives an example of these limits using sport history:

While Jaggard and Booth can legitimately write competing versions of the history of the lifesaving movement in Australia, there are limits to historical representation. How seriously would Jaggard and Booth be taken if they denied the existence of women as members, competitors, and administrators in surf lifesaving in Australia?⁴³⁷

Douglas Booth has made inroads into the conceptualisation of possibilities for sport history. Having made quite a mark for himself with his astute examinations of both sport, race and politics in his 1998 book *The Race Game: Politics and Sport in South Africa*,⁴³⁸ and in his somewhat famous (at least in sport history circles) ‘debate’ with Ed Jaggard concerning surf lifesaving in Australia,⁴³⁹ Booth has more recently turned his attention to the method and philosophy of sport history.⁴⁴⁰ *The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History*, is Booth’s important and well-received study into the theories of knowledge and the construction and presentation of such in sport history.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁶ Phillips refers to the libel litigation case where historian and Holocaust denier, David Irving was found to have manipulated, misused and misconstrued archival material to make the case that the Holocaust did not exist.

⁴³⁷ Phillips, ‘Conclusion’, p. 248.

⁴³⁸ Douglas Booth, *The Race Game: Politics and Sport in South Africa* (London: Frank Cass, 1998).

⁴³⁹ Including, among others: Douglas Booth, ‘War off Water: The Surf Life Saving Association and the Beach’, *Sporting Traditions*, Vol. 7, No. 2, May 1991, pp. 135-162; Douglas Booth, ‘Swimming, Surfing and Surf-Lifesaving’, in Wray Vamplew and Brian Stoddart (eds), *Sport in Australia: A Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 231-254; Douglas Booth, ‘Healthy, Economic and Disciplined Bodies: Surfing and Surf Lifesaving in Australia and New Zealand, 1890-1950’, *New Zealand Journal of History*, Vol. 32, 1998, pp. 43-58; Douglas Booth, *Australian Beach Cultures: The History of Sun, Sand and Surf* (London: Frank Cass, 2001).

⁴⁴⁰ Douglas Booth, ‘Escaping the Past? The Cultural Turn and Language in Sport History’, *Rethinking History*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2004, pp. 103-125; Douglas Booth, ‘Sport Historians: What Do We Do? How Do We Do It?’, in M. G. Phillips (ed.), *Deconstructing Sport History* (Albany, NY: State University of NY Press, 2006), pp. 27-54.

⁴⁴¹ Douglas Booth, *The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History* (London: Routledge, 2005). There have been numerous reviews, both in history and sport history journals which attest to the significance of this work. The following are examples: Allen Guttmann, ‘Douglas Booth, The Field: Truth and Fiction in Sport History’ [Book Review], *Journal of Sport History*, Vol. 32, No. 3, Fall 2005, pp. 395-400; Tony Collins, ‘Review Article - Work, Rest and Play: Recent Trends in the History of Sport and Leisure’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 42, Issue 2, April 2007, pp. 397-410. Booth’s book

The embracing of additional possibilities in sport history from the 1990s onwards has seen a change in the structure and influence of sport history research. Catriona Parratt identifies a number of main areas of concern for historians of sport during the 1990s. One of these, an area important to this discussion, is ‘the postmodernist assaults on history’s epistemological claims, empiricist certainties and the modernist credo of progress’,⁴⁴² which clearly recognises the profound effect of postmodernism in sport history in recent times. The postmodernist influence was definitely being felt in sport history in the 1990s. As Parratt notes:

... whether it is in the form espoused by Sydnor, the accommodationist version represented in *Coming on Strong* and *The Eternally Wounded Woman*, or simply in a heightened awareness of the need to interrogate what we so often take as givens – class, race, gender, ‘history’ itself – the influence of postmodernism is being felt in the field.⁴⁴³

Despite this, the debate over what is a valid sport history method and what counts as truth and even whether a search for the facts of the past is possible continues today and but for a few exceptions the field of sport history maintains a decidedly modernist approach. The opinion of Wiggins and Mason still holds true when they suggest that it is probably safe to say that most sport historians reject many of the basic tenets of the postmodernist approach.⁴⁴⁴ The charge of relativism in sport history is a cutting one, with many believing that the postmodernist approach only results in what Richard Holt has called ‘dazzling kaleidoscope of impressions where anything can be construed to mean anything’.⁴⁴⁵

was also co-winner of the ‘Book of the Year’ prize awarded by the North American Society for Sport History (NASSH) in 2006.

⁴⁴² C. M. Parratt, ‘About Turns: Reflecting on Sport History in the 1990s’, *Sport History Review*, Vol. 29, Issue 1, May 1998, p. 4.

⁴⁴³ Parratt, ‘About Turns’, p. 14. Parratt refers to two important texts in this citation. The references for these are: Patricia Vertinsky, *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Exercise, and Doctors in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990) and Susan Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport* (New York: The Free press, 1994).

⁴⁴⁴ Wiggins and Mason, ‘The Socio-Historical Process in Sports Studies’, p. 48.

⁴⁴⁵ Cited in Wiggins and Mason, ‘The Socio-Historical Process in Sports Studies’, p. 48.

Certainly, this thesis does not intend to create ancient Irish sport history out of the ether, so to speak. However, any restrictive notions of what might count as truth, fact or reality, and indeed any narrow ideas of the value of tales, myth and narrative, in sport history must necessarily be loosened or even abandoned if there is to be greater illumination and understanding of sport in ancient Ireland.

3.6 Conclusions

Chapter Three has examined various understandings of truth and explained the limitations of searching for *the* truth in a world which may be better understood by seeking and appreciating multiple truths. As Rosenberg so eloquently puts it:

Postmodern histories have the potential to include aspects or dimensions of the past that have been previously excluded, to express relationships to the past that are impossible under the traditional history model and, to share more broadly, understandings of the past appropriate to the contemporary condition. Postmodern histories can tell meaningful stories about the past ...⁴⁴⁶

Further, this chapter has touched on the debate regarding truth as it continues in the academic disciplines of history and sport history and additionally, how notions of truth can and have been applied to myth and narrative.

This thesis adopts the view that there is a need to acknowledge and celebrate the existence of multiple realities. The plurality of possibilities in sport history, as in all avenues of inquiry, is dependent on one's needs, desires and experiences. An understanding of sport-like activity afforded by an examination of the Ulster tales may prove fruitful in offering up new or renewed possibilities for understanding, engaging or appreciating sport history and, indeed, sport itself.

Chapter Four is the first in a series of chapters which delve into various aspects of the Ulster tales. In Chapter Four, the archetypical Irish hero Cú Chulainn is introduced and examined by way of a selective analysis of his physical, social and martial development. The chapter concentrates on those aspects of the hero that are defined

⁴⁴⁶ Cited in Phillips, 'Conclusion', p. 251.

by his engagement in physical activity and the development and performance of acts of physical and martial superiority. Chapter Four also addresses the influence that the hero imposes on the structures of society, particularly those related to sport-like activity in the tales.

Chapter Four

The Heroic Biography of Cú Chulainn

4.1 Introduction

There is a close relationship between heroic action, the making of a hero and sport-like activity. This chapter examines the archetypical Irish hero Cú Chulainn, concentrating specifically on those aspects of the hero that are developed through and defined by his engagement in physical activity and the development and performance of acts of physical and martial superiority. However, while focussing on the role of sport-like activity in the hero's development, this chapter also addresses the influence that the hero imposes on the pre-existing structures of society, particularly those related to sport, games and martial activity in the tales. The warrior hero both defines, and is defined by, physical and martial prowess. This chapter engages in a selective analysis of aspects of the physical, social and martial development of the Irish hero Cu Chulainn.

According to Peter O'Connor, the hero is a mortal who embodies the ideal qualities of the race.⁴⁴⁷ This assessment is somewhat widespread amongst authors writing about mythology. It has been suggested that many of the world's mythologies follow a similar pattern and that the centrality of a 'hero' is common to most.⁴⁴⁸ For instance, Donna Rosenberg claims that:

Heroes are the children of gods who have an unusual birth, possess extraordinary strength, kill monsters with the help of special weapons, embark on an arduous journey, descend into the Underworld as part of their tasks, and have an unusual death.⁴⁴⁹

Despite this formulaic assessment, Rosenberg is quick to note that heroes are not the same throughout the world. This is primarily because they come from cultures that permit them to express their individuality.⁴⁵⁰

⁴⁴⁷ O'Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 125.

⁴⁴⁸ This suggestion has been made most notably by Joseph Campbell, the doyen of world mythological studies. See, in particular, Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

⁴⁴⁹ Rosenberg, *World Mythology*, p. xvi.

⁴⁵⁰ Rosenberg, *World Mythology*, p. xvi.

Barbara Hilliers' paper, 'The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle', examines the 'circle of heroes' that remain constant throughout the various tales attributed to the Ulster cycle. Often, says Hilliers, these men do not play a particularly large or important role in the stories and she suggests that perhaps their presence has more to do with the 'invocation of the heroic world of Emain Macha' than being a requirement of the plot.⁴⁵¹ Hilliers acknowledges that 'the idea of a circle of heroes, gathered around the central figure of a king to defend his honour and drink his wine, ever ready for adventures of a military, chivalric, or amorous kind, is not confined to Ireland'.⁴⁵² Hilliers cites sagas from French and Germanic literature that demonstrate this as well as the most obvious of heroic cycles, the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. In all cases, says Hilliers, 'a historical or quasi-historical figure is surrounded by a cast of champions; the king is the convenient centrepiece and figurehead for a more or less stable group of actors'.⁴⁵³

Hilliers notes that the heroes of the Ulster cycle are not just names but they have:

families, heroic biographies, and often individual stories attached to them. For the most famous heroes, such as Conchobar, Cú Chulainn, or Fergus, we can reconstruct complete biographies, as we possess tales about their births,⁴⁵⁴ childhood deeds, wooings, heroic exploits, and deaths.

Ann Dooley suggests that in the *Táin Cú Chulainn* is represented as the youthful hero *par excellence*. Cú Chulainn's position as the most excellent hero is, according to Dooley, 'clearly marked by the way other characters can themselves be typed as contrastive'.⁴⁵⁵ She posits that:

Other heroes act as points of reference on an age spectrum, whether as equally young but foolish (Etarcomal), younger but also brave (the boy troop), old and wise but impotent (Fergus, Ailill) downright amoral and misgendered as a competent woman fighter (Medb) or old and risible but with good intentions (Illiarch).⁴⁵⁶

⁴⁵¹ Hilliers, 'The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle', pp. 99-106.

⁴⁵² Hilliers, 'The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle', p. 99.

⁴⁵³ Hilliers, 'The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle', p. 100.

⁴⁵⁴ Hilliers, 'The Heroes of the Ulster Cycle', p. 101.

⁴⁵⁵ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 10.

⁴⁵⁶ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 10.

The heroic nature of the warrior and the willingness to put those ends above others (even life) can be evidenced in an example from the *Táin* where the character Cethern chooses three days of full strength then death (so he can attack his enemies) rather than be an invalid for a year and then survive.⁴⁵⁷

While the characters of the Ulster tales are, for the most part, human manifestations, there is a close connection between humans and gods in the tales. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh acknowledges this and makes the observation that:

Irish myth is concerned above all with the relationship between man and the gods, and that the myth of the hero is used as a vehicle for exploring this relationship ... The situation can be stated in structuralist terms: a basic opposition in Irish myth is between man and god, and this is mediated in the person of the hero.⁴⁵⁸

This is not unique to Irish myth of course, and as Ó Cathasaigh points out, all myth systems have opposites which are mediated by a third category which is ‘abnormal or anomalous’.⁴⁵⁹ According to Ó Cathasaigh, the hero in Irish tradition belongs to that third category of being. The hero is neither human nor god but lies between the two: ‘He is at once the son of a god and of a human father; he is mortal and lives out his life among men, but Otherworld personages intervene at crucial moments of his life’.⁴⁶⁰

O’Connor emphasises the importance of the hero in Irish mythology also, with particular emphasis on the relationship between humans and gods. Like Ó Cathasaigh, O’Connor sees the hero as the ‘third position’, lying between gods and humans, and suggests that the relationship between gods and humans can be explored via the specific image of the hero.⁴⁶¹ Ó Cathasaigh identifies two types of hero, the king-hero and the martial-hero. Ó Cathasaigh examines the hero of Irish tradition but while the initial commentary refers to both martial and king heroes, the examples that

⁴⁵⁷ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 36.

⁴⁵⁸ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology’, p. 80.

⁴⁵⁹ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology’, p. 80.

⁴⁶⁰ Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology’, p. 80.

⁴⁶¹ O’Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 126.

follow in the body of the text use the story of Conaire Mór, a king-hero, as the focus.⁴⁶²

This dissertation, however, is primarily concerned with the martial hero as it is he (and rarely she) who most regularly and visibly utilises sport-like activity and martial training in his development and career as a warrior. Cú Chulainn is the quintessential martial-hero, exemplifying the vigorous youth, well trained in all manner of combat techniques and accomplished protector of land and people. Despite this parentage, Cú Chulainn is not able to use any ‘magical’ powers to achieve his ends. While he may have occasion to visit the Otherworld, the fame and honour that is bestowed upon him he gains in the real world. As O’Connor puts it, ‘while divine figures achieve victory in battle through magic, the hero achieves it through physical prowess and will-power’.⁴⁶³

The king-hero and the divine figure in the Ulster tales are not necessarily defined by their physical abilities in the same way as the martial-hero. The king-hero should be ‘complete’ in the sense that he should be in possession of all his limbs and faculties but his physical prowess is not a factor. Cú Chulainn’s identity as a martial-hero (and indeed as the foremost martial hero in the tales) is undeniably linked to his corporeal abilities and, as a result, the training that he undertakes in order to improve, and even perfect, this crucial aspect of his being is critical.

In this chapter the character of Cú Chulainn is selected as an exemplar of the pre-Christian Irish heroic type primarily because he stands out as the most obvious candidate. Despite not being the character which features in the highest number of Ulster tales, Cu Chulainn certainly plays a central role in the action of many. He features heavily in the longest and most prestigious of Irish tales, the *Táin Bo Cúailnge* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley). Moreover, Cú Chulainn is selected here as the subject of this examination as descriptions of his martial learning, game-playing, physical attributes and combat skills both in and out of actual situations of conflict are more numerous than those of the other characters. While one might be tempted to assume that all of Ulster’s warrior heroes underwent similar martial preparation, Cú

⁴⁶² Ó Cathasaigh, ‘The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology’, pp. 79–90.

⁴⁶³ O’Connor, *Beyond the Mist*. p. 125.

Chulainn's exceptional parentage, qualities and abilities leads one to be more cautious. In fact, Cú Chulainn is presented as unique in a number of important ways, both explicitly (as when the text suggests directly that Cú Chulainn is a 'unique youth') and implicitly (such as when his precocious physical abilities are described).

Jeremy Lowe points out that the conceptualisation of Cú Chulainn as an unproblematic heroic figure was most influentially forwarded by Marie-Louise Sjoestedt in 1948. Sjoestedt espoused the idea that the early Irish literature reflected the codes of a heroic society, thus the warrior and his codes functioned as an instrument of the social order.⁴⁶⁴ From Sjoestedt's configuration of Cú Chulainn as 'the hero of the tribe', an assessment supported by later scholars such as Nagy⁴⁶⁵ and Ó Cathasaigh,⁴⁶⁶ one has a clear sense of the role that heroes play in performing deeds of valour on behalf of society.

The hero Cú Chulainn displays precociousness in his actions and maturity but especially in his physical ability. For instance, ordinarily a warrior, even a rather gifted warrior, would not have achieved anywhere close to the martial maturity that Cú Chulainn displays in the *Táin* at the age of just seventeen. Sayers suggests that Medb misreads the age aspect of the sign 'Cú Chulainn'. Ordinarily, the sign 'Cú Chulainn' at the time of the *Táin*, would take on all the aspects of a warrior-hero at age seventeen. However, in this case Cú Chulainn is clearly no ordinary hero. The sign 'Cú Chulainn must be read in terms of an extraordinary human, otherwise one might easily, and perhaps fatally, underestimate his abilities. In the case of Cú Chulainn, 'child equals man and young man equals Hero'.⁴⁶⁷ Cú Chulainn's precocious development was evident, however, at a much earlier stage than his 'cattle raiding' exploits. Throughout his martial, social and political development, as told through a collection of individual tales, Cú Chulainn is consistently represented as

⁴⁶⁴ Jeremy Lowe, 'Contagious Violence and the Spectacle of Death in Táin Bó Cúailnge', in Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland (eds), *Language and Tradition in Ireland: Continuities and Displacements* (Amherst/Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), p. 85.

⁴⁶⁵ See Joseph Nagy, 'Heroic Destinies in the Macgnímrada of Finn and Cú Chulainn', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philology*, Vol. 40, 1984, pp. 23-39.

⁴⁶⁶ See Tomás Ó Cathasaigh , 'Between God and Man: The Hero of Irish Tradition', in M. P. Hederman and Richard Kearney (eds), *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies 1977-1981* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1982), pp. 220-227, and Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology', pp. 79-90.

⁴⁶⁷ Sayers, 'Cú Chulainn, the Heroic Imposition', p. 83.

being ahead, not just of others his age, but of fully trained, adult warriors. Birth tales aside, from Cú Chulainn's initial contact with 'civilised' society, his extraordinary abilities and potential for greatness is evident.

Jeremy Lowe, however, puts forward an alternative view of the impact of the hero Cú Chulainn on the society depicted in the *Táin*. Lowe suggests that the *Táin* questions and subverts the heroic ethos rather than uncritically celebrating it. In Lowe's assessment, the medium of this subversion is violence. The *Táin*, says Lowe, 'reveals the disruptive aspect of warrior function, exploring the chaos of violence unleashed by heroes who fight on behalf of their societies.'⁴⁶⁸

Ann Dooley also suggests that Cú Chulainn's place as an unproblematic archetypal hero can be questioned. From her analysis of Cú Chulainn in the *Táin*, Dooley concludes that:

The writing consciously plays with ... [the] liminal space between childhood and adulthood: the hero is mocked – or mocks his audience – as less than the orthodox fighting male; he hides, disguises himself, fights with unorthodox weapons, allows himself to be seen in undignified situations ... and generally slips in and out of heroic responsibility at will.⁴⁶⁹

In this chapter, the role and significance of the principal martial hero of the Ulster cycle, Cú Chulainn, is examined. This selective analysis touches on aspects of Cú Chulainn's upbringing, early education and physical training, his appearance and the unique set of abilities which sets him apart from the other Ulster heroes in the tales. Chapter Four assesses the impact Cú Chulainn has on the society in which he is depicted as the greatest of all warriors. The analysis will also examine the function of taboos on the behaviour and eventual demise of the hero. This chapter provides the biographic background to the Irish tales' most famous character. It also allows more salient discussion here and in subsequent chapters of the relationship between sport-like activity and the institution of the Irish martial hero as depicted in the Ulster tales.

⁴⁶⁸ Lowe, 'Contagious Violence', p. 85.

⁴⁶⁹ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 10.

4.2 Appearance, Gifts and Attributes

Sjoestedt examines the attributes of Cú Chulainn at the moment he has been accepted as a hero.⁴⁷⁰ Having taken up arms and gone into battle alone and succeeded, Cú Chulainn is placed at the king's knee. Sjoestedt notes that Cú Chulainn is, of course, beautiful (in what Sjoestedt suggests is the 'baroque sense of beauty') although he regularly experiences contortions during the periods of battle rage. From descriptions of the hero's beauty one can only deduce that the standards of beauty are somewhat removed from those constituting beauty today. This description of Cú Chulainn from the *Táin* shows clearly the 'different' factor of the Irish hero:

You would think he had three distinct heads of hair – brown at the base, blood-red in the middle, and a crown of golden yellow. This hair was settled strikingly in three coils on the cleft at the back of his head. Each long, loose-flowing strand hung down in shining splendour over his shoulders, deep-gold and beautiful and fine as a thread of gold. A hundred neat red-gold curls shone darkly on his neck, and his head was covered with a hundred crimson threads matted with gems. He had four dimples in each cheek – yellow, green, crimson and blue – and seven bright pupils, eye-jewels, in each kingly eye. Each foot had seven toes and each hand seven fingers, the nails with the grip of a hawk's claw or a gryphon's clenched.⁴⁷¹

The length of this description in the *Táin* belies the importance of the look of such a hero. Almost grotesque in some ways, Cú Chulainn is clearly set apart from other humans.⁴⁷² However, in addition to his beauty, Cú Chulainn is subject to a *riastradh* or 'war rage', a contortion which is, according to Sjoestedt, 'the manifestation of his warlike valour'.⁴⁷³ Kinsella translates it as a 'warp-spasm' and the description below is from his translation of the *Macgnímrada*:

⁴⁷⁰ Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes* (Toronto: Dover Publications, 2000), p. 67.

⁴⁷¹ Kinsella, *The Tain*, pp. 157-8.

⁴⁷² In the case of sporting heroes today this 'apartness' is no less evident. Sometimes by written description such as in newspapers and sporting magazines but more frequently in the visual mode in photographs and video footage, the sports hero of today is clearly set apart from the milieu. Bulging muscles, extreme flexibility, and displays of almost superhuman feats add to both the visual and descriptive understandings of the modern sporting hero as exceptional. Aligned to this is the modern conception of hegemonic masculinity and femininity which requires that the 'apartness' be of a certain type (or direction) hyper-masculinity for males and a curious hybrid of difference from and conformity to the oftentimes contrary aspects of sport and femininity. See Jim McKay, Michael Messner and Donald Sabo (eds), *Masculinities, Gender Relations and Sport* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000).

⁴⁷³ Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, p. 62.

[It] seemed each hair was hammered into his head, so sharply they shot upright. You would swear a fire-speck tipped each hair. He squeezed one eye narrower than the eye of a needle; he opened the other wider than the mouth of a goblet. He bared his jaws to the ear; he peeled back his lips to the eye-teeth till his gullet showed. The hero-halo rose up from the crown of his head.⁴⁷⁴

Sjoestedt suggests that this warp is a sort of stigmata which confers itself upon the hero during his first exploit. The change in appearance is a physical manifestation of the hero's fury. Sjoestedt likens the Irish heroes to the fierce *Berserkir* of Scandinavia in this war-rage transformation.⁴⁷⁵ Despite Sjoestedt's suggestion, though, it is clear that only Cú Chulainn underwent such a transformation. In addition to being in possession of an impressive and sometimes imposing physicality, Cú Chulainn also has a number of other attributes which assist him in his role as warrior hero.

Cú Chulainn is in the possession of certain *buada* or 'gifts'.⁴⁷⁶ It is not certain as to whether these gifts are considered innate or whether they are regarded as having been given, learned or in some other way acquired. The tales offer conflicting evidence regarding the origins of the gifts as will be discussed below. It would seem however, that most of the characters in the Ulster Cycle tales possess some gifts. Some gifts seem to be specific to an individual, others to the occupation or rank of the character, while still others are more generalised and may be possessed by a number of quite different characters at once. The tale 'The Wooing of Emer' contains the following passage on Cú Chulainn's gifts:

Many were his gifts. First, his gift of prudence until his warrior's flame appeared, the gift of feats, the gift of *buafach* (a game like draughts), the gift of chess playing, the gift of calculating, the gift of soothsaying, the gift of discernment, the gift of beauty.⁴⁷⁷

The passage above also mentions Cú Chulainn's defects. As a mortal hero, Cú Chulainn is in possession of a range of abilities and attributes, both positive and

⁴⁷⁴ Kinsella, *The Tain*, p. 77.

⁴⁷⁵ Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, pp. 62-3.

⁴⁷⁶ The English translations variously term the *buada* as 'gifts' or 'virtues'.

⁴⁷⁷ T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, 'The Wooing of Emer', in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover (eds), *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1936), p. 154.

negative. As indicated above, sometimes the same attribute could be deemed positive and negative, depending on the situation. For instance, of Cú Chulainn it was said he was too young, had no beard, was too daring and was too beautiful. Strangely ‘beauty’ makes both lists, so it is desirable to be beautiful, but to be too beautiful is a defect.

Cú Chulainn is seen as a supreme ‘decoder’. That is, he can read ‘signs’ such as counting how many members comprise an opposing army by examining subtle markers which relate to where the army has been.⁴⁷⁸ Indeed, Cú Chulainn is described as being prudent (it is one of his ‘gifts’), yet his prudence is limited by the ‘war rage’ which comes upon him. Peter O’Connor suggests that the *riastradh* is connected to rage and the inability of those affected to be able to discriminate between friend and foe.⁴⁷⁹ Thus Cú Chulainn is clearly not a godlike figure. The subtleties of his nature and character suggest a typically human individual which both increases a number of possibilities for, and decreases the predictability of actions, thoughts and behaviours enacted by the hero.⁴⁸⁰

In the tale ‘The Wooing of Emer’, Cú Chulainn, defending Emer’s charge that he does not have the strength of a true chariot-chief, points out his unique fosterage details and relates, in a very long-winded way, each of his foster parents and those who have influenced him. He has, he claims, been brought up among ‘chariot-chiefs and champions, among jesters and druids, among poets and learned men, among the nobles and landlords of Ulster’.⁴⁸¹ Accordingly, he has all their ‘manners and gifts’. And in no modest way he claims that because of all this he is ‘the darling of the host and multitude’.⁴⁸²

⁴⁷⁸ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, p. 36. This may be considered as different to the ‘gift of calculating’ which is mentioned in the passage above. In ‘calculating’ the army one surmises that Cú Chulainn can see the army and make a quick and very accurate determination of the numbers therein.

⁴⁷⁹ O’Connor, *Beyond the Mist*, p. 176.

⁴⁸⁰ The female characters also have *buada* although these clearly represent the clerical influence on the tales. Emer’s gifts are listed in ‘The Wooing of Emer’: ‘She had six gifts: the gift of beauty, the gift of voice, the gift of sweet speech, the gift of needlework, the gifts of wisdom and chastity’. Cited from ‘The Wooing of Emer’, in Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, p. 155.

⁴⁸¹ Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 159.

⁴⁸² Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 159.

Laeg, Cú Chulainn's charioteer, also had gifts. He possessed the three virtues of charioteering which he displays in the space of an hour in the 'Intoxication of the Ulstermen', to wit, turning around, backing the chariot in a straight line and 'leap[ing] over gap'.⁴⁸³ It also seems that the possession of gifts and virtues is not exclusively human. In the *Táin*, we learn that Donn Cúailnge, the bull over which the battle is fought, has his own set of virtues:

He would bull fifty heifers every day. These would calve before the same hour on the following day, and those that did not calve would burst with the calves because they could not endure the begetting of the Donn Cúailnge. It was one of the virtues of the Donn Cúailnge that fifty youths used to play games every evening on his back. Another of his virtues was that he used to protect a hundred warriors from the heat and cold in his shadow or shelter. It was one of his virtues that no spectre or sprite or spirit of the glen dared to come into one and the same canton as he. It was one of his virtues that each evening as he came to his ... shed ... he used to make a musical lowing which was enough melody and delight for a man in the north and in the south and in the middle of the district of Cúailnge.⁴⁸⁴

These gifts, it seems, are included in the story to highlight the superiority of the bull especially in terms of his masculinity. That is, his male prowess and virility are expounded and his size and strength are celebrated. Although, having said this, it would seem that the magnificence of this beast was far more wide-ranging especially if one is to believe his penchant for music and melody.

Ultimately, though, Cú Chulainn's gifts cannot prevent his death for as Sjoestedt notes '[a]mid such a luxury of faculties, Cú Chulainn lacks the one most precious to a warrior, one which mythology readily attributes to heroes, namely invulnerability'.⁴⁸⁵ As reinforced in passage above, Cú Chulainn is most appropriately considered as a mortal hero. He is susceptible to injury and ultimately to death itself. In order to most fully appreciate Sjoestedt's comment, one must understand the nature of Cú Chulainn's physicality and, in particular, that aspect which pertains to Cú Chulainn's

⁴⁸³ T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, 'The Intoxication of the Ulstermen', in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover (eds), *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1936), p. 221.

⁴⁸⁴ Cecile O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1984), p. 174.

⁴⁸⁵ Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, p. 69.

martial abilities, for it is these martial abilities which, more comprehensively than the gifts, define the hero. The following section examines Cú Chulainn's early martial learning.

4.3 Cú Chulainn's Early Physical and Martial Learning

Sjoestedt suggests that the heroes of the Irish tales are superior in all aspects of their being.⁴⁸⁶ She mentions three spheres of superiority, namely warfare, magic and intellectual culture.⁴⁸⁷ While all aspects of the hero are important, the nature and traditions of the Iron Age warrior society, within which the tales were couched, demanded that physical and martial preparedness for battle were imperative. Without a reliable warrior class the very existence of the society was threatened. This notion is clearly demonstrated by the angst and fear that emanated from Ulster during the periods of 'debility' as a result of the curse laid by Macha on them for nine generations.⁴⁸⁸ It is by no mistake that Macha curses only the adult, male population of Ulster. It is clear that the potential of adult males for defence of the kingdom is recognised as women and younger males are exempt from the curse. In an era when long range assault weapons were not even dreamt of, the necessity for a well-trained 'hands-on' warrior class was paramount. The importance of developing a reliable warrior class is evidenced by the existence of the 'boy-corps', a group of adolescent males training at arms in Emain Macha. Trained and organised by the older boys, the group is watched carefully on a daily basis by the king himself. The fact that the Ulster tales are themselves devoted to the exploits of this warrior class coupled with the obviously high social status of the Red Branch warriors, indicates the indispensability of the skilled martial 'hero' to such societies. This section looks specifically at the early martial exploits of the principal Red Branch hero, Cú Chulainn.

Cú Chulainn is represented in the tale as being a precocious child. He is adamant that he visit Emain Macha despite the protestations of his mother and he sets off alone at the age of five. It is immediately obvious that this is no ordinary five-year-old.

⁴⁸⁶ Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, p. 69.

⁴⁸⁷ Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, p. 69.

⁴⁸⁸ Eleanor Hull suggests that it was supposed to be five days but that in the case of the cattle raid of Cooley it lasted for about four months ('Old Irish Tabus or Geasa', *Folklore*, Vol. 12, No. 1, March 1901, p. 59). Hull suggests this might just be to show off how great a warrior Cú Chulainn is rather than be a direct challenge to the other story.

Stubborn like a five-year old he is, but Cú Chulainn has a depth of knowledge and understanding that is not expected in one so young. Cú Chulainn sets out alone, armed only with directions from his mother. His mother is clearly aware of the prodigy that is her son as she makes but a feeble effort to have him wait until he can be properly introduced at the capital. This precocious attitude and ability is elaborated upon as the *Macgnímrada* continue. Even at this early age, the hero must be seen to challenge the rules and traditions.

In the use of weapons, Cú Chulainn is clearly ahead of others his own age. For Cú Chulainn, chronological age seems irrelevant. Even at the tender age of five, Cú Chulainn not only possesses but has mastered the use of the toys that will one day be superseded by adult weapons. The ‘toys’ include (depending on the translation) a shield, a spear and a small javelin as well as a hurley stick (made of bronze) and ball (made of silver).⁴⁸⁹ Sayers suggests that while these implements are often translated as ‘toy’ weapons, they were more probably a form of ‘practice’ weapon, weapons without the sharp and deadly aspects. In his discussion of the items in the *Mellbretha*, Sayers suggests that the translation of *bunsach* as ‘toy javelin’ might be a mistranslation and that, for reasons of safety and economy, one would be better advised to picture a spear without a metal tip.⁴⁹⁰ Certainly, though, at this early stage of life and at this time in his career as a warrior, Cú Chulainn does not use the ‘grown up’ versions of such items.

Cú Chulainn uses these ‘toy/practice’ weapons on the way to Emain Macha. The following passage both describes the way Cú Chulainn amuses himself during this journey and demonstrates Cú Chulainn’s exceptional physical skills prior to any formal learning:

[W]ith his hurly he would strike the ball and drive it a great distance; then he pelted the hurly after it, and drove it just as far again; then he threw his javelin, lastly the spear. Which done, he would make a playful rush after them all, pick up the hurly, the ball and the

⁴⁸⁹ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 158; Cecile O’Rahilly (ed.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I* (Dublin: Dublin University Press, 1976), p. 136.

⁴⁹⁰ Sayers, ‘Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland’, p. 117. Refer also to Chapter Two for a full account of the *Mellbretha*.

javelin, while, before the spear's tip could touch the earth, he had caught the missile by the other end.⁴⁹¹

Of course, as Sayers notes, such feat-like activities as this are well beyond human abilities.⁴⁹² Such descriptions may be an exaggeration whose purpose is to show the extreme athleticism and superiority of Cú Chulainn, even as a very young child.

In a further display of precocious and superior ability, Cú Chulainn outplays the 'thrice fifty' boys on the playing fields upon his arrival. It is hard to say for sure whether the figure of 150 boys is an exaggeration. Logistically it seems rather impossible although if the figure is correct it certainly gives some idea of the size of the green needed to accommodate such a number of players training in one area. Despite Cú Chulainn defeating the 150 boys of the corps, Cú Chulainn finds himself in a somewhat precarious position. He is on the green engaged in the 'games' or, perhaps more rightly, in the paramilitary training of the boy-corps, but he has not abided by the conventions of entry into the activity. That is, he has not gained 'surety'.

For newcomers it was customary to ask for and receive 'surety', a kind of protection from the group, prior to joining in. To neglect to receive 'surety' is, it seems, quite dangerous as the group is then within its rights to attack that individual. The tale tells of Cú Chulainn's arrival at Emain Macha and his joining in the activities of the group without first securing this protection. Cú Chulainn rushes into the hurley game, captures the ball and promptly goals. Understandably, the boy-corps is astounded:

In utter amazement the whole corps looked on; but Follamain mac Conchobar cried: 'Good now, boys, all together meet this youngster as he deserves, and kill him; because it is taboo to have such a one join himself to you and interfere with your game, without first having had the civility to procure your guarantee that his life should be respected'.⁴⁹³

⁴⁹¹ T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, 'The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn', in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover (eds), *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1936), p. 138.

⁴⁹² Sayers, 'Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle', p. 62.

⁴⁹³ Cross and Slover, 'The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn', p. 138.

Such a foolhardy action is ill-advised on several levels. Firstly, the boy-corps is fundamentally a military unit.⁴⁹⁴ This means that Cú Chulainn is likely to be maimed or even killed as a result of his not securing protection from this large group of future warriors. Secondly, the failure to gain protection might indicate to the boy-corps that this is likely a lad of non-noble parentage. One might deduce that sons of those other than the warrior class were not expected to become warriors as the boys seem unwilling to allow Cú Chulainn's entrance to the group. However, the youths, once Cú Chulainn has outplayed them, deduce that Cú Chulainn is clearly the son of an Ulster chieftain. This assumption may well result from the troop's knowledge of the upbringing of the sons of noblemen/warriors. While Cú Chulainn could be perceived as lacking breeding and status, as evidenced by his either ignorance of, or disregard for, the conventions of approaching the boy-corps, it seems that the overriding factor is Cú Chulainn's abilities on the field. In a society where parentage is significant, to risk others concluding that he is not of the nobility is counter-productive to Cú Chulainn's ambitions and, in this case, safety. Finally, asking for 'surety' would demonstrate Cú Chulainn's understanding of the norms and practices of the society. Such adherence to convention would be expected of one who was aiming to join the premier band of warrior trainees. Ordinarily actions such as failing to secure protection would result in exclusion at best and death at worst. In this case, however, the perpetrator is exceptional. How Cú Chulainn pushes the boundaries of convention in the society is discussed at length below.

4.4 Cú Chulainn's Martial Skills

Cú Chulainn's primary experience as a warrior, his first foray into battle, is indeed telling. Cú Chulainn sets about shedding first blood as a warrior by defeating the sons of Nechta one-by-one. These three brothers are renowned as warriors of skill and are considered difficult to triumph over in combat. Before each of the three encounters, Cú Chulainn is made aware of the brothers' reputations by his charioteer, Iubar.⁴⁹⁵ One brother, Fioll mac Nechtain, was invulnerable to either point or edge of any kind.⁴⁹⁶ Iubar's information is received somewhat strangely by Cú Chulainn. When

⁴⁹⁴ Later in the *Táin* the boy-corps come to aid of Cú Chulainn while he is recuperating from a fierce bout.

⁴⁹⁵ At this point in his career, Cú Chulainn is using King Conchobar's chariot and team and Iubar has been chosen especially to charioteer the king's team for Cú Chulainn.

⁴⁹⁶ Cross and Slover, 'The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn', p. 148.

told he should be careful, Cú Chulainn says, ‘Not to me should such a thing be spoken ... for I will take in hand my special feat: the tempered and refined iron ball ...’.⁴⁹⁷ It is unclear whether Cú Chulainn had planned all along to use a non-pointed weapon by matter of instinct or whether Cú Chulainn is just a little put out that Iubar thinks he needs to caution him to be careful in the first place. Since Cú Chulainn does not stop Iubar from giving him further advice (on the capabilities of the other brothers for instance), it seems that the challenge is over the need for Cú Chulainn to be cautioned. For his part, Cú Chulainn objects to the advice on each occasion that he receives it, yet his actions are arguably swayed by the advice.

In any case, Cú Chulainn takes his iron ball and hurls it into Fioll’s forehead so that it travels backwards through his skull ‘so leaving his head traversed with a fair conduit for the air’. There is no specific mention of a hurley stick or other means of propulsion for the iron ball other than the verb translated as ‘hurled’, as in the description, ‘... the little lad grasped his ball, hurled it with the exact effect foretold, and he took Fioll’s head’.⁴⁹⁸ There is a precedence of sorts for the use of a ball used as a weapon. When Cú Chulainn is visiting the smith’s property for a feast, he is confronted by a vicious guard dog. In the LL version [Recension II] of the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn disposes of the beast by ‘throwing his playing ball’ down the dog’s throat with great force, then seizing him by the hind legs and dashing him against a rock.⁴⁹⁹

The second of the brothers was called Tuachall mac Nechtain and it is made clear to Cuchullain by Iubar that this brother must be killed by whatever first attempt is made as he has the extraordinary ability to avoid any weapon that faces him. Cú Chulainn has a response, confidently proposing that he will use Conchobar’s spear to pierce the shield over Tuachall’s breast, ‘holing’ his heart and breaking ribs on the side furthest from blow.⁵⁰⁰ The head was removed before the body touched the ground.

The third brother was renowned for swiftness across the water’s surface. His name is Fainnle mac Nechtain and Cú Chulainn is told by his charioteer that the entire world’s

⁴⁹⁷ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 148.

⁴⁹⁸ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 149.

⁴⁹⁹ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 141. In Recension I of the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn he kills the dog by grabbing him around the throat and throwing him against a pillar stone. See O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 141.

⁵⁰⁰ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 149.

swimmers cannot ‘cope’ with him. Fiannle darts out onto the ford and invites Cú Chulainn to come out too. Cú Chulainn is less than impressed by Fiannle’s capabilities as told by Iubar and rejoins Iubar with an example of his own ability in the water, citing his ability to carry a youth on each hand and cross a river without getting wet.

Judging by the language used after being given advice for a third time, it seems that Cú Chulainn is under the impression that his martial skills are in question. Cú Chulainn responds with a kind of boasting which not only sets up the ensuing action but further gives rise to the supreme abilities of this warrior-hero in the making. This passage also adds depth to the descriptions of the activities of the boy-corps as to this point in the story there has been no mention of aquatic activities. As mentioned briefly above, the boys of the corps engage in bathing and swimming activities after their (perhaps more formal) training on dry land. Cú Chulainn, at least, has special skills in the aquatic environment and this adds to his overall representation as a prodigy. Whatever may have transpired to result in Cú Chulainn needing or wanting to carry four boys across the river, the reader is not privy to this information.

Returning to the action in the tale, Cú Chulainn and Fiannle wrestle in the water.⁵⁰¹ Cú Chulainn is clearly in control of the situation and is once again in a position to use Conchobar’s sword to remove the head of an enemy. Cú Chulainn retains the head, as is the custom of the warrior in order to prove that a kill occurred, and allows the body to float downstream.

The passages which depict the slaying of the three sons of Nechtan show the adaptability of Cú Chulainn in a martial setting. Clearly, Cú Chulainn has an extant and extensive repertoire of martial and game skills which he can tailor for use in various situations. However, as is the nature of the heroic tales such as the Táin, the ultimate defence of the state comes down to one individual. The multitude of other Ulster warriors are conveniently neutralised by the curse which affects the adult male population. Cú Chulainn is injured and very much in need of time to recuperate. The god Lug (and Cú Chulainn’s ‘father’ from the Otherworld) comes to visit him dressed

⁵⁰¹ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 150.

as a warrior. As Lug approaches it becomes clear that this is an otherworldly being as he is carrying numerous weapons and performing feats, yet no one in the Connacht army seems to notice him. Cú Chulainn and Laeg are the only ones who seem to see him. Lug dresses Cú Chulainn's wounds and puts him into a deep sleep for three days and three nights so that Cú Chulainn will heal. In the meantime, Lug promises to take Cú Chulainn's place and 'stand against the army for that time'.⁵⁰² By this time, the current boy warriors-to-be have arrived to assist Cú Chulainn but their impact is minimal and rather short-lived. The boy-corps have clearly chosen an inopportune time to assist Cú Chulainn. Lug's promise quite obviously did not encompass the protection of the boy-corps and the 150 boys are met by 150 warriors of Connacht. The result is that only one individual, Follamain, the king's son, walks away. Unfortunately, Follamain is slain not long after. Cú Chulainn asks Lug (in the form of a warrior) to assist in the retribution for the death of the boy-troop. Lug's response at this time shows very clearly the position of the archetypical hero as a solitary one. Lug says, 'I will not stay ... No matter what the deeds of craft or courage a man does in your company the glory and fame and name go to you, not to him. So I will not stay'.⁵⁰³

Clearly, then, the above passages are designed to elaborate on the independence of the hero-warrior. Lug, in the form of a warrior or not, could easily help Cú Chulainn in his efforts against the army, but he does not. The hero-warrior must stand alone. This notion of 'aloneness' is replicated if not literally then metaphorically in the experience of many modern athletes. The status of 'hero' is one most commonly bestowed on an individual. This individual must have the necessary skills, rise to the challenge and be solely responsible for the outcome. This aspect of hero-aloneness may also be responsible for the timing of the boy-corps entry into the fray. It is not desired, nor necessary, that Cú Chulainn has help in defeating the army (although the time to sleep and recuperate could be considered as 'help', it is not military in nature). The glory and honour must go to Cú Chulainn and Cú Chulainn alone.

The fate of the boy-corps is sealed well before they meet the army. They could not survive. To meet the Connacht army without Cú Chulainn would and did end in

⁵⁰² Kinsella, *The Táin*, p. 143.

⁵⁰³ Kinsella, *The Táin*, p. 147.

disaster, but to meet the Connacht army with Cú Chulainn is totally out of the question. But the passage, however, is necessary on several levels. Firstly, the boy-corps must be seen to be strong, brave and worthy as they are indeed the ones who will lead/protect Ulster in the future. Secondly, they must be seen to at least try to help their province. Add to this the debility of the warrior class as a result of the Macha incident and the need for action by this group escalates.

If the boy-corps had arrived slightly earlier or later the outcome may have been different, and certainly if the boy-corps was seen to be helping Cú Chulainn, the ‘aloneness’ of the hero-warrior would have been undermined. Sjoestedt recognises this aloneness and states that the hero is ‘the eternal solitary, he who perseveres when others turn back’.⁵⁰⁴ When Cú Chulainn travels abroad to gain additional martial training, he sets off with two companions. These two soon abandon the hero and he is left to face monsters and phantoms alike by himself.

This independence in all things martial and military (and perhaps in all things in general) is seen in the initial entry into Emain Macha when Sétanta defeats the boy-corps on his own, one against 150. Not long after that, the boy is required to travel alone to Culann the smith’s house which then necessitates the single-handed defeat of the guard-dog. As mentioned above, Cú Chulainn then sets out alone to prove himself a worthy warrior by killing the sons of Nechtan without assistance though advice on method is freely given by Iubar. Individual achievement in the sole protection of the province is important for this hero. Cú Chulainn’s role as protector is not, however, the only influence that this hero has over the society depicted in the tales. Cú Chulainn, as supreme hero, has an impact on the structure and function of the society to which he is aligned. This aspect of Cú Chulainn’s existence as hero is examined more fully in the following section.

4.5 The Impact of the Hero on Borders, Boundaries and Rules

In his paper, ‘Cú Chulainn, The Heroic Imposition of Meaning on Signs and the Revenge of the Sign’, Sayers recognises Cú Chulainn as a superb maker and reader of signs. Sayers notes that the reading of signs is one of Cú Chulainn’s ‘gifts’ (*buada*)

⁵⁰⁴ Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, p. 75.

and he speculates as to whether such gifts are acquired, inherited or ‘developed over time after an initial period of potentiality’.⁵⁰⁵

In the *Táin*, Fergus, an exiled Ulster warrior, recounts Cú Chulainn’s boyhood deeds for Medb and Ailill and the Connachta.⁵⁰⁶ Fergus begins by giving a glowing account of Cú Chulainn’s abilities, gifts and qualities. Most of these elements are conceivably human, for example, Fergus claims that one would not find any man his age equal him in growth, dress, fearsomeness, power, striking power and in sureness of aim, to name a few. The list ends with an example of Cú Chulainn’s hero qualities, namely, possessing the feat of ‘nine men on the every spear point’.⁵⁰⁷ Medb, however, does not believe all the hyperbole, reckoning that by his age he has not developed his manly deeds to any problematic capacity. But Medb has been misled by Cú Chulainn’s age because even when he was younger his deeds were those of a man. So, says Sayers, in the case of Cú Chulainn, child equals man and young man equals hero.⁵⁰⁸

In a hero, it seems, there is a certain amount of precocious development. The *Macgnimrada* (Boyhood Deeds) serve to detail the early exploits of the hero Cú Chulainn. Cú Chulainn’s development of the meaning of signs and, of course, his moulding and shaping of those signs to suit himself, are important both to the story of the *Táin* and the notion of the hero.

Rosenberg suggests that heroes are ‘the models of human behaviour for their society’.⁵⁰⁹ When it comes to the Irish tales the assessment of Sjoestedt may be more applicable. Sjoestedt, writing about the heroes in the Irish tales specifically, suggests that the hero represents the ideal qualities (rather than modelling the behaviour) of the race. The hero’s actions then, are the exception rather than the rule. The principal hero of the Ulster Cycle of tales, Cú Chulainn, does operate within society although he bends, breaks and re-shapes the rules with some regularity in order to satisfy his needs and, indeed, whims.

⁵⁰⁵ Sayers, ‘Cú Chulainn, the Heroic Imposition’, pp. 81-82.

⁵⁰⁶ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 137.

⁵⁰⁷ Thomas Kinsella, *The Tain*, pp. 75-76.

⁵⁰⁸ Sayers, ‘Cú Chulainn, the Heroic Imposition’, p. 83.

⁵⁰⁹ Rosenberg, *World Mythology*, p. xvi.

Sayers suggests that Cú Chulainn, as a child, was unaware of the rules of society and it is only through his actions which violate these rules that Cú Chulainn comes firstly to understand and then re-write these rules.⁵¹⁰ The successful recognition, understanding and acceptance of signs are paramount for one's safety. Cú Chulainn's precocious physical abilities are first explained in the tales in the *Macgnímrada* (Boyhood Deeds). Told to the advancing Connacht army by the exiled Fergus in the *Táin*, one learns that as Cú Chulainn makes his way to the boy corps at Emain Macha he plays with his hurley stick and ball and the toy weapon he has brought with him in order to alleviate the boredom of such a long trip. Cú Chulainn's skill with the javelin and hurley stick is evident as is his superior physical development for such a young age and he displays strength and speed far beyond his chronological age. Such action is not merely precocious, it is humanly impossible. However this is the type of physical superiority which, even at such a tender age, sets Cú Chulainn apart from other warriors and even other heroes. There are several other examples of the hero's early physical development from the *Macgnímrada*. The majority of these deal with Cú Chulainn's redefinition of these rules and conventions on the playing fields and the battlefield and in the assembly halls which showcase the etiquette of society.

These changes to the rules and conventions do not set a precedent for all others but instead leaves the original rules as steadfast as before. It is Cú Chulainn's supreme physical skill and martial strength which forces others to attend to any changes. The changes that Cú Chulainn makes are invariably ones from which he alone can benefit. That is, for all others the rules do not only stay the same, they are even more firm.

Rules and conventions are not the only social structures which are challenged or changed by Cú Chulainn. He also has a profound effect on the boundaries which characterise oppositional understanding in the society. Sjöblom discusses the cosmological and religious meanings attached to boundaries in the Ulster Cycle, particularly in the *Táin Bó Cúailgne*.⁵¹¹ Sjöblom suggests that the hero in these tales, most notably Cú Chulainn, are indeed liminal characters and he follows O Cathasaigh

⁵¹⁰ Sayers, 'Cú Chulainn, the Heroic Imposition', p. 84.

⁵¹¹ Tom Sjöblom, 'On the Threshold: The Sacredness of Borders in Early Irish Literature', in J. P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (eds), *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Belfast and Emain Macha: December Publications, 1994), pp. 159-164.

in noting that the hero type belongs to the boundary area by nature and that the hero is used as a vehicle for exploring the sacred dimension that exists between cosmos and chaos where exists transcendental, sacred knowledge and power.⁵¹² Not only does Cú Chulainn as hero operate on the boundaries in real terms (that is as the protector of the actual physical boundaries of Ulster) but he also operates in the area between community and Otherworld. In effect, his personal and communal relations exist within the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Cu Chulainn is the exception and he is permitted such.

While Medb and Ailill attempt to buy him off, ‘it is impossible for Cu Chulainn to change sides’. It is not just a question of blood ties with Conchobar (as O Cathasaigh has suggested) but it has a mythical explanation as well. O Cathasaigh writes:

The king may be the representation and personification of the cosmos but the hero is the one who stands on its borders protecting it. His existence is dependent on this function; without it he would not be the hero of the tribe – the archetypal perfect individual of the community.⁵¹³

Sjöblom suggests that this hero with his exceptional powers may in fact prove extremely dangerous to Ulster society.⁵¹⁴ In one of the boyhood tales episodes, for instance, where Cú Chulainn must be calmed by water and naked women in order to stop him from destroying Emain Macha, Cú Chulainn’s ability to wield his will is tempered, however, by an imposed set of personal taboos. The notion of taboos and their influence on, and indeed over, Cú Chulainn is discussed in the next section.

4.6 Geasa: Master and Limit of the Hero

Geis is usually translated ‘taboo’ and it is indeed like a taboo, an unconditional prohibition, a sort of categorical imperative of magical character. Robert Welch and Bruce Stewart suggest that a *geis* might be prohibitive or prescriptive, ‘a supernaturally sanctioned injunction to forego or perform certain actions’.⁵¹⁵ The link

⁵¹² O Cathasaigh cited in Sjöblom, ‘On the Threshold’, p. 162.

⁵¹³ O Cathasaigh cited in Sjöblom, ‘On the Threshold’, p. 163.

⁵¹⁴ Sjöblom, ‘On the Threshold’, p. 164.

⁵¹⁵ Robert Welch and Bruce Stewart (eds), *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 212.

between heroes and an all-powerful taboo is not confined by any means to the Irish tales. In fact, Eleanor Hull, writing in 1901, is less than impressed that the most notable works on the ancient custom of taboos had not included evidence from the Irish tales. Hull suggests that the influence of these taboos, or *geasa* in the plural, pervade almost every instance of ancient Irish writing and their power encircles every Irish hero. Such taboos may be tribal, ancestral or personal.⁵¹⁶ They formed a ‘traditional code of chivalrous practice’.⁵¹⁷ The characters of the early literature take such taboos very seriously and, according to Welch and Stewart, they need only be informed or reminded of their existence for them to be compliant to them.⁵¹⁸

Sjoestedt suggests that while some *geasa* are objective, that is, attached to a particular object,⁵¹⁹ the majority are subjective, inherent, she says, in the ‘agent’ and not in the object. Additionally, the more eminent the individual, the more *geasa* they are likely to have.⁵²⁰ As Hull suggests:

As is but natural, the tabus of the Cúchulainn cycle accumulate around the head of the two chief semi-divine personages, Cúchulainn and Conchobhar. Conall, Fergus, Cormac *conloinges* (Conchobhar’s son), and the other chiefs are all more or less affected by them, but not to the same degree.⁵²¹

Some of Cú Chulainn’s *geasa* are: he may not eat the flesh of a dog (Sjoestedt considers this a totemic *geis*); and, he must not give his name to a single warrior (this is an example of a well-known form of name taboo). However, the majority of Cú Chulainn’s taboos relate to his defence of the territory: he is forbidden to allow warriors to trespass on the territory without barring their way before morning, if they come by night, or before night if they come by day; he must not allow birds to feed on the territory without bringing down some of them, or fish to come up the rivers without catching some of them and; a woman may not walk over the land without his knowledge.

⁵¹⁶ Hull, ‘Old Irish Tabus, or “Geasa”’, p. 41.

⁵¹⁷ Hull, ‘Old Irish Tabus, or “Geasa”’, p. 61.

⁵¹⁸ Welch and Stewart, *Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*, p. 212.

⁵¹⁹ Some examples of this include not being able to enter a chariot for 27 days after eating horse flesh and, as Sjoestedt notes, the taboo that is attached to the spear of Ailill Olomm, which must not strike a stone, kill a woman or be placed under the teeth to straighten it.

⁵²⁰ Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, p. 71.

⁵²¹ Hull, ‘Old Irish Tabus, or “Geasa”’, p. 61.

However, only two of these affect Cú Chulainn's physicality and impact upon the place of sport and games in the making of the hero. The *geasa* suggesting that Cú Chulainn not allow birds to feed nor fish to come up the river without catching some suggests that, firstly, Cú Chulainn can catch such creatures easily as this is surely to have been a regular occurrence and, secondly, whether intentional or not this becomes a form of physical practice or training for the hero. Certainly the act of not allowing trespass without barring the way is also physical and indeed tactical and although it differs slightly from the other two in that it has a martial quality, this also can be seen to show the importance of physical skill to the hero.

Ultimately the *geasa* contribute to Cú Chulainn's undoing. He is weakened by being repeatedly tricked into dishonouring his taboos. As it happens Cú Chulainn is caught between two of his taboos. On the one hand he cannot pass a hearth without tasting the food that is being prepared but also he is forbidden to eat dog-flesh.⁵²² Either way the hero is breaking his taboo. In fact, Cú Chulainn seems to know this and he attempts to avoid the dilemma by taking the food (with his left hand) and placing under his left thigh. He then loses strength in these areas which debilitates him completely as he enters his final fight. Despite this, Cú Chulainn still has enough strength and skill to perform his three thunder-feats, as well as throw a spear so that it kills ten men (he does this on two separate occasions) and drive his own chariot (after Laeg is wounded),⁵²³ and to kill two men by dashing them against rocks. Such is the original strength and skill of this hero. But it is his time to die. He watches as those closest to him and most valuable to him (his charioteer and his horses) are killed by the enemy using his (Cú Chulainn's) own spear (as it is thrown back to him). Finally, Cú Chulainn himself succumbs.

While it not taboo for Cú Chulainn to kill women (and it seems charioteers are in this category too) it is nevertheless frowned upon. The chivalrous hero is the protector of women and not the slayer of them. However, in the early Irish tales, the distinction between genders is marked by their role more than their biology. This means that if a

⁵²² Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, p. 78.

⁵²³ See Joseph Nagy, *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, Ireland: Four Courts Press, 1997), regarding Laeg and CuChulainn and the driving of his own chariot as the beginning of the end for Cu Chulainn, pp. 256-257.

woman, or indeed a charioteer is behaving like a man, like a warrior, then Cú Chulainn is justified in killing her (or him). For example, in *TE*, Cú Chulainn kills Ess Enchenn because she was trying to destroy him. In this case, then, the action of killing her is an act of self-defence.⁵²⁴

David Greene, in his symposium paper ‘Tabu in Early Irish Narrative’, suggests that it is evident in the early Irish literature that the notion or at least the term ‘*geis*’ can be seen to have widened in meaning initially to include that which is appropriate to a person’s status and then to what Greene terms a ‘positive obligation imposed by one person upon another’.⁵²⁵ The theme of *geis* refers most prominently, in earlier tradition, to kings and the ritual prohibitions placed upon them. In the Irish sagas there are, according to Greene, cases where the meaning of the word is ‘weakened’. By ‘weakened’, Greene seems to mean ‘expanded’ to include non-kings and certainly non-ritualistic prohibitions. Greene discusses instances in the *Táin* (Recension I) where a challenge to combat by way of a chariot turned in a certain direction (with the left side facing towards the prospective opponent) acts as a form of ‘obligation’ that those challenged must take up.⁵²⁶

Honourable actions are important to the hero. In the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn beheads four of Medb’s men. He does, however, send the bodies (minus the heads, of course) back intact for ‘he did not deem it honourable or seemly to take the horses or garments or arms from the bodies of those he killed’.⁵²⁷ However, when it comes to honourable actions, one of the most critical, in terms of the legend of the hero at least, is the manner in which the hero ultimately dies. The death of the warrior hero is inevitably as poignant as his life, as explained below.

⁵²⁴ Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 168.

⁵²⁵ David Greene, ‘Tabu in Early Irish Narrative’, in Hans Bekker-Nielsen, Marianne Borch, Bengt Algot Sorensen (eds), *Medieval Narrative: A Symposium - Proceedings of the Third International Symposium Organized by the Center for the Study of Vernacular Literature*, Odense University, 21-22 November, 1977 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1979), p. 9.

⁵²⁶ Greene, ‘Tabu in Early Irish Narrative’, pp. 14-15.

⁵²⁷ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 153.

4.7 The Death of a Hero

The hero's death is an important event in creating the legend of the hero. Lowe discusses the passage in the *Táin* where the Uliad are crippled by their pangs and then rise to return to the battle where they will meet their deaths. Lowe suggests that this passage demonstrates the 'ambivalence of the warrior function: it is based on individuality and trappings of glory and status, but it actively pursues the chaos of anonymity and death'.⁵²⁸ In the passage mentioned above, the Uliad warriors awake from a kind of death, only to pursue death itself. The warriors are intimately connected to death in the *Táin*. As Lowe puts it, 'they bring it to others and wait for it themselves'.⁵²⁹ In fact, as Lowe points out, the subjectivity of the warriors 'can only be preserved outside the context of battle'.⁵³⁰ The charioteer Loeg, for instance, regularly describes the warriors as they approach Cú Chulainn. However, once the combat begins, that individualism and order is no longer relevant.

Cross and Slover note that the death of Cú Chulainn violates the image of the hero, as for the warrior-hero there is an 'embarrassment attendant upon representing the unconquerable champion of Ulster falling in battle'.⁵³¹ However, as suggested above, Sjoestedt notes that Cú Chulainn lacks invulnerability, a gift readily given to hero-warriors. According to Sjoestedt, 'the Irish rightly denied this precious faculty to their typical hero'.⁵³² In her opinion, 'it could only serve to diminish him in their eyes, for it offended against the ideal of Celtic heroism which involved a suicidal extreme'.⁵³³

What more fitting a way to prematurely end the life of the warrior-hero than to see him killed in battle. A long sickness or death by trivial means (if there is such a thing) would surely not have been appropriate and, of course, the hero must die young, without an heir.⁵³⁴ That is his destiny and it certainly fits the hero template for

⁵²⁸ Lowe, 'Contagious Violence', p. 92.

⁵²⁹ Lowe, 'Contagious Violence', p. 91.

⁵³⁰ Lowe, 'Contagious Violence', p. 92.

⁵³¹ T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, 'The Death of Cú Chulainn', in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover (eds), *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1936), p. 333.

⁵³² Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, p. 69.

⁵³³ Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, p. 69.

⁵³⁴ Cú Chulainn did have one son, Connla, whom Cú Chulainn killed without knowing who he was.

stories in the indo-European tradition for as Sjoestedt suggests, ‘the hero *par excellence* will die without leaving any posterity’.⁵³⁵

The tale ‘The Death of Cú Chulainn’ recounts dramatically the death of the warrior-hero. He is ever valorous, and dignified even in death. He ties himself to a pillar stone so as not to die sitting or lying down. It is important that the hero die on his feet. He also manages something of a post-mortem revenge for as Lugaid cuts off Cú Chulainn’s head, Cú Chulainn’s sword falls and cuts off Lugaid’s right hand (of course Lugaid promptly cuts off Cú Chulainn’s right hand to match it up again).

It seems almost strange then that Conall the Victorious avenges the death of Cú Chulainn as the two are bound in ‘a comrade’s covenant’.⁵³⁶ This seems a contradiction because all his life Cú Chulainn has faced all manner of challenges and critical moments alone, whereas here, in the event of his death, we learn that he has a pact with Conall. Despite this, the aloneness of the hero holds for Cú Chulainn fights alone to the last and it is only afterwards that he receives assistance (with vengeance). Cú Chulainn the character is dead but the legend of this warrior hero can readily continue.

4.8 Conclusions

Cú Chulainn is the archetypical Irish martial hero because he embodies a superior (even supernatural) physicality. It is his physical abilities in martial practice and execution which place him firmly in the prime defender role. The martial abilities are pre-empted by Cú Chulainn’s physical prowess in sport-like activity and games. As Cú Chulainn matures, the ‘games’ of childhood and the boy-corps are replaced by martial learning and practice. To some extent the ‘childishness’ of the game is left behind. Yet there seems to be some ludic element to his adult exploits, an immaturity offset by superior skills and the notion of impending martial greatness. Cú Chulainn, as hero and defender of the tribe, not only engages in battles on the province’s behalf, he manipulates the very structure of the society itself. Cú Chulainn’s existence disrupts both the natural and established order of the Uliad, yet ultimately, after his death, though the legend endures, the changes that he has enacted do not.

⁵³⁵ Sjoestedt, *Celtic Gods and Heroes*, p. 59.

⁵³⁶ Cross and Slover, ‘The Death of Cú Chulainn’, p. 338.

Having introduced the hero Cú Chulainn in this chapter and the effect his presence had on the Uliad, this thesis now moves to examine more closely the link between sport-like activity and war in the Ulster tales. Chapter Five, examines the sport, games and martial training activities contained in the Ulster tales with particular attention to those activities learned and practiced in the boy-corps and to the feats of arms learned from expert teachers.

Chapter Five

Sport-Like Activity and Education in the Ulster Cycle

5.1 Introduction

The Ulster Cycle of tales represents a heroic age. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that much of the sport-like activity described in the tales is related in some way to martial education and combat. The close relationship that seems to exist between sport-like activity and warfare in the Irish tales is clearly articulated by Raftery:

The Irish tales ... present us with a culture in which warfare is endemic, where fighting is based on individual prowess, and where set-piece confrontations take place between selected champions. Among these people warfare was almost a ritualized sport with a well-defined code of conduct.⁵³⁷

As a prime example of heroic literature, the Ulster tales provide an insight into this close relationship between sport-like activity and war, particularly in the training for war and the posturing (both verbal and physical) and boasting that precedes conflict. Indeed, as Williams and Ford suggest, it represents ‘a time where military might was a thing to strive for as life’s highest good, rather than as a means to secure the fruits of peace’.⁵³⁸ With both the weight of the importance of military prowess and the intimate connection between sport and war in mind, this and the following two chapters examine the nature and significance of sport-like activity in the early Irish Ulster Cycle of tales. In order to do this effectively, a typology is devised which separates physical, sport-like activity in terms of its function. These three general and rather arbitrary categories to which the sport-like activity in the tales have been assigned are not to be considered as essential but instead functional and useful in organising and discussing a number of activities, events and tales.

The category types are as follows: 1) Sports and Games in Martial Learning; 2) Sport-Like Activity in Relation to Combat;⁵³⁹ and 3) Sports and Games and Displays of

⁵³⁷ Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland*, p. 141.

⁵³⁸ Williams and Ford, *The Irish literary Tradition*, p. 13.

⁵³⁹ An identification and analysis of the relationship of sport-like activity to combat and, in particular, single combat is undertaken in Chapter Six.

Heroics and Superiority.⁵⁴⁰ The first of these is discussed in the present chapter and the elements are arranged in what amounts to a chronological order in terms of the age or development of the agent, that is, the ‘doer’ of the activity. However, the ordering of these elements is not to be understood as offering a fixed account of when these activities occur in the life-cycle of the warrior hero or other agent. This chapter, then, covers two basic areas of martial learning: the games of the boy-corps and feats learned from expert teachers.

5.2 Sports and Games in Martial Learning

The category of Sports and Games in Martial Learning includes those instances of sport-like activity which occur in the earlier, learning phases of a warrior’s career. The activities grouped together here are sourced primarily from the *Macgnímrada* (‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’), *Tochmarc Emire* (‘The Wooing of Emer’) and *Foglaim ConCulainn* (‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’). According to the Ulster tale, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, it seems that youngsters who aspired to be warriors gathered at Emain Macha to be part of the boy-corps, an elite group of young, aristocratic boys. The corps trained daily in physical activity and rudimentary martial skill learning. ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’ is a series of extracts about Cú Chulainn’s childhood which are told to the Connachta army and their supporters by Fergus who is in exile from Ulster over a dispute involving a woman. The tale gives important background information for the *Táin*. The ‘Boyhood Deeds’ are told to the Connachta (Medb, Ailill and their troops) as they prepare to engage Cú Chulainn in the cattle raid. Fergus tells the tale to indicate to the hosts the nature of the character with whom they are dealing with in Cú Chulainn.

The tales *Tochmarc Emire* (‘The Wooing of Emer’) and *Foglaim ConCulainn* (‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’) both have passages which include accounts of how Cú Chulainn learned feats of arms from the warrior woman Scáthach (the ‘Shadowy’). *Tochmarc Emire* deals primarily with the trials and tribulations that Cú Chulainn goes through to secure for himself the marital commitment of Emer, a woman of equal age, form and race to Cú Chulainn, and one who satisfied Cú Chulainn’s conditions of being equal in skill and deftness and who was the best handiworker of all the maidens

⁵⁴⁰ An identification and examination of activities that can be categorised under the heading ‘Sports and Games and Displays of Heroics and Superiority’ are discussed in Chapter Seven.

in Ireland. Emer alone fulfilled all these conditions. As part of his ‘wooing’ of Emer, Cú Chulainn travels to visit a number of warriors who train him in martial arts.⁵⁴¹

The tale *Foglaim ConCulainn* (‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’) is an extended version of the journey that Cú Chulainn undertakes to secure this expert training. Whitley Stokes translated the tale for the 1908 issue of *Revue Celtique*. Stokes suggests that the tale, although defective in parts, has importance in that it makes some parts of *Tochmarc Emire* intelligible. In order to more effectively discuss their contents as they relate to martial learning, these three tales are outlined below.

Outline of the Tale *Macgnímrada* (‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’)⁵⁴²

Cú Chulainn, at the age of five, hears of the boy-corps from his mother and decides to visit Emain Macha to test the boy-corps ‘at their own sports’.⁵⁴³ Despite his mother’s protestations that he was too immature, the precocious lad asked for directions and set out alone for Emain Macha. On his long journey to Emain Macha, Cú Chulainn takes with him his hurley, made of brass, his ball of silver, his throwing javelin and his toy spear.⁵⁴⁴ When Cú Chulainn does reach Emain Macha he encounters the 150 boys of the boy-corps ‘hurling on the green and practicing martial exercises’.⁵⁴⁵ The boys think that Cú Chulainn must be the son of ‘some petty Ulster warrior’ because he does not follow the procedure for seeking ‘safe-conduct’.⁵⁴⁶ Cú Chulainn joins the boys and is set upon as an outsider. Cú Chulainn runs to where the king is playing fidchell. The king stops Cú Chulainn and informs him of the need for securing protection from the corps. Cú Chulainn then joins the boy-corps. The next five episodes are unique to Recension I of the *Táin* and they see Cú Chulainn, firstly, unable to sleep for want of a pillar stone at his head and feet. The bedding arrangement is altered at his request. Secondly, a man attempts to waken Cú Chulainn but Cú Chulainn when aroused dashes his brains out. In the third episode,

⁵⁴¹ Cross and Slover suggest that this aspect of the tale is an addition of earlier material to the ‘later’ (eighth century) wooing tale in ‘the Wooing of Emer’, p. 153.

⁵⁴² This summary is drawn from the LU version of the *Táin* (Recension I) as it contains five episodes of the *Macgnímrada* not found in the LL version. For an in-depth consideration of the various versions of the tale see Daniel Melia, ‘Parallel Versions of “The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn”’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, Vol. X, No. 3, July 1974, pp. 211-226.

⁵⁴³ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 137.

⁵⁴⁴ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 138.

⁵⁴⁵ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 138.

⁵⁴⁶ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 138.

Cú Chulainn is playing with the boy-corps and he accidentally kills 50 of them. Cú Chulainn runs to the king's bedchamber and Fergus makes peace between him and the corps. The fourth LU episode sees Cú Chulainn leave the king's house because he hears King Conchobar groaning after a fight between the Ulstermen and Egon Mac Durthacht. Cú Chulainn first encounters Fergus, then an otherwordly being whom he wrestles, and then he finally comes across Conchobar. He retrieves some pig meat for Conchobar which helps him recover from his battle wounds and Cú Chulainn carries him back to Emain Macha.

The final LU episode not found in the LL version is where the Ulstermen are in the grips of their pangs and 27 marauders attack Emain Macha. The boy-corps comes to help but all are scared away except Cú Chulainn who kills nine of the men and scares away the rest. The next and subsequent episodes of the tale are the same for LU and LL. Cú Chulainn is invited to attend a feast with the Ulster nobility at Culann the Smith's residence. Cú Chulainn is busy on the playing fields and decides to follow along afterwards. Forgetting that Cú Chulainn is to follow, the king tells Culann to go ahead and release his guard dog after the main party arrive. Subsequently the boy arrives and is confronted by the vicious dog. With all the ruckus, the king remembers that Cú Chulainn is due to arrive and they are all sure that the boy has been killed by the dog but they underestimate Cú Chulainn. The boy kills the dog using a hurley ball (or using his bare hands in another version of the tale). The episode ends with an explanation of the relevance of Cú Chulainn's name ('Hound of Culann'), as Cú Chulainn takes up the role of guard dog for Culann until a worthy pup can be appropriately trained. The final episode in the *Macgnímrada* is Cú Chulainn's taking up of arms. Cú Chulainn overhears the druid Cathbad telling some boys that it was an auspicious days for someone to take up arms. Cú Chulainn deceives the king by telling him that Cathbad told him specifically that he should take up arms. King Conchobar helps the boy by giving him weapons and Cú Chulainn sets out to the border to seek combat. He finds and defeats the three sons of Nechta and starts to make his way back to Emain Macha. On his approach it is noticed that Cú Chulainn is overcome with 'battle rage' and a strategy is quickly devised where, as a diversion, a number of women bare their breasts at him. This gesture embarrasses Cú Chulainn so much that he turns his head away long enough for him to be seized and dunked into

vats of water until his battle rage subsides. Cú Chulainn then takes up his place in the court at the king's feet.

Outline of the Tale *Tochmarc Emire* ('The Wooing of Emer')

In this tale Cú Chulainn, although still a youth, finds himself 'wooing' Emer, who eventually becomes his wife. The men of Ulster have realised that Cú Chulainn is so beautiful that there is a chance that the wives and daughters of the Ulstermen will be seduced by him. There is also some concern that Cú Chulainn may not produce an heir. Convinced that marriage is a good idea and with messengers being unable to find an appropriate maiden, Cú Chulainn goes to Emer but before she will have him as her husband she sets him several physical challenges, including slaying hundreds of men and staying awake for a year. In the meantime, Forgall the Wily, Emer's father, who is against the marriage, visits the court at Emain Macha disguised as a foreign dignitary. Forgall convinces Cú Chulainn to travel abroad to better his warrior skills, all the while hoping that Cú Chulainn will be killed while he is away. Cú Chulainn, then, journeys abroad to visit the best warrior camps in the known world. Travelling with Conchobar, Conall and Leogaire, Cú Chulainn stays at two such camps, one run by Donall (a male) and the other run by Scáthach (a female). At both camps Cú Chulainn hones his warrior skills under the tutelage of expert teachers. While fighting for Scáthach, Cú Chulainn overpowers a neighbouring warrior-woman and ends up fathering a son to her. The child, Connla, features in another tale, 'The Tragic Death of Connla'. Cú Chulainn, after returning to Ireland, sets about achieving the challenges set by Emer. They are married and according to this story they were not separated until their death.

Outline of the Tale *Foglaim ConCulainn* ('The Training of Cú Chulainn')

The tale *Foglaim ConCulainn* ('The Training of Cú Chulainn') is an extended version of the journey that Cú Chulainn undertakes to secure expert training. Whitley Stokes translated the tale for the 1908 issue of *Revue Celtique*. Stokes suggests that the tale, although defective in parts, has importance in that it makes some parts of *Tochmarc Emire* intelligible. 'The Wooing of Emer' and 'The Training of Cú Chulainn' do differ in content at times, notably for the purposes of this thesis in the warrior camps that Cú Chulainn stays at and in the length of time spent there.

The tale begins with Cú Chulainn embarking on a journey ‘to get his training’ with Leogaire the Victorious and Conall the Triumphant. At the very first stop, the expert teacher, Dordmir, only allows Cú Chulainn to train with her so his companions return to Ireland. Cú Chulainn stays at the Dordmir’s camp for a year when he is informed of an even greater teacher, Scáthach. He leaves the first camp and travels to Scáthach’s camp. After proving his worth Cú Chulainn is permitted to stay at the camp. Then, after surviving an attack from the Scáthach’s warriors, killing one of her sons in single combat and sharing a night with her daughter, Cú Chulainn uses knowledge gained from the daughter to force Scáthach into training him. He stays with Scáthach for a year before travelling to visit the warrior woman Aífe, who suggests that Cú Chulainn needs to stay and complete the final aspects of his training with her. Again, Cú Chulainn stays a year. By the time Cú Chulainn is ready to leave, Aífe informs him that she is pregnant to him. Cú Chulainn leaves Aífe’s stronghold and on the way back to Scáthach’s camp he meets a hag. She asks him to move out of the way on the narrow pass but when he does so she attacks him and Cú Chulainn kills her.

After returning to Scáthach’s camp Cú Chulainn finds several Irish warriors including Ferdiad, so Cú Chulainn stays for another year at Scáthach’s camp, learning alongside them. At the end of a year they all leave but not before Scáthach binds them all in honour and friendship. They pay their fees and leave.⁵⁴⁷ The warriors are not heard of until they reach a kingdom run by Aed the Red. The warriors decide to ask for lodgings for the night and Cú Chulainn goes off alone to secure some live birds to take to the fort while the others go to find Aed. While on his own, Cú Chulainn comes across 200 men and women weeping and lamenting over the imminent departure of the king’s first born child (a beautiful damsel) as a part of a tribute to the tribe of the Fomorians. Three men arrive to take their ‘tribute’ and on seeing Cú Chulainn they think he is part of the tribute. Cú Chulainn disposes of the three and then, deciding that it was not right to speak to the damsel any further, leaves her alone and re-joins his comrades at the fortress of Aed. Cú Chulainn does not tell his companions of his adventure. Though sad after losing his daughter, Aed welcomes the Irishmen in anyway. Not long after, the damsel approaches the fortress. She tells

⁵⁴⁷ These may well be ‘fosterage fees’ as in other texts both Cú Chulainn and Ferdiad refer to Scáthach as their foster mother.

her father of the events that took place and Aed is very pleased. Cú Chulainn is offered the tribute instead. Cú Chulainn divides the tribute evenly, one third each to the Irishmen, the Fir Catt and towards the damsel's dowry. After staying with the Fir Catt for six weeks they return to Ireland where they are welcomed back and receive many accolades and gifts, partly because they had earned a very fierce reputation which brought great wealth and respect to Ulster.

5.3 Sport-Like Activities of the Boy-Corps at Emain Macha

The boy-corps is, evidently, the vehicle for the early physical and martial training of the warriors protecting the province of Ulster. The 'capital', Emain Macha, played host to a group of around 150 boys/youths who are translated in the tale variously as the boy-corps,⁵⁴⁸ the boy-troop,⁵⁴⁹ or the youths.⁵⁵⁰ From the *Macgnímrada*, the 'Boyhood Deeds', some insight can be gleaned into the nature and significance of games and sports in the early training of the future warriors in the Ulster tales.

The king invested much of his day in observing the boy-corps. The following passage indicates King Conchobar's level of interest in the progress of the youths:

For this is how Conchobar spends his time of kingship since he assumed sovereignty: as soon as he arises, settling the cares and business of the province, thereafter dividing the day into three, the first third of the day spent watching the youths playing games and hurling, the second third spent in playing *brandub* and *fidchell* and the last in consuming food and drink until sleep comes on them all ...⁵⁵¹

Clearly, though, watching the play of the youths is a pleasurable pastime for the king as he has already taken care of the politics of sovereignty and then devotes the rest of the day to enjoyable activities and indulgences. The observance of the youths at their games is aligned with the other two 'pastimes' of playing board games (*brandub* and *fidchell*),⁵⁵² and feasting, both pleasurable, rather than instrumental, activities. Additionally, while Conchobar watches the boys, he could not be said to 'watch over'

⁵⁴⁸ Cross and Slover, 'The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn', p. 137.

⁵⁴⁹ Kinsella, *The Tain*, p. 76.

⁵⁵⁰ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 158 (also 'youths and boys').

⁵⁵¹ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 158.

⁵⁵² See Chapter Seven for a discussion on the types and purposes of board games in the tales.

them. While Conchobar does come to the ‘rescue’ of Cú Chulainn as he is being chased by the corps,⁵⁵³ there is no indication that the king interferes with the actual training of the corps.

In regard to the leadership and administration of the boy-corps, it seems that, in this case at least, the boys were under the control of the king’s son Follamain. It is unclear from the tales whether or not adult warriors played any part in the boy-corps’ early education, though the requirements of fostering a young noble male would probably include at least an introduction to such things.⁵⁵⁴ It could be suggested that after years of virtually the same training methods that an older boy, or in this case a boy of exceptional parentage, would lead the others in their training. Although the age of Follamain is not mentioned in this tale, the wording of the translation above suggests that Follamain considers himself as apart from the corps itself. Follomain is the one who directs the boys to attack Cú Chulainn and in the translation by Cross and Slover, there is a specific reference to Follomain as the ‘head’ of the boy-corps.⁵⁵⁵ The youths themselves are variously referred to as ‘kings’ sons’.⁵⁵⁶

The play of the boys was undoubtedly designed to aid their education as warriors. Training activities were primarily competitive, and sometimes combatative, either between groups or individuals. In the case of Cú Chulainn, however, the ratio was often higher with Cú Chulainn pitted individually against the rest of the troop, such was his skill. The following sections outline, analyse and discuss the games and sport-like activity of the boy-corps of Emain Macha as indicated by the tale ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’. The first activity examined is hurley, followed by an analysis of a kind of ‘stripping’ game, wrestling and forms of aquatic activity. Each of these important training activities is discussed in more detail below.

⁵⁵³ At one point in the tale, Cú Chulainn is fleeing from the youths and is chased into the area where Conchobar and Fergus – the narrator of the tale- are playing *fidchell*. Conchobar involves himself in settling the situation down by explaining to Cú Chulainn the conventions for joining the boy-corps. More discussion of Cú Chulainn’s challenge to the conventions can be found in Chapter Five.

⁵⁵⁴ Fergus Kelly notes that in the early Irish legal texts, the son of a king or nobleman must be maintained by their foster-parents in accordance with his rank and thus be taught board games as well as horsemanship, swimming and marksmanship (which Kelly later refers to as ‘outdoor sports’). See Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), p. 87.

⁵⁵⁵ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 138.

⁵⁵⁶ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 160.

a) **Hurley**

Historical references abound throughout the world for stick and ball games. Stanaland suggests that in most cases both the original name and intent of the games have changed over the years and that many of these games have ‘lost their identity’ with the passage of time.⁵⁵⁷ Irish hurling is one notable exception to this rule.

The activity mentioned is translated by Cross and Slover as ‘the hole-game’ where the principal aim of the game seems to be to get the ball in the ‘hole’. The game is translated by Sayers as ‘hurley’, although he notes that it was more probably an antecedent of the hurley, and suggests that the literal translation is ‘driving, or playing, the ball’,⁵⁵⁸ while Ross suggests that the stick and ball team game was actually known as ‘baire’.⁵⁵⁹ The game is, nevertheless, mentioned in the very earliest of manuscripts and often appears in translations of the Ulster tales as ‘hurley’. Whatever the name, this game, suggests Ross, was ‘probably closely similar to the modern ‘caman’ played in the Scottish Highlands ... and somewhat akin to hockey’.⁵⁶⁰ MacLennan cites several examples of translations of the Irish tales where ‘shinty’ (and its associated terms such as the ‘caman’ for the club or stick) is used instead of hurley or ‘hurling’.⁵⁶¹ The Scottish game of ‘shinty’ is, according to MacLennan, a sporting and cultural ‘cousin’ to hurling. In fact, suggests MacLennan, shinty was introduced into Scotland by Irish missionaries.⁵⁶² These authors agree, however, that as far as the rules went ‘the goal’ was a hole dug in the ground and the opposition’s goal would be defended as one’s team endeavoured to hit the ball into their own goal at the other end of the field. The principal aim of the game seems to be the getting of the ball in the ‘hole’ as the following passage from ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’ suggests:

... when they played the hole-game and it was their turn
to aim at the hole, it being his to defend it, he stopped all
thrice fifty balls just at the edge of the hole, so that not one

⁵⁵⁷ Peggy Stanaland, ‘Hurling: An Irish Social and Political Identity’, in N. B. Bouchier (ed.), *Proceedings and Newsletter* (Albuquerque, NM: North American Society for Sport History, 1993), p. 34.

⁵⁵⁸ Sayers, ‘Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland’, p. 107.

⁵⁵⁹ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 97.

⁵⁶⁰ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 97.

⁵⁶¹ MacLennan, ‘Shinty and the Celtic Celebration of New Year’, p. 84.

⁵⁶² MacLennan, ‘Shinty and the Celtic Celebration of New Year’, p. 84.

went in; when the defence was his and it was his turn to shoot, he would hold the entire set without missing one.⁵⁶³

Despite contention concerning the origins of the game, MacLennan suggests that hurling has such distant ancestry that it is impossible to pin down its origins.⁵⁶⁴ MacLennan uses the evidence of the Irish tales to show that hurling had devoted followers more than a thousand years before the birth of Christ and cites as an example a tale from the mythological cycle where, supposedly, the invading and defending armies in the Battle of Moytura agreed to a hurling contest in preparation for the battle.⁵⁶⁵ This dates the sport, according to MacLennan, as early as 1272 BCE.⁵⁶⁶

Stanaland suggests an even earlier start point and goes on to explain the importance of the game by examining the extent of the evidence in Irish history and literature.⁵⁶⁷

Translators and interpreters of these manuscripts have given reference to hurling as a part of Lughnasa festivals dating as far back as 1500 B.C. Legendary heroes carried a hurley stick as routinely as a sword, fields for hurling were maintained on the lands of nobles ... sticks and balls were left as an inheritance; and stories and legends that were such a significant part of the oral history of Ireland abound with incidents of hurling feats.⁵⁶⁸

It is clear from this passage that hurling was (and is) an important part of Irish culture. Stanaland also notes that despite the fact that many people, particularly in the United States, trace their heritage back to Ireland, their Irish ancestors did not bring hurling with them to any great degree.⁵⁶⁹ Importantly, suggests Stanaland, the unique ‘Irishness’ of hurling furnished ancient poets and storytellers with a subject matter

⁵⁶³ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 140.

⁵⁶⁴ MacLennan, ‘Shinty and the Celtic Celebration of New Year’, p. 85.

⁵⁶⁵ The battle of Moytura is used by Egan to date the origins of the Tailteann Games though Egan claims the date of this battle was 1896 BC and not 1272 BC as MacLennan suggests. See Egan, ‘The Spirit of the Celts in Sport’, p. 37.

⁵⁶⁶ MacLennan, ‘Shinty and the Celtic Celebration of New Year’, p. 86.

⁵⁶⁷ Stanaland, ‘Hurling: An Irish Social and Political Identity’, p. 34.

⁵⁶⁸ Stanaland, ‘Hurling: An Irish Social and Political Identity’, p. 34. *Lughnasa* celebrations occurred on 1 August. *Lughnasa* was a Celtic religious event accompanied by a fair or assembly to welcome a new season.

⁵⁶⁹ Stanaland, ‘Hurling: An Irish Social and Political Identity’, p. 35.

that, ‘has helped perpetuate heroic characteristics of a people’.⁵⁷⁰ MacLennan quotes a passage from MacNeacail’s book *Scáthach the Warrior Queen*, recounting a rather stylised and perhaps even modern translation of the tale ‘The Wooing of Emer’ or, more specifically, the ‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’. The hero Cú Chulainn travels to a warrior training camp run by the warrior woman Scáthach and upon arrival at the camp she challenges Cú Chulainn to a ‘shinty’ match.

‘We’ll have a game of shinty,’ was the first thing she said ... then she picked up a caman, with its bent end of hard flat edges, that she had hooked in to her belt, and a hard wooden ball from a pocket in the front of her dress. I thought, this is a waste of time. I’m supposed to be here to learn the arts of war, and she’s going to play a game. But I didn’t say anything to her – after all we didn’t have teams so how could we play a game like shinty? Then she gave a shriek of a whistle that nearly tore the inside of my ear out! And suddenly we were surrounded by sturdy men with camans in their hands. ‘Choose your team,’ she said, ‘I’ll be watching how you play. A good player will make a good warrior’.⁵⁷¹

It is clearly the case that in the tales there is a strong conceptual and practical link between sports and games and warrior training activities. Further, it is deemed that successful participation, even dominance in sport and games, is a strong indication of expected success as a warrior. The stylised version, a modern translation, highlights the link between hero and hurley to an even greater degree than the more ‘traditional’ or ‘literal’ translations. Possibly, this points to the importance of the link between the sport in its modern form and Irish nationalism.⁵⁷²

In the *Táin* (Recension I) version of the ‘Boyhood Deeds’, Cú Chulainn bides his time en route to his destination of the smith’s house by ‘playing’ with his hurley, ball and

⁵⁷⁰ Stanaland, ‘Hurling: An Irish Social and Political Identity’, p. 35.

⁵⁷¹ Aonghus MacNeacail, *Sgàthach the Warrior Queen* (Edinburgh: Balnain Books, 1993), pp. 15-16.

⁵⁷² Both Lincoln Allison and Sugden and Bairner indicate the close link between hurling and Irish nationalism. Speaking of Gaelic football and hurling, Allison suggests that they have ‘had an image deriving most of their history of being ‘fenian’ or nationalistic, Celtic, anti-British and ‘taig’ (peasant)’. Lincoln Allison, ‘Sport and Nationalism’, in J. Coakley and E. Dunning (eds), *Handbook of Sports Studies* (London: Sage, 2000), p. 348. Sugden and Bairner suggest that ‘even today, while Gaelic football may be the most popular of Irish sports, because hurling suggests an unbroken link with the island’s ancient past, it is considered by purists as the definitively Irish game’. John Sugden and Alan Bairner, *Sport, Sectarianism and Society in a Divided Ireland* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993), p. 24.

spear. As the smith's guard dog approached him, Cú Chulainn was not interrupted from his play. O'Rahilly's translation reads: '... he would throw his ball and then throw his hurley after it so that it struck the ball, neither stroke being greater than the other. And he threw his toy spear after them and caught it before it fell'.⁵⁷³ The *Táin* (Recension I) also includes a mythically charged chapter named 'The Fight between Eógan mac Durthacht and Conchobar'. After being 'thrown', then insulted, by a phantom, Cú Chulainn rises to his feet and uses his hurley stick to both strike off the head of the phantom and to 'drive the head like a ball before him across the plain'.⁵⁷⁴

Although combat related, there is a passage in the *Táin* (Recension I) whereupon 27 marauders attack the Ulstermen while they are in their 'debility' and the boy-corps heard them. All the other lads ran away, leaving Cú Chulainn to cast stones at them and attack them with his hurley. The passages above indicate that the hurley was used both in the training of warriors but was also pressed into service as a useful weapon, at least by the younger warrior. This fluid transition of sporting implement to weapon of opportunity is discussed more fully in a later section of this chapter.

As a corollary to this section on the stick and ball game hurley, mention should be made of a second game mentioned in the tales that involves a ball. There is a reference in the *Táin* (Recension I) to Cú Chulainn 'playing ball' against 'thrice fifty' boys and defeating them.⁵⁷⁵ It cannot be ascertained if this is some additional ball game, such as perhaps a primitive football-type activity. There is no additional information on such an activity but it is clear that this game was a part of the training regime of the boys. Moreover, there is no indication as to whether this 'ball' was a larger ball or the type more like the one used in hurley (which was small enough to be driven into the mouth of a guard dog). In discussing *Mellbretha*, the Old Irish legal document which outlines the levels of liability for various games and physical activities, Sayers suggests that there may have been a ball game of sorts but little evidence exists in the tales to support this.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷³ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 141.

⁵⁷⁴ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 139.

⁵⁷⁵ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 140.

⁵⁷⁶ Sayers, 'The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic', p. 154.

The next sport-like activity examined here relates initially to warrior training but, like hurley, the skills honed in the training of the next activity also transfer to the realm of combat. The following section looks specifically at the use of precise and controlled strokes (of hand or sword), depicted in early martial training as ‘the stripping game’.

b) The ‘Stripping Game’

The ‘stripping game’, as it is termed in some translations, seems to be an activity where combatants try to ‘strip’ the clothing from each other. The boys take turns to try to grab, tear or cut clothing from their opponent’s body without actually injuring them. According to the *Táin* (Recension I), when the corps were ‘engaged in the game of stripping one another, [Cú Chulainn] would strip them all stark-naked but they could not even take his brooch from his mantle’.⁵⁷⁷

Sayers mentions this example of the stripping contest in his examination of the *Mellbretha* or ‘Sports Judgements’. Although mentioned in Chapter Two of this thesis, for ease it is appropriate that this work is again briefly summarised here. *Mellbretha* is an Irish law tract related to sporting actions thought to date from the seventh century. It lists some 25 games and sports and classifies them by the degree of legal liability attached to the participants.⁵⁷⁸ Many of the activities contained in *Mellbretha* appear in one form or another in the early Irish tales. According to Sayers, item eleven of *Mellbretha*, *Immarchor uanán*, can be literally translated as ‘mutual casting (off) of clothes’. Sayers comments that such an activity was a recognised contest among youths.⁵⁷⁹ This skill (feat) is represented in the tales as *béim co commus*, translated variously as ‘stroke of precision’,⁵⁸⁰ or ‘well-measured blow’.⁵⁸¹

Comparable in terms of its careful, well-measured strokes is the ancient Indian self-defence sport of Silambam fencing. In his dissertation, which comprehensively

⁵⁷⁷ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 140.

⁵⁷⁸ Sayers, ‘Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland’, p. 106.

⁵⁷⁹ Sayers, ‘Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland’, p. 114.

⁵⁸⁰ Kinsella, *The Táin*.

⁵⁸¹ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, and O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*.

examines the ancient sport,⁵⁸² J. David Manuel Raj discusses the actions which score points for the contestants. Silambam fencing utilises blunt ended staves in contests which have a richly historic and ritualistic nature. It seems clear from his description of the scoring system that controlled strokes are required. Raj outlines this system in one of his earlier works:

The result is usually decided on the basis of *touches* made by the player on the person or the apparel of his opponent. For identifying the touches, the ends of the staff are smeared with a sticky powder that makes a mark whenever an end touches the opponent.⁵⁸³

The use of the word ‘touches’ suggests that strong blows and forceful hits would be out of place in such a contest and thus the activity seemed to require *finesse* rather than force, much like the descriptions of the ‘stripping game’. This point is further confirmed by the deciding blow, one which according to Raj, displays a unique feat of marksmanship and agility. A participant who ‘makes a mark at the centre of the forehead of the opponent, a rare feat which is traditionally called “Thilaghmalid” or “Pottuvaithal” is hailed as a great victor in the contest’.⁵⁸⁴ The fact that the Silambam fighters used blunt staves, though, is in stark contrast to the sharp and potentially deadly swords that the Ulster boy-warriors used. The effect of an incorrectly applied stroke in Silambam, while it may have the potential for real harm, does not seem as dangerous as a poorly timed or controlled stroke in the ‘stripping game’.

This kind of tempered blow is also seen in combat. In the *Táin*, for instance, Cú Chulainn uses a measured stroke against Etarcomal. Etarcomal, a young warrior, has accompanied Fergus (a long-time friend of Cú Chulainn who is now on the side of Connacht) to talk to Cú Chulainn. In the passage which follows, Cú Chulainn delivers several carefully measured strokes. The following section is cited from the

⁵⁸² This form of Indian fencing has its roots around the time of the Sangam period in Indian history (200 BCE-200 CE approximately). However, much of Raj’s material is gained from questionnaires sent out to Silambam masters in the 1970s and his information, as passed down from master to master, pertains primarily to the sport as practiced in Middle Ages and beyond.

⁵⁸³ Raj cited in J. David Manuel Raj, ‘The Origin and the Historical Development of Silambam Fencing: An Ancient Self-Defence Sport in India’, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Oregon, 1977, p. 98. Emphasis added.

⁵⁸⁴ Raj cited in Raj, ‘The Origin and the Historical Development of Silambam Fencing’, p. 99.

Kinsella version of the *Táin*. It takes place after their discussion with Cú Chulainn had ended and Etarcomal returns to combat Cú Chulainn:

‘It’s you who want this,’ Cú Chulainn said to Etarcomol. ‘It isn’t my wish.’
 ‘You have no choice,’ Etarcomol said.
 Cú Chulainn cut the sod from under his feet. He fell flat with the sod on his belly.
 ‘Go away now,’ Cú Chulainn said. ‘I don’t want to wash my hands after you. I’d have cut you to pieces long ago but for Fergus.’
 ‘I won’t leave it like this,’ Etarcomol said. ‘I’ll have your head or leave you mine.’
 ‘It will be the latter for sure.’
 Cú Chulainn poked at the two armpits with his sword and the clothes fell down leaving the skin untouched.
 ‘Now clear off!’ Cú Chulainn said.
 ‘No’, Etarcomol said.
 Then Cú Chulainn sheared off his hair with the sword-edge as neat as a razor, leaving the skin unscratched. But the stubborn fool persisted and Cú Chulainn struck down through the crown of his head and split him to the navel.⁵⁸⁵

It would seem that measured strokes against these adversaries were designed to be ‘warning shots’ which carried the implicit message that if the opponent was to continue then more heavy-handed blows would likely follow. The ‘measured stroke’ might also be a show of skill and control which may serve to unnerve a potential foe from taking action. The stroke would also surely add to the status and prestige of the performer and it is perhaps no surprise that in these accounts the perpetrators of such carefully delivered strokes are exceptional (or destined to be exceptional) warriors. In the case of Cú Chulainn’s encounter with Etarcomal, the use of this stroke implies a message along the lines that: ‘I am toying with you now and giving you a show of my mettle, but if you persist I will use my more dangerous skills in a forceful, and even fatal, manner’. Unfortunately for Etarcomol, this clear warning is not heeded.

A measured stroke of this kind is also seen in the tale ‘The Tragic Death of Connla’, delivered by Connla against Cú Chulainn. In that tale, Connla, refusing to tell his name to a single warrior, as Cú Chulainn himself had instructed, laments that another

⁵⁸⁵ Kinsella, *The Tain*, pp. 119-120.

warrior had not come to the beach with Cú Chulainn to meet him. Cú Chulainn tells Connla that he will be killed if he does not say who he is:

‘Let it be so!’ said the lad. The boy made for him. They exchanged blows. The lad, by a properly measured stroke with the sword, cropped off Cú Chulainn’s hair. ‘The mockery has come to a head!’ said Cú Chulainn.⁵⁸⁶

It seems that here the intent of the blow is not to show superiority or even skill necessarily (although it may also serve that purpose) but instead the action is seen by Cú Chulainn as an insult. This particular translation not only suggests the act as making a mockery of Cú Chulainn but is also rather humorous in its reference to it coming to a ‘head’.

Strokes of precision, as seen in the ‘stripping game’ or ‘mutual stripping’ activity, seem to have been both part of boyhood training and utilised in the precursor to deadly combat in their later careers. Like the ‘stripping game’ and hurley (mentioned above), the next sport-like activity to be discussed, wrestling (‘mutual overthrowing’), also transfers from the fields of training into the sphere of actual combat. The following section outlines the nature and incidence of wrestling-like activities in the Ulster tales.

c) Wrestling

Poliakoff claims that wrestling ‘appealed deeply to the ancients’.⁵⁸⁷ Linked clearly to ancient martial training, wrestling, suggests Poliakoff, tests the ‘martial virtues’ of cunning, boldness, courage, self-reliance and perseverance and was to be found in both the legend and the history of many ancient civilisations.⁵⁸⁸

A wrestling-type activity is mentioned in the *Macgnímrada*, the aim being to ‘knock’ one’s opponent from their feet. The passage, which again highlights the abilities of Cú Chulainn, reads, ‘[w]hen [the game was] to upset each other, he would knock over

⁵⁸⁶ T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, ‘The Tragic Death of Connla’, in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover (eds), *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1936), p. 174.

⁵⁸⁷ Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World*, p. 23.

⁵⁸⁸ Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World*, p. 23.

the hundred and fifty and they could not stretch him on the ground'.⁵⁸⁹ Wrestling activities either as holds and throws, or indeed incorporating blows as well feature a number of times in the Ulster tales.

Poliakoff also considers that important insights can be provided by the poetry and prose of the ancients and cites as examples the early Mesopotamian poetry such as the hymns of Shulgi and the epic of Gilgamesh which both include references to wrestling.⁵⁹⁰ Karl Krippes' paper, 'Wrestling and Wrestler as Epic Aspects of the *Secret History*', compares the wrestling feats of the Irish Ulster tales to that of the Mongols in the *Secret History of the Mongols*. Sayers, however, suggests that such a comparison may or may not be mutually illuminating.⁵⁹¹ Firstly, Sayers takes issue with Krippes calling the tales 'folktales', instead pointing out to readers that they are the 'work of monastic *literati* continuing the native aristocratic tradition of the legendary past'.⁵⁹² Secondly, and more illuminating to this discussion, Sayers cites 'evidence' of wrestling in the tales hoping to 'sharpen' the focus and better equip readers to pursue the parallels suggested by Krippes.⁵⁹³ As is Sayers' wont, the discussion is often based on the translation of certain words and combinations in Old Irish. More importantly, Sayers does examine wrestling in the Irish tales, giving both explanations and examples of several instances of wrestling activity in the tales. As the principal theorist regarding wrestling in the early Irish tales, Sayers' materials are heavily relied upon in the following discussion.

Wrestling activities either as holds and throws, or indeed incorporating blows as well feature a number of times in the Ulster tales. For instance, in the 'Boyhood Deeds', Cú Chulainn joins the boy-corps and outplays them at several games and activities, one being wrestling. In the *Táin* (Recension I), Cú Chulainn goes to find the king at the scene of a battle and finds instead a spectre who 'throws' Cú Chulainn.⁵⁹⁴ In an encounter during the single combats in the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn is up against Mand Muresci mac Daire. They wrestle and Cú Chulainn is thrown several times until his charioteer urges him on, using a socially acceptable form of scorn, and Cú Chulainn

⁵⁸⁹ Cross and Slover, 'The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn', p. 140.

⁵⁹⁰ Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World*, p. 3.

⁵⁹¹ Sayers, 'The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic', p. 153.

⁵⁹² Sayers, 'The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic', p. 155.

⁵⁹³ Sayers, 'The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic', p. 153.

⁵⁹⁴ Sayers, 'The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic', p. 155.

dashes Mand into fragments against a pillar stone. In the tale ‘Bricriu’s Feast’ one of the tests the heroes must undergo is meeting and fighting a giant. The encounter between the giant and Conall is a weaponless struggle. This, notes Sayers, suggests an exchange of blows as well as holds.⁵⁹⁵ The giant’s ‘holds’ are said to be stronger than Conall’s and the hero escapes with his life but not his chariot and team.

Sayers goes on to discuss more instances of wrestling in the Ulster tales. In the ‘Boyhood Deeds’, Cú Chulainn challenges the sons of Nechtan Scene. He kills one of them in a weaponless battle in water. Sayers suggests that what may have taken place was a ‘form of aqua wrestling, doubtless with rather less fixed rules than on land’.⁵⁹⁶ Also, in the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn meets Froech in single combat and they strip off their clothes to wrestle in the water and Froech is submerged and ultimately drowned by Cú Chulainn. In the tale ‘The Death of Aife’s only son’, Cú Chulainn fights his young son, Connla, and in the third stage of the encounter they agree to wrestle in the water (Cú Chulainn eventually resorts to using the *gae bolga* and fatally disembowels his son). In an earlier stage of the encounter Cú Chulainn and Connla engage in the more conventional form of wrestling - on land. Since Connla is only a child and is shorter than Cú Chulainn, he stands on two stone pillars. Connla proves to be a capable wrestler and he throws Cú Chulainn three times down between the pillars but neglects to move his own feet during that time and finds he sinks to his ankles into the stone pillars.

According to Sayers, the style of wrestling seems to have been similar to the Graeco-Roman style although he notes that the use of the legs cannot be ruled out. Additionally, there is no indication of wrestling in the prone position and the throw rather than the pin seems to have been the decisive aspect of the contest.⁵⁹⁷ According to Poliakoff, the notion of a ‘pin’ was out of place in the ancient world. In Greek and Roman wrestling if the shoulders or back touched the ground this constituted one form of ‘fall’, as was completely stretching a man prone or ‘tying him

⁵⁹⁵ Sayers, ‘The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic’, p. 156.

⁵⁹⁶ Sayers, ‘The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic’, p. 157.

⁵⁹⁷ Sayers, ‘The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic’, p. 159.

up in a controlling hold from which he could not escape'.⁵⁹⁸ Indeed, as in the Ulster tales, the throw and not the pin was the culmination of the Greek and Roman wrestle.

Wrestling formed part of the basic training of the Irish warrior and seems to have served purposes such as a para-military sport, entertainment and, at least in legendary tradition, a martial application.⁵⁹⁹ Sayers also suggests that the use of wrestling, particularly in the water, may have offered variation to a long, linear plotline and created heightened tension in the epic, especially when used in the fatal combat of father versus son in 'The Death of Aife's Only Son'. Sayers also surmises about the relationship between the warrior hero and the land he occupies in combat. The act of throwing one's opponent off their feet temporarily breaks his tie with the earth and puts him in a position of 'non-control and submission', even 'landlessness'.⁶⁰⁰

One final point of issue that Sayers has with Krippes' comparison of wrestling in the Irish tales is that Sayers observes that the motif of wrestling serves quite a different purpose in the *Secret History of the Mongols* to that in the Ulster tales. In the Ulster Cycle, the texts deal with heroic adventure rather than politics (in the sense of territorial acquisition, clan alliances and federations and conflict and subjugation). To illustrate this point, Sayers uses Krippes' observation that the two Mongol wrestlers in the *Secret History* metaphorically overthrow or upset the peace and harmony of their respective tribes.⁶⁰¹ Krippes concludes that wrestling's appearance in the *Secret History* 'seems to be a device for describing the power-struggles which preceded Chinggis' election as qan'.⁶⁰²

It seems in the Mongolian epic that old scores are settled during the wrestling. One clan which has been incorporated into another is shown to be subservient when their wrestler dies in a match.⁶⁰³ According to Sayers, 'In Mongolia wrestling achieved and has maintained high ritualised status; the Irish evidence suggests movement in the

⁵⁹⁸ Poliakoff, *Combat Sports in the Ancient World*, p. 24.

⁵⁹⁹ Sayers, 'The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic', p. 159.

⁶⁰⁰ Sayers, 'The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic', p. 160.

⁶⁰¹ Sayers, 'The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic', p. 160.

⁶⁰² Sayers, 'The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic', p. 160.

⁶⁰³ Sayers, 'The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic', pp. 162-3.

opposite direction, a social devolution toward purely *secular* status'.⁶⁰⁴ In his view, in the two early cultures:

[b]oth wrestling and combat were conducted according to conventions, the ‘rules’ in the first case, the strategic and tactical palettes available to the leader in the second, where ambush and surprise attacks might be permissible within the norm.⁶⁰⁵

Sayers notes that in the *Secret History* the wrestlers never really get to wrestle (presumably because of the ulterior motives of one party) and they certainly do not get to wrestle fairly.⁶⁰⁶

In the Ulster tales, wrestling is seen most often as a form of combat both in water and on land but is also a critical inclusion in the training of young warriors. Though an aqueous environment for wrestling is indicated in several tales, it is those activities which take place primarily in the water which are examined in the next section.

d) Aquatic Activity

While aquatic activity in the form of swimming and bathing was seemingly quite common in the ancient world, there is little evidence regarding the extent and nature of that activity. Swimming and/or bathing is mentioned in most histories of ancient civilisations. Histories of ancient Rome provide evidence of the extensive use of bathing facilities (the *thermae*). However, these were not known to be places for practicing or even engaging in swimming either for recreation or competition,⁶⁰⁷ although swimming was likely engaged in by youths in rivers and lakes.⁶⁰⁸ Dating back to even earlier times, some 1200 to 1500 years before the period of the Roman Empire, swimming was known and practiced in ancient Egypt. According to El

⁶⁰⁴ Sayers, ‘The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic’, p. 165.

⁶⁰⁵ Sayers, ‘The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic’, p. 165.

⁶⁰⁶ Sayers, ‘The Motif of Wrestling in Early Irish and Mongolian Epic’, p. 165.

⁶⁰⁷ According to Mechikoff, the Roman baths or *thermae* formed part of the mild exercise, health and hygiene forwarded by Claudius Galen in his ‘moderation in all things’ philosophy. In these popular facilities, the Romans engaged in mild exercise and then plunged into the baths, immersing themselves. See Mechikoff, *A History and Philosophy of Sport and Physical Education*, pp. 88-90. Despite the size of some of the facilities, the emphasis was on recreational bathing (as opposed to washing) and not swimming.

⁶⁰⁸ Klaus Bergdolt, *Wellbeing: A Cultural History of Healthy Living* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), p. 77.

Habashi, swimming was represented in hieroglyphs depicting swimmers both in and out of the water as well as on spoons and figurines.⁶⁰⁹

The Ulster tales contain few comprehensive descriptions of aquatic activity. For instance while there is a description of Cú Chulainn traversing the river, there is no description of the stroke/s used in doing so. However, there are several general references to swimming, bathing and combat in the water as well as references to sea-going craft (although not in a competitive sense).⁶¹⁰ The descriptions of bathing, or being able to skim over water ‘as lightly as a swan or a swallow’,⁶¹¹ are brief and do not elicit much information about technique or water training regimes. According to the early Irish laws there was a legal requirement to teach swimming as part of the fosterage agreement for a child of noble or regal birth.⁶¹² The legal texts, however, are no more forthcoming in the nature and practice of such tutelage.

In the tale ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, Cú Chulainn boasts to Iubar, the charioteer, of his swimming ability:

[K]nowest [thou] the river which we have in Emain Macha,
the Callan: well, when the boy-corps break off from their
sports and plunge into it to swim, on either shoulder I take
a lad of them, on each palm another, nor in the transit
across that water ever wet as much as my ankles.⁶¹³

Cú Chulainn is clearly an expert swimmer, or at least this is how this tale represents him. Cú Chulainn is to be considered as more skilful than all others and the exaggerated picture of a mortal warrior who does not so much as get his ankles wet when carrying four youths across the water, adds to this supposed supremacy.

The tone of the passage above suggests that the ‘sports’ were considered different to the swimming in that the ‘sports’ ceased and the swimming then took place. The training of the youths may have a realm and reach which does not quite encompass

⁶⁰⁹ Zaki El Habashi, *Tutankhamun and the Sporting Traditions* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1992), pp. 84-85.

⁶¹⁰ The activity of wrestling in water has been examined above and so will not be included repetitiously in this section.

⁶¹¹ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 146.

⁶¹² Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 87.

⁶¹³ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 149.

swimming, the latter seemingly used as a relief from the former. Swimming, here, occupies the role of a recreation, a diversion from training rather than an additional training activity in itself.⁶¹⁴

Despite this distinction, Cú Chulainn is clearly proud and boastful of his abilities in the water. The practice of moving ‘lads’ from one side of the river to the other itself suggests a desire to perhaps test oneself and to display this extraordinary skill rather than as a utilitarian form of transportation. However, Cú Chulainn’s boasting is in response to his being told that his next opponent is renowned for his ability in water, specifically his swiftness across the water.

Evidently, the ability to swim and swim well is valued in a warrior, despite little evidence for actual instruction in the activity. This is further evidenced by a number of ‘combats’ that occur in rivers or streams. As mentioned above, Cú Chulainn defeats one of the sons of Nechta in the water. Also as mentioned above, Cú Chulainn wrestles his son Connla in water and in the *Táin*, the action in the fight with Ferdiad occurs in and around a ford. Additionally, Cú Chulainn’s ultimate fighting weapon, the *gae bolga*, is used exclusively in an aquatic environment. This short passage indicates clearly the relationship of this weapon to water:

Such was the nature of the *ga bulga*: it used to be set downstream and cast from between the toes: it made one wound as it entered a man’s body but it had thirty barbs when one tried to remove it and it was not taken from a man’s body until the flesh was cut away about it.⁶¹⁵

This weapon, it seems, could only be utilised with a foot action which launched the barbed spear from the water and into the bowels of the opponent.⁶¹⁶

Aside from swimming activities and the various forms of combat which occurred in and around water, the final aspect of aquatic ‘sport’ considered here, albeit briefly, is the use of boats and other water craft. The Ulster tales clearly refer to water

⁶¹⁴ On the other hand, it might be surmised that some form of training did take place on the water as there are several examples of combat occurring in an aqueous environment.

⁶¹⁵ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, pp. 228-9.

⁶¹⁶ For a more comprehensive account of the feat and weapon of the *gae bolga* see below.

transportation in the form of boats and, possibly, rafts. For instance, Cú Chulainn and his colleagues travel by boat to seek expert tuition in martial training in the tale ‘The Wooing of Emer’ and also, in the tale ‘The Death of Connla’, Connla travels by boat to Ireland and even completes feats in the boat while travelling.⁶¹⁷

In ‘The Wooing of Emer’ as Cú Chulainn travels between Donoll’s camp and Scáthach’s camp he comes across youths ‘rowing’ on a lake.⁶¹⁸ There is no more information given in the text about the nature of the activity, for instance whether or not they were just cruising around, rowing for practice or fitness or, indeed, rowing in races (organised or not). In fact, there is no indication in the tales of boat racing as either an established activity or even as an impromptu occurrence. Although Connla engages in feats whilst in the water craft, it would seem that these feats are not specific to a water environment but instead are related either to the way the child amuses himself on a long journey,⁶¹⁹ or to the display of superior skills.

Thus far, the four most prominent sport-like activities in the early learning of the martial heroes have been examined.⁶²⁰ There is, however, one additional activity that warrants investigation. Although not mentioned specifically as a training activity of the boy-corps, it can be suggested that a form of boxing might possibly form part of a warrior’s training regime. This activity is discussed briefly below.

e) Boxing

Although not mentioned as a training activity in the *Macgnímrada*, fisted blows are described in that and other tales. Such encounters, however, do not seem to be the result of a mutual coming together of opponents. In the ‘Boyhood Deeds’, this practice does not seem to be a training game. Instead, when the other boys have been continually outplayed by Cú Chulainn in another training game, it seems Cú Chulainn then ‘began to belabour them with his fists’. It is indicated that Cú Chulainn ‘laid out fifty of them’ due to ‘his blows and pushes and repeated charges’.⁶²¹ In Kinsella’s

⁶¹⁷ Cross and Slover, ‘The Tragic Death of Connla’, p. 172.

⁶¹⁸ Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, pp. 163-164.

⁶¹⁹ Recall here the toys and physical activities with which Cú Chulainn amused himself en route to join the boy-corps in Emain Macha. These included his hurley and ball, javelin, and spear all stuck or thrown and retrieved in a certain order and before any of them reached the ground.

⁶²⁰ That is, the most prominent by virtue of being present in the ‘Boyhood Deeds’ tale.

⁶²¹ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 139.

translation of the *Táin*, the same passage is translated thus: ‘Once they laid hold of him, but he worked his fist on them and knocked fifty of them senseless’.⁶²² There is no suggestion in these passages that the use of fists in combat was completed as a matter of course in the training of warriors. In a non-game setting, Cú Chulainn uses his fist to kill a man who was attempting to wake Cú Chulainn by striking him in the forehead, ‘driving the front of his forehead onto his brain’.⁶²³ Additionally, in the *Táin*, there is the example of a large number of Connachtmen who do not grant Cú Chulainn ‘fair play’ and attack him with their fists all at once.⁶²⁴ Twenty-nine warriors went against Cú Chulainn with their poison-tipped weapons - they threw spears which Cú Chulainn caught on his shield, they went at him with fists and got him down on the ground – where he ‘uttered his warrior’s scream on high, and his cry of unfair fight’.⁶²⁵

Given the number of times fisted blows are used in combat, it can be expected that such an activity formed some part of warrior training. Perhaps one is simply not privy to the practice of such skills. In fact, given the seemingly extensive amounts of time devoted to early martial training, there are possibly numerous additional games and training exercises that were utilised but not mentioned in the tales. Clearly the Ulster tales were designed to be told to an audience and not to be regarded as an authority on the practices of warrior training. Those activities included were most probably regarded as most critical from a training perspective or most interesting from a literary one.

The activities described in the *Macgnímrada*, namely hurley or the ‘hole-game’, the ‘stripping game’, the wrestling activity that Sayers terms ‘mutual overthrowing’ and even the descriptions of Cú Chulainn’s ability in water, are described in the tale with the prime purpose of adding to the picture of Cú Chulainn as a formidable athlete and, therefore, a person of great warrior potential. This is clearly evidenced by Conchobar saying, ‘I congratulate the land into which the little boy has come; were his full-grown deeds to prove consonant with his boyish exploits, he would indeed be of some solid use’, with which Fergus, the exiled narrator of the ‘Boyhood Deeds’, later

⁶²² Kinsella, *The Tain*, p. 79. This chapter of the *Táin* occurs in Recension I.

⁶²³ O’Rahilly (ed.), *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 138.

⁶²⁴ The concept of ‘fair play’ is examined at length in Chapter Six.

⁶²⁵ Kinsella, *The Tain*, p. 167.

concurs saying that ‘as the little boy grows, so also will his deeds increase with him’.⁶²⁶ However, this tale can also serve to exemplify the kinds of training activities (albeit not necessarily all of the activities) that the Ulster warriors engaged in as youths. The reader is privy to a picture of the boy-corps as coherent, purposeful and homogenous group whose existence is necessary if Ulster is to continue to produce quality defenders and champions.

The majority of martial encounters in the Ulster tales are single combats, possibly because, from a literary point of view, the hero Cú Chulainn must be seen to be supreme and therefore capable of being the sole defender. In fact, one could imagine that with the exception of Cú Chulainn, most warriors/champions would engage in combats which are variously individual and group encounters and this might account for the nature of the training activities that the boy-corps engages in. The boy-corps structure and direction is not designed for the exceptional individual hero like Cú Chulainn, in fact, the boy-corps is regularly represented as working together (usually against Cú Chulainn alone) in the training activities in the *Macgnímrada*. However, later in their martial learning the training becomes very much individualised as the warriors seek out expert teachers under whom they can complete their education. The focus of this chapter now shifts to that next phase of martial learning, the learning of feats and specifically, the learning of feats from an expert instructor.

5.4 Learning of Feats

The learning and practice of feats was an important aspect of martial learning, pre-combat posturing and the maintenance of the hero’s warrior status. Sayers notes that the generic term for these feats or martial exploits was *cles*.⁶²⁷ This term was used regardless of the location or function of the ‘feat’ and such exploits could be seen on the battlefield, the parade ground and even in the king’s hall. According to Sayers, the ‘lists of such feats, varying in length, are given in eleven recensions of six works

⁶²⁶Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 140.

⁶²⁷Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 46. As Sayers notes, ‘*Cles* appears in the verbs *clissim* and *conclissim* “I jump, perform” and in a variety of compounds and binary combinations: *chaemclessach* “accomplished”, *clesrada* “feat of arms” ... *cocliss* “performing feats together”, *comchliss* “equal in feats”... *tet chliss* “path of feats”. *Cles* is also a standard component in the names of the numerous individual feats, e.g. *klass cletenech* “javelin feat”, *ubullchless* “apple feat”, and *faeborchless* “(sword) edge feat”, p. 46.

from the Ulster Cycle'.⁶²⁸ The six works are: the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ('The Cattle Raid of Cooley'); *Tochmarc Emire* ('The Wooing of Emer'); *Scela Chonchobuir* ('The Tidings of Conchobar'); *Fled Bricrend* ('Bricriu's Feast'); *Siaburcharpat Con Chulainn* ('The Phantom Chariot of Cú Chulainn') and; *Aided Con Chulaind* ('The Death of Cú Chulainn').⁶²⁹ Specifically, though, this section is concerned with the learning and honing of these *cles* or feats. Cú Chulainn opted to travel abroad to complete his warrior training and, although Cú Chulainn was well adept at many feats beforehand, his time spent with a number of warrior chiefs extended and refined his repertoire. The following sections examine the processes of being accepted into training camps of the expert warriors and the feat learning that occurred therein.

5.5 The Expert Teacher: An Analysis of Feat Learning in *Tochmarc Emire* and *Foglaim ConCulainn*

The learning of warrior skills in the Ulster tales is best divided into two groups. Firstly, there are those skills which are learned in the playing of games and the practicing of skills amongst the boy-corps. Although this seems like the first stage, some prior knowledge or perhaps aptitude for games and martial skills is expected.⁶³⁰ In the tales, one only has a description of Cú Chulainn's entry into the boy-corps. Cú Chulainn is an exceptional figure with, as discussed above, precocious development. One is not privy to the experience of the more 'ordinary' or 'average' potential warrior in the corps. The descriptions of Cú Chulainn's entry into the boy-corps, while it might tell little of the calibre and skill level of the boys whom are generally accepted into the corps, can reveal something of the nature and organisation of the processes that these warriors in training undergo at this stage of their learning.

It seems conceivable that some of the warriors will 'graduate' from the corps when they take up arms and that that will represent the last of their formal training at arms. This learning of feats from an expert teacher represents the second group of skills learnt on the path to being a great warrior. From the descriptions in tales such as 'The

⁶²⁸ Sayers, 'Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle', p. 47.

⁶²⁹ One might assume that Sayers conflates 'The Training of Cú Chulainn' (which also includes a list of feats) with 'The Wooing of Emer' which covers some similar events.

⁶³⁰ There is reference to several Ulster chiefs claiming their abilities as warriors in order that they are chosen as Cú Chulainn's foster-parent. Although it is not explicitly stated, the fact that these warriors claim this might indicate that they may expect to have a hand in very early martial learning or that simply, they consider themselves worthy protectors of the child.

Wooing of Emer' and 'The Training of Cú Chulainn' it is also clear that many warriors do undergo additional training at the hands of an expert teacher. Such teachers were predominantly female and their training facilities were offshore (perhaps in Scotland or on the Isle of Skye). Writing of 'The Wooing of Emer', Chadwick suggests that perhaps the most remarkable aspect of that tale is 'the way in which it is taken for granted that these martial feats be taught by these women and that establishments [or 'schools' as she calls them] should exist for the purpose'.⁶³¹ Presumably, though, not every warrior was permitted to undertake this additional training. There is evidence to suggest that there were some minimum skill requirements that warriors had to possess in order to be either accepted at all (as in the case of Cú Chulainn's companions at the camp of Dordmir) or to pass the first stage of training (as evidenced by the lads who had been attempting to master the Bridge of Leaps for over a year in order to secure the next level of training).

Although Cú Chulainn is clearly exceptional, other highly ranked warriors also underwent almost as thorough a training as Cú Chulainn save for the learning of (possession of) the *gae bolga*, the weapon that, in the tales at least, only Cú Chulainn wields. Clearly though the weapon exists in type and technique before Cú Chulainn is educated in the feat as both Scáthach and Aífe are familiar with its use. In the 'Training of Cú Chulainn', it is Scáthach that instructs Cú Chulainn in the use of the *gae bolga*, and while discussing his, as yet unborn, child's education with Aífe, Cú Chulainn tells Aífe that if it is a boy that she should train him in martial arts but that she should not teach him the *gae bolga* (for Cú Chulainn wishes to do that himself). Reading between the lines, then, it is clearly in Aífe's capacity *to* teach that skill, although it is not mentioned anywhere else that she has done so.

The term *gae bolga* goes mostly untranslated but the term is examined etymologically by Sayers in 'Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle'.⁶³² In a later paper, however, Sayers translates the term as the 'bellows or bag spear' describing it as 'a multi-barbed spear deployed deceptively in an aquatic environment by Cú Chulainn

⁶³¹ Chadwick, *The Celts*, p. 135. The issue of women instructors at these camps is more fully examined in Chapter Eight.

⁶³² Sayers, 'Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle', pp. 55-56.

alone'.⁶³³ The term *gae bolga* seemed to refer to the weapon itself as well as to the ‘feat’ of being able to use it. These two are difficult to separate in practice though because if the warrior possessed the weapon, they also possessed the feat or skill of using the weapon and vice versa. In the tales, however, Cú Chulainn alone possesses the weapon and feat of the *gae bolga*.

The *Táin* has a passage which refers to the training that Cú Chulainn and Ferdiad underwent during their training at arms. In the section entitled ‘The Encounter with Ferdiad’, the hosts (Ailill, Medb and their troops) decide that the next warrior to face Cú Chulainn must be Ferdiad because he was equal in every respect to Cú Chulainn save one, the possession and mastery of the weapon and feat of the *gae bolga*. The section describes the two warriors (Cú Chulainn and Ferdiad) as having had the same ‘fostermothers’ in Scáthach, Uáthach and Aífe from whom they had learned ‘the arts of valour and arms’.⁶³⁴

It is noteworthy that the learning of the feats, even for one as supremely talented as Cú Chulainn, was not an end-point and that practice was required to maintain the level of skill needed to perform the feats effectively. In the *Táin*, it is mentioned that Cú Chulainn was practicing his feats and that he used to do so ‘early every morning ... that he might not forget or disremember them’.⁶³⁵

Sayers has produced a comprehensive examination of the martial feats in the Ulster Cycle, including their identification, categorisation and evaluation of feasibility.⁶³⁶ Cú Chulainn, as an exceptional hero, has a long list of feats associated with him and these are listed in more or less similar forms in the various recensions of the *Táin*. Sayers identifies some 21 individual feats as mentioned in the LU (Recension I) version of the *Táin*. Excluding the feat of the *gae bolga* (as both individual to Cú Chulainn and not really fitting into his suggested pattern), Sayers suggests that there is a structure or pattern that can be identified which may indicate that the feats were practiced in a specific order.⁶³⁷

⁶³³ Sayers, ‘Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland’, p. 120.

⁶³⁴ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 211.

⁶³⁵ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 189.

⁶³⁶ Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’.

⁶³⁷ Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 63.

Working on the dual assumptions that the feats are both humanly feasible and that they could have been performed alone, Sayers suggests the list of feats may represent a training schedule of sorts. The list begins with those feats of a callisthenic or juggling nature (possibly ‘loosening up’ activities) proceeds through activities which utilise the whole body and focus on agility (rope walking, twisting, long and high jumps, sprinting) to strenuous weight events (such as the throwing of a wheel and the possible support of a human pyramid by one person). Breathing and voice activities (‘mass of shout’, ‘crushing roar’ and ‘hero’s cry’) followed once the heart rate was accelerated and then, finally, exercises involving the accurate use of weapons (controlled strokes and the ‘stunning shot’). Stamina, says Sayers, would have been built up by repetition of individual feats or of the complete series.⁶³⁸

While even Sayers admits that his ‘schedule’ of sorts is highly speculative and even that the lists of feats may be so listed as a literary systemisation only,⁶³⁹ there is the potential to see in his suggestions a structure which both explains and creates more questions about the nature and learning of the feats. The feats may be so ordered to give a training effect, perhaps to prevent injury through effective warm up, or they may have allowed the warrior to recall the elements though a simple but logical grouping of feats. On the other hand, if these feats were so structured and practiced in a particular order then what of the suggestion that some feats were learned before others? Could one conceive of a situation where the warriors would be introduced to the feats in a particular order, or, perhaps, where the warrior knows the structure and can perform some of the feats but others are skipped over until such time that they are capable of all feats? The role of the expert teacher then might become more complex as they become responsible for ensuring that the full repertoire of feats is known and completed. Again though, this is highly speculative and on the back of Sayers’ speculation, is doubly so.

5.6 Conclusions

The early Irish Ulster tales provide a rich source of examples of physical activity and martial training engaged in by the warrior chiefs. From their arrival at the boy-corps

⁶³⁸ Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, pp. 63-64.

⁶³⁹ Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 64.

camp in Emain Macha as mere children to their most brutal of battles, the warriors of Ulster were expected to learn and master a number of physical skills and feats. It could be argued that it is those feats which, for the most part, define the warrior to the society.

This chapter has outlined the various sports and games which feature in the martial learning of the warrior both at Emain Macha and at the hands of expert trainers abroad. Chapter Six delves further into the relationship between sports and games and combat in the tales. The nature of combat, in particular, single combat, will be examined with several examples, drawn from the tales, recounted to give a clearer understanding of the encounters. Chapter Six will also address the weaponry involved and the fluid transition of the sporting and military implements and the martial skills of the warrior as the circumstances altered. In fact, the utilisation of certain implements can be seen to be determined by the availability of that implement in a time of need rather than an actual decision on the ‘right’ tool for the encounter.

Chapter Six

Sport-Like Activity and Combat in the Ulster Cycle

6.1 Introduction

The close relationship between sport-like activity and war-like activity in the ancient world has been investigated by several prominent sport historians.⁶⁴⁰ Johan Huizinga, in a seminal work on humans and the play element, suggests a close literal connection between war and sport (a form of play) in stating that ‘all fighting that is bound by rules bears the formal characteristics of play by that very limitation’.⁶⁴¹ These historians also indicate that there is a direct relationship between the nature of combat in a society and the types of training (often utilising sports and games) engaged in during martial learning.⁶⁴² The warrior’s training and experience will be reflected in the sphere of war and the realm of war will be reflected in the nature of the warrior’s martial training. For instance, John Marshall Carter, writing on sports in pre-Feudal Europe, suggests that the sports of the Gallo-Roman nobility and the Germanic tribal nobility were closely linked to the practices of war for those societies, where hunting, archery and other activities simulated combat and sharpened the martial skills of warriors.⁶⁴³

Huizinga devotes an entire chapter to a consideration of the play element in war in *Homo Ludens* and one aspect he discusses is single combat. Huizinga suggests that: ‘The single combat serves various purposes; it may be a demonstration of personal *aristeia* [prowess or excellence], or it may be the prelude to a general conflict, or it may go on during the battle as episodes of it’.⁶⁴⁴ Specifically, Huizinga considers the play element in duelling. He suggests that in the modern duel, it is the shedding of blood and not the killing that matters – the duel is symbolic and a play form.

⁶⁴⁰ As discussed in Chapter Two, both Baker and Cornell, for instance, link the activities of sport and war in the ancient world.

⁶⁴¹ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 89. The relationship and indeed common elements between and among the notions of ‘play’, ‘game’ and ‘sport’ were debated heatedly in philosophy of sport circles during the late 1980s and 1990s. The two principal ‘players’ in this debate were Bernard Suits and Klaus Meier and despite difference of opinion on the nature of the relationship, there seemed no doubt that there was a relationship.

⁶⁴² See in particular, Cornell, ‘On War and Games in the Ancient World’, pp. 31-34.

⁶⁴³ J. M. Carter, *Medieval Games. Sports and Recreations in Feudal Society* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), pp. 23-4.

⁶⁴⁴ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 91.

Huizinga elucidates: ‘The spot where the duel is fought bears all the marks of a playground; the weapons have to be exactly alike as in certain games; there is a signal for the start and the finish, and a number of shots are prescribed. When blood flows, honour is vindicated and restored’.⁶⁴⁵ Certainly the single combats in the Ulster Cycle, particularly in the *Táin*, rarely end with just the shedding of blood. These combats are regularly fought to the death. An understanding of the nature of combat in the Ulster Cycle tales is critical to an understanding of how sport and combat are related in these tales specifically.

This chapter is divided into two sections. The first section examines the nature of armed combat in the Ulster tales, particularly that of single combat, a highly ritualistic and rule-governed form of martial engagement. This section also examines the related concept of *fír fer* ('fair play') which, to a large extent, governed the warriors in their martial encounters. The second and final section of this chapter examines the use of implements (both toys and weapons) in the Ulster tales. Specifically, this section looks at the fluidity with which these implements transition from the play setting of games and pastimes to the more serious arenas of organised martial learning, self-protection and, finally, war.⁶⁴⁶ The contention is that implements such as the hurley stick and ball, the javelin and the spear can be seen to occupy a situational relevance and ‘transition’ to take on new meanings and possibilities as circumstances change from the benign (a way to amuse oneself on a long journey) to the more malignant (as a tool of combat).

6.2 Armed Combat in the Ulster Cycle

Armed combat between individuals and/or groups have been a feature of many (even most) ancient and medieval heroic literature. Taylor Culbert writes that ‘one of the most frequent and certainly the most dramatic forms of fighting in heroic literature is hand-to-hand struggle between two great warriors’.⁶⁴⁷ While not discussing the Irish tales specifically, Culbert’s examination of single combat in medieval heroic narrative

⁶⁴⁵ Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, p. 95.

⁶⁴⁶ And vice versa, that is, from weapons of war to use on the playing and training fields.

⁶⁴⁷ Taylor Culbert, ‘The Single Combat in Medieval Heroic Narrative’, Doctoral Thesis, University of Michigan, 1957, p. 1.

can shed much light on the nature and significance of single combat in the Ulster tales.⁶⁴⁸

Culbert defines single combat as a hand-to-hand fight, often fatal, where one man contends with his adversary in a very purposeful fashion. Culbert's definition allows that the combat be either governed by rules and conventions (what he terms 'formal combat') or be completely impromptu, regulated by no laws or customs of any kind ('informal combat').⁶⁴⁹ However, despite this latter category being admitted, Culbert then curiously omits what he calls 'mere brawls ... which arise accidentally or casually'.⁶⁵⁰ Culbert's distinction here is most probably that the altercation itself is purposely convened although action within the fray may be regulated or not. According to Culbert, 'one combatant or both must exhibit some conscious determination to arrange a meeting which will produce a physical struggle at close quarters'.⁶⁵¹

Further, Culbert makes an important distinction between 'heroic single combat' and 'judicial single combat'. In heroic single combat participants meet to impose their personal will upon each other through the exercise of purely human prowess. Victory in the case of heroic single combat is thus achieved by 'human means' alone. In judicial single combat, participants engage in the conflict essentially as instruments through which some external superior power, usually a superhuman power, makes its will known and determines the victor accordingly. Victory, then, in the case of judicial single combat, is awarded as the result of intervention by superior, often supernatural, forces acting through the human participants.⁶⁵² This is not to say that the adversaries themselves must be human for Culbert considers that some non-human entities such as monsters and dragons are often considered as if they were

⁶⁴⁸ Culbert, 'The Single Combat in Medieval Heroic Narrative'. Culbert's thesis examines a defined list of sources under the general classifications of continental Germanic heroic tales, Icelandic 'Family Sagas', Anglo-Saxon materials, and what Culbert designates as the 'Arthur and Alexander materials', all of which fall into the what Culbert admits is an arbitrarily designated medieval period of 400-1475 CE. Although the Ulster Cycle of tales fits nicely within Culbert's five point requirements for inclusion, Culbert does not discuss the Irish materials at all.

⁶⁴⁹ Culbert, 'The Single Combat in Medieval Heroic Narrative', p. 2.

⁶⁵⁰ Culbert, 'The Single Combat in Medieval Heroic Narrative', p. 2.

⁶⁵¹ Culbert, 'The Single Combat in Medieval Heroic Narrative', p. 2.

⁶⁵² Culbert, 'The Single Combat in Medieval Heroic Narrative', pp. 3-4.

human by the storytellers (for instance, they can be injured or killed by human actions and may have human-like emotions and motives for engagement).

In the Ulster tales, the single combats are characteristically between humans but on occasion the heroes and kings find themselves in contests with otherworldly or supernatural beings. The single combats in the Ulster Cycle can be considered heroic single combats under Culbert's definition as victory is determined by physical, individual means and not by the imposition of a third party on the will of the participants. Culbert's definition of single combat is, therefore, worthwhile in understanding the single combats in the Ulster Cycle and can be utilised to guide a discussion of the relationship between single combat and sport and games.

In ancient Ireland, and indeed in the Ulster tales, there seemed to be rules governing the single combat contest. According to Lowe, this system was intended to provide rules of combat or to structure the ethical behaviour of warriors. It was a system framed by the concept of *fír fer* (literally ‘truth of men’ but translated more colloquially as ‘rules of fair play').⁶⁵³ *Fír fer* prescribed the permitted circumstances for engagement in combat. For instance, a person offering individual combat could only be opposed by a single opponent. This type of fighting, and, indeed, references to breaches of this law are to be found in the early Irish tales. Ross cites the example of Ferchu Loingseach and his twelve men attacking Cú Chulainn all at once and it being said in the text that they had not granted him ‘fair play’.⁶⁵⁴ If Culbert's definition is applied, many of the combats which transgress *fír fer* could, in fact, be considered heroic single combat as most often the decidedly underhanded practice of ‘many attacking one’ is both premeditated and the outcome is not determined by a higher or mythical power.⁶⁵⁵

Culbert, however, focuses on a certain selection of medieval narratives none of which seem to incorporate a heavy sense of fair play, at least not any that Culbert explores. The single combats in the stories he considers are highly ritualised at times but his

⁶⁵³ Lowe, ‘Contagious Violence’, p. 89.

⁶⁵⁴ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 63.

⁶⁵⁵ In fact, Culbert allows single combats to also include instances where two or more opponents are deemed to be acting as one. Such a notion is not encompassed by *fír fer* and is thus not appropriate for an analysis of single combat in the Ulster tales. See Culbert, ‘The Single Combat in Medieval Heroic Narrative’, pp. 4-5.

analysis of the Germanic, Icelandic, Anglo-Saxon and Scottish heroic narrative is conspicuously lacking an examination of any possible underlying (and perhaps internalised) ethical system. This may, as with later Irish materials, be in part a factor related to the influence of Christianity on the native sagas.⁶⁵⁶ In short, in Culbert's examination of heroic single combat, there is little that approximates the concept of *fír fer*.

Philip O'Leary examines the notion of *fír fer* in early Irish literature and focuses on the Ulster tales which, by his reckoning, express the concept most fully.⁶⁵⁷ According to O'Leary, *fír fer* is not just an expression of numerical equality, despite the text regularly referring to such issues in reference to the concept. There are also examples where the demand for *fír fer* does not simply request single (or even sides) combat but rather requests 'fair play in the sense of a willingness to abide by the arbitrary yet mutually accepted terms'.⁶⁵⁸

Indeed, that 'many' should not attack 'one' seems to be more of a convention than a rule. In the age the tales represent, it was probably not written down, although Sayers' work on the *Mellbretha* ('Sports Judgements') suggests that similar rules were written down sometime later perhaps in the tradition of the non-written rules of *fír fer*.⁶⁵⁹ There is reference to liability issues surrounding para-military, or more loosely, competitive, games. There are instances of such games or practices that are subject to 'sick maintenance',⁶⁶⁰ a form of compensation in either service, material or monetary terms as a penalty for injuring a person whilst engaging in these practices. Games that incur such penalties include 'few against many', 'cross pelting', 'throwing a spear into an assembly' and 'hiding on a hillside'; the last of these is possibly a form

⁶⁵⁶ Philip O'Leary suggests that the introduction of Christianity to Ireland produced a 'fascinatingly hybrid morality' where the old and new systems existed in the same system albeit not necessarily consistently. See O'Leary 'Fír fer: An Internalised Ethical Concept in Early Irish Literature?', *Eigse*, vol. 22, 1987, pp. 13-14.

⁶⁵⁷ O'Leary, 'Fír fer: An Internalised Ethical Concept in Early Irish Literature?', pp. 1-14.

⁶⁵⁸ O'Leary, 'Fír fer: An Internalised Ethical Concept in Early Irish Literature?', p. 9.

⁶⁵⁹ Sayers, 'Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland', p. 106.

⁶⁶⁰ 'Sick maintenance' was part of the legal responsibilities of assailants towards their wounded victims. It entailed the bringing of the injured person into the house of a third party and cared for (nursed, fed and housed) until they were cured. This was a formal agreement with the requirement of three lords to be in attendance at its inception. After 700 CE the practice of 'sick maintenance' had all but been abandoned in favour of the less cumbersome method of payments according to the victim's rank. For a full discussion of this and related early Irish laws see Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, pp. 129-131.

of ‘king of the castle’ where the king’s position is maintained, perhaps, through force of arms.⁶⁶¹ These laws were a product of a time much later than the Ulster tales. Perhaps such conventions as were adhered to in the tales underwent much refinement and then finally were written down in documents such as *Mellbretha*.⁶⁶²

Jackson also suggests that there is a ‘rough sense of decency and fair play’ in the tales and cites the example of Cú Chulainn’s encounter with a Connacht charioteer who is cutting wood and is dismayed to learn that it is Cú Chulainn who has come upon him. Cú Chulainn lets him know, however, that he should not be afraid for he does not kill charioteers. It is not honourable, it seems, to take advantage of an unarmed servant, what Jackson terms a ‘helpless enemy’, because it is not an action worthy of a hero.⁶⁶³ According to Tymoczko, however, the idea that the *Táin* reflects the ideals of heroism is based on the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century treatment of the tale. Indeed, Jackson’s understanding of the honourable hero is certainly influenced by such ideals. These understandings of Cú Chulainn, as the ultimate Irish hero and hero of the tribe, standing alone to valiantly defend the province, were influenced by the politics of the nationalist movement in Ireland. Tymoczko argues that the Irish patriots sought to use both the *Táin* and the figure of Cú Chulainn as a fierce martial hero as symbols of Irish national identity in a time of struggle in the lead up to the Easter Rising in 1916.⁶⁶⁴ The result was a heroic paradigm which allowed the patriots to celebrate an individualistic martial hero who takes heroic action on behalf of the tribe.

Lowe suggests that it is this historical element which informs modern scholarship of the tales as an ‘unproblematic affirmation of the heroic ethos’.⁶⁶⁵ The idealistic representation of the heroic warrior facing the enemy alone and adhering to a sense of justice in *fir fer* is something Lowe argues against. According to Lowe, the rules of fair play are so consistently transgressed in the *Táin* that they become insufficient to

⁶⁶¹ Sayers, ‘Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland’, p. 117.

⁶⁶² Sayers, ‘Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland’, pp. 116-7.

⁶⁶³ Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*, p. 13.

⁶⁶⁴ Cited in Lowe, ‘Contagious Violence’, p. 85.

⁶⁶⁵ Lowe, ‘Contagious Violence’, p. 85.

explain the nature of the battles that take place.⁶⁶⁶ In fact, Lowe goes on to make an even stronger point:

The concept of *fír fer* repeatedly fails to define the contests between the warriors: it does not reveal the presence of a prevailing ideology so much as demonstrate how the rules do not work. Even among the nobler figures in the tale, efforts to invoke *fír fer* seem doomed to failure.⁶⁶⁷

Lowe considers that the number of times the rules of *fír fer* are invoked and then flouted are so great that it can hardly be said to regulate the action and behaviour of the warriors in particular or of society in general. In fact, when Cú Chulainn faces Fergus they make a deal to fight fairly but do not bother to call it *fír fer* at all.

Lowe suggests that this further demonstrates that the ‘rule’ of *fír fer* was not a rule at all. Lowe does admit that there is a sense of fairness to be found in the text,⁶⁶⁸ though adherence to an actual rule is unlikely. Lowe’s position on the notion of *fír fer* is a rather essentialist one. Lowe’s understanding of the notion is that *fír fer* is either invoked as a rule or it is not, but the reality may have been a more fluid acceptance of a general understanding of what is acceptable or unacceptable in a given circumstance.

Adhering, perhaps, to some social norm regarding heroic conduct, the lines which Cú Chulainn draws for himself even, are not fixed as they first appear. For instance it is Cú Chulainn who claims that he does not kill charioteers. There is evidence in the tales, however, that Cú Chulainn does in fact kill charioteers if those charioteers somehow transgress his wishes. In the text this caveat is duly noted. In one case in the *Táin*, a Connachta charioteer is sent off with instructions about what he should do and say to the ‘men of Ireland’ once he reached the camp. According to Recension I, though, the charioteer does not adhere sufficiently to the instructions and Cú Chulainn kills him with a missile from great distance. The passage ends with the line, ‘So it is not true that Cú Chulainn never slew charioteers; but he did not kill them unless they

⁶⁶⁶ Lowe, ‘Contagious Violence’, pp. 89-90.

⁶⁶⁷ Lowe, ‘Contagious Violence’, p. 90.

⁶⁶⁸ Lowe, ‘Contagious Violence’, p. 90.

were at fault'.⁶⁶⁹ Additionally, later in the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn slays 'a countless number of hounds and horses and women and boys and children and the common folk' in the battle at *Sesrech Breslige*.⁶⁷⁰

It seems that the 'rules' of such engagements are fluid and flexible rather than fixed in a rigid, essentialist understanding of *fír fer*. It must be noted that the battle of *Sesrech Breslige*, which occurs more than half way through the *Táin*, deviates from the pattern set thus far in the *Táin*. The 'combats' have been predominantly of two types: single combat and the slaying of many from a distance (using the thunder feat for instance). Lowe argues that the limits placed on society by the system of *fír fer* are continually exceeded by the disruptive nature of the violence of martial encounters in the *Táin*. 'As violence proliferates, it begins to eradicate the boundaries that separate individuals and the social ties that bind them to one another'.⁶⁷¹ The *Sesrech Breslige* battle is far more intimate and gruesome than anything that has gone before. Dooley suggests that the 'Breslech is a totalising image of war visited out of the blue' and adds that the battle appears as a 'striking contrast' to the kind of combats in which Cú Chulainn has participated during the early part of the *Táin*.⁶⁷²

As mentioned above, the most common of encounters in the *Táin* are single combats. The contest of one-on-one in combat followed a ritualistic template. In the *Táin*, a procession of daily single combats occurs. Ailill and Medb agree to Cú Chulainn's request because Cú Chulainn persists in killing large groups of their warriors, particularly at night and always from a distance. Ailill and Medb are satisfied to risk one warrior per day in single combat against Cú Chulainn with the promise that he will not kill *en masse* during the evenings. Thus begins a series of single combats that are clearly premeditated. Sometimes a place of meeting is organised but in other instances Cú Chulainn awaits the arrival of the challenger in an undesignated place.

On occasion, the challengers are unaware of what Cú Chulainn even looks like and during these instances they are surprised to see such a young and inexperienced looking opponent. Several challengers refuse to meet Cú Chulainn in single combat

⁶⁶⁹ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 151.

⁶⁷⁰ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 203.

⁶⁷¹ Lowe, 'Contagious Violence', p. 91.

⁶⁷² Dooley, *Playing the Hero*', pp. 207-8.

once they have seen him because they consider Cú Chulainn too young to fight against. In one episode of the *Táin*, Nadcranntail is surprised to see a youth and refuses to fight the beardless boy.⁶⁷³ In another, Mand regards Cú Chulainn as a ‘beardless imp’ and appears unarmed to the fight.⁶⁷⁴ One final example is seen when Medb sends Cúr mac Daláth to fight Cú Chulainn but as Cúr sees him, he draws back unwilling to fight the ‘beardless boy opposing him’.⁶⁷⁵ Having returned without meeting Cú Chulainn, Cúr is told that he is mistaken (presumably mistaken in thinking that Cú Chulainn does not meet a certain standard of warrior proficiency as Cúr suggests that a boy should be sent to meet Cú Chulainn).

Perhaps the position Cúr adopts is an indication that, in the tales, there is occasionally an intention to create an even match up. This perhaps indicates another branch of *fír fer*. A prestigious adult warrior is not expected to engage a ‘beardless youth’ in combat. This could be the case for two reasons. Firstly, there is no honour attached to a celebrated warrior overcoming such an inexperienced opponent and secondly, and perhaps more importantly, there may be a serious repercussions in terms of status and honour if the youngster manages to emerge victorious.

The modern sport philosophy equivalent of this aspect of *fír fer* is encompassed by the notions of ‘good competition’ and ‘fair play’ as applied both formally and informally in sport. One aspect of this debate is the ethics of ‘running up the score’ or continuing to play hard and score excessively after such time that a defeat of that opponent is assured. Feezel articulated his so-called ‘Anti Blowout’ thesis in 1986 arguing that ‘running up the score’ is an example of poor sportsmanship.⁶⁷⁶ Dixon argued against the ‘Anti Blowout’ thesis in 1992 but made the distinction between recreational (fun) sport and competitive games and suggested that there is ‘nothing intrinsically wrong with pressing for a lopsided victory in a competitive game’.⁶⁷⁷ Kretchmar raises the issue of the importance of playing hard until the end of a game. However, Kretchmar

⁶⁷³ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 165.

⁶⁷⁴ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 194.

⁶⁷⁵ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 172.

⁶⁷⁶ Randolph Feezel, ‘Sportsmanship’, *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 12, Issue 1, May 1986, pp. 1-13.

⁶⁷⁷ Dixon, ‘On Sportsmanship and “Running up the Score”’, *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 19, Issue 1, May 1992, pp. 1-13.

continues to state the importance of avoiding the ‘psychically painful embarrassment experienced by those who suffer heavy defeats’ in the event of an uneven contest.⁶⁷⁸

This may be a useful understanding of the notion of fair play for contests already underway or at least already arranged. It can be considered to be a different matter if one chooses a particularly weak opponent with the express intention of procuring a lopsided victory. Were one to do so, one might not be said to be adhering to notions of fair play. In the tales it seems it is not acceptable to agree to fight a weak opponent but one might debate what counted as ‘weak’. Some of Cú Chulainn’s opponents, like Etarcomal, are young and foolish and in Etarcomal’s case, Cú Chulainn is initially reluctant to fight him, primarily because Etarcomal has come along under the protection of Fergus, with whom Cú Chulainn shares history and respect.

Kretchmar writes of two ‘family members’ contesting and in this context it means they are interested in each other’s progress. Their own strategies, rhythms, even their very relationship to the test is, in part, dictated by the other’s performance.⁶⁷⁹ By ‘testing families’ Kretchmar means that the opponents come from the group of people who are on a similar level to each other and where ability and experience are critical determining factors in their conceptual admission to that group.⁶⁸⁰ Essentially, this is advocating the importance of engaging a worthy opponent. In fact, Delattre suggests that the basic condition for success in competitive athletics is that one has a worthy opponent. As Delattre states:

We must be mutually able to discover worthy opponents, opponents who are capable of generating with us the intensity of competition ... It is of the utmost importance for competitors to discover the opponents whose preparation and skill are comparable to their own and who respect the game utterly.⁶⁸¹

⁶⁷⁸ R. S. Kretchmar, ‘Ethics and Sport: An Overview’, *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 10, Issue 1 (October 1983), pp. 21-32.

⁶⁷⁹ R. S. Kretchmar, ‘From Test to Contest: An Analysis of Two Kinds of Counterpoint in Sport’, in William Morgan and Klaus Meier (eds), *Philosophic Inquiry in Sport* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1988), p. 228.

⁶⁸⁰ Kretchmar, ‘From Test to Contest’, p. 228.

⁶⁸¹ Edwin Delattre, ‘Some Reflections on Success and Failure in Competitive Athletics’, in William Morgan and Klaus Meier (eds), *Philosophic Inquiry in Sport* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1988), p. 272.

While this may be the case in competitive sport, could the same also be said for combat in the Irish tales? One would imagine that the need for supremacy would supersede the seeking of ‘good’ opponents for combat. However, when single combat is intrinsically wound up with the opportunity for status maintenance and improvement in the tales, there may be some useful links to be drawn to links between this and Delattre’s notion of a ‘worthy opponent’. Certainly the Ulster hero would not primarily be concerned with the prevention of the ‘psychically painful embarrassment’ that may accompany a heavy defeat.

Loland and McNamee discuss the development of the ideal of ‘fair play’ suggesting firstly that it conjures up notions of high moral values. However, they are quick to note that the ideal has firm links to the development of industrial society in England and the class interests which were related to it. Loland and McNamee attempt a reinterpretation of the fair play ideal and its justification.⁶⁸² By engaging moral practice rather than moral theory, Loland and McNamee set up a useful and interesting way of approaching the notion of ‘fair play’ in the combats of the Ulster tales. Noting that ‘everyday notions’ of fair play are composite, Loland and McNamee use both a version of contractualism and virtue ethics to determine how each accommodates the other to give a rich account of fair play in sport settings.⁶⁸³

Clearly, Loland and McNamee are referring to the richness of understanding the phenomenon of modern (late twentieth and early twenty-first century) sport. However, it can be suggested that the understandings and conclusions they posit can be applied in an effort to illuminate the concept and practice of *fír fer* in the Ulster tales. This is not to say that the practices and conceptualisations practiced by the inhabitant of early Ireland (or medieval Ireland) are to be exacted by such a connection but it is simply to say that in an effort to understand *fír fer* from a twenty-first century such a comparison may be useful.

As mentioned above, Loland and McNamee suggest that the everyday notions of fair play are comprised of a combination of both formal (keep to the written rules) and

⁶⁸² Sigmund Loland and Mike McNamee, ‘Fair Play and the Ethos of Sport: An Eclectic Philosophical Framework’, *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol. 27, Issue 1 (May 2000), pp. 63-80.

⁶⁸³ Loland and McNamee, ‘Fair Play and the Ethos of Sport’, p. 64.

informal (possessing a disposition to try hard, respect the opponent and so on). According to Loland and McNamee the core in the justification of the fairness ideal is: ‘When voluntarily engaged in a rule governed practice, those engaged enter into a tacit social agreement wherein a moral obligation arises to keep the formal playing rules of the game’.⁶⁸⁴ All sports, say Loland and McNamee, ‘bear the hallmark of this tradition’.⁶⁸⁵

A formalist account of games cannot fully encompass the practice of sport, particularly as these accounts tend to be ideal types which are rarely, if ever, realised. Fred D’Agostino articulates game formalism in the following way: ‘No activity is an instance of some particular game G if any rule of G is violated during that activity’.⁶⁸⁶ By ‘rules’ D’Agostino is referring to the formal, written rules of the activity. This account, on its own, can shed little light on either the practice of modern sport or the practice of single combat in the Ulster tales. From the point of view of the Ulster warriors, *fír fer* and the intentional disregard of some or all of the norms surrounding single combat and sport-like activity, a formalist account cannot account for all, or even enough, of the scenarios presented in the tales. First and foremost, there may have been a written set of rules governing single combat and sport-like activity but if there were, these are not now known to those who read and study these tales.

The concept of *fír fer* suggests agreement on some level but the ability to defer to a set of rules (either constitutive or regulative) or to an ‘ethos’ and seek a different outcome or recompense for actions which diverge from that framework is not evident. For example, there is evidence of warriors, about to engage each other, negotiating not only the weapons they will resort to,⁶⁸⁷ but also in the terms of that engagement. In one notable incident, Cú Chulainn dons a fake beard so that Nadcranntail will fight him. Now satisfied that he is about to fight a worthy opponent, Nadcranntail and Cú Chulainn devise a set of temporary rules to guide the encounter. The passage reads:

‘That is more like him ... A fight with rules!’

⁶⁸⁴ Loland and McNamee, ‘Fair play and the Ethos of Sport’, p. 65.

⁶⁸⁵ Loland and McNamee, ‘Fair play and the Ethos of Sport’, p. 65.

⁶⁸⁶ Fred D’Agostino, ‘The Ethos of Games’, in William Morgan and Klaus Meier (eds), *Philosophic Inquiry in Sport* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 1988), p. 65.

⁶⁸⁷ As in the fight between Cú Chulainn and Ferdiaid.

‘Agreed,’ Cú Chulainn said. ‘Name your rules.’
 ‘Thrown spears’ Nadcranntail said, ‘and no dodging.’
 ‘No dodging’, Cú Chulainn said, ‘except upward’.
 Nadcranntail made a cast at him but Cú Chulainn leaped
 on high ...
 ‘You have fought foul! You have dodged my throw’, Nadcranntail
 said. ‘You are free to dodge mine by leaping upward’, Cú Chulainn
 said.⁶⁸⁸

This account shows clearly the practice of accepting rules and the situational relevance of those rules as well as the importance of at least being seen to adhere to the agreement.

The absence of fair play is not restricted to combat situations. Regularly in reference to the boy-corps, Cú Chulainn is described as playing alone against a number (usually 150) youths. It could be argued that the boy-corps operated as a paramilitary unit and that the activities the boys engaged in should be operating under the same regulative understandings of *fír fer* as the actual combats in the tales. However, the apparently lop-sided training arrangement does seem to be an accepted part of the training regime and possibly satisfies the criteria of a somewhat ‘equal’ encounter. Clearly, the point is reiterated, Cú Chulainn is exceptional and his training in the company of those less talented requires a different sense of equality. This inequity is valued in the games and sports of the boy-corps but is a transgression of terms in actual combat.

However, as O’Leary suggests, the Ulster tales are riddled with examples of heroes flaunting and flouting *fír fer*. There seems to be little consequence of such actions. The transgressions *are*, however, noted as such on occasion as is evidenced by passages such as this from the *Táin*: ‘Terms of fair play were broken against him; twenty men were sent to attack him all together’.⁶⁸⁹ Again, though, there seems to be no tangible consequence of transgression.

One might consider whether there is a separate set of conventions (even rules) which govern the appropriate and inappropriate waiving of *fír fer*. As O’Leary suggests, what may be evident in the Ulster tales is a fledgling ethical position in such matters.

⁶⁸⁸ Kinsella, *The Tain*, p. 124.

⁶⁸⁹ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 168.

Although from a much later period, the concept of *fír fer*, coupled with the existence of *Mellbretha*,⁶⁹⁰ is telling in terms of the possible development of an ethical framework of sport-like activity in early Ireland.

This section has focussed on the nature of single combat, the principal variety of martial engagement in the Ulster Cycle tales. In discussing such combats, the nature and significance of the underlying ethical concepts surrounding that engagement was explored. The following section looks at the implements which are utilised in both sport-like and martial encounters and, more specifically, examines the transition of such items from toys and game implements to weapons (and vice versa) in the tales.

6.3 Toys and Weapons of Sport and War

It is clear from the preceding discussions that sport and games play a pivotal role in the hero's early education and martial learning. Cú Chulainn, as the archetypal warrior hero, displays unequalled skill and dexterity with his 'toys' at such a tender age that his future as an exceptional warrior-hero appears pre-destined. This section examines the transitions that 'toys' make from the play setting of games and pastimes to the more serious arenas of organised martial learning, self-protection and, finally, war. Implements such as the hurley stick and ball, the javelin and the spear can be seen to occupy a situational relevance and 'transition' to take on new meanings and possibilities as circumstances change from the benign (a way to amuse oneself on a long journey) to the more malignant (as a tool of combat). Additionally, items which are traditionally called weapons such as the sword, javelin and sling shot, can be seen to be used in situations of play and games. This section, then, is primarily concerned with the fluidity of these 'toys' and weapons as implements of games, skill learning, martial training and combat.

⁶⁹⁰ Binchy suggests that the categories of 'fair play' and 'foul play' in *Mellbretha* turn on the character of the game and the circumstances in which it was played rather than the actual *conduct* of the players. See Binchy, *Mellbretha*, p. 151. This, however, could be a direct function of the tract's legal nature rather than recognition of the spirit in which the games are actually played. O'Leary's suggestion, however, that there is a fledgling internalised ethical system evident in the actions of the Ulster heroes would suggest that there may have been some concern about the conduct of participants in single combat in the early Irish tales but that by the time of the *Mellbretha*, there had been some influence by Christianity on ethical development in Ireland. See O'Leary, 'Fír fer: An Internalised Ethical Concept in Early Irish Literature?', pp. 13-14.

Ultimately the implements used in sport, recreations and in war in the Irish Ulster tales have multiple meanings. They have meanings which are related variously to the display of skill, warrior education, and the determination of status and prestige, and, indeed, the implements form part of the defining features of the warrior in the tales. A warrior who is unarmed (and this seems to be a loose definition since the weapons and playthings can be interchangeable) is no warrior at all. In the tales, a woman carrying arms can be considered to be ‘like a man’ and therefore able to be treated like any other armed male.⁶⁹¹ An unarmed male can likewise be considered in a sense as ‘like a woman’ and can therefore be treated like one.⁶⁹²

There are very few examples of weapons or implements used in war or combat in the Ulster tales which are not also the principal tool in a game or related training activity. The implements, while they may be utilised for a game or training purposes, are also intimately bound up in the meanings of warrior and hero. Susan Schultz Kleine, discussing the connections of individuals to their possessions, suggests that ‘[we] often use material goods for not only utilitarian purposes, but also to stand for personal meaning’.⁶⁹³ According to Dickson, ‘a warrior is, by definition, one who is armed’. Dickson uses the example of Laeg’s warning to Cú Chulainn as he is about to meet unarmed with Medb to discuss a truce. The charioteer warns Cú Chulainn not to go unarmed because a ‘warrior without his weapons is not under warrior’s law; he is treated under the rule for cowards’.⁶⁹⁴ As Dickson suggests ‘Not only is a weaponless man visibly not a warrior, his social role becomes that of a coward, placing him on the bottom rungs of social hierarchy’.⁶⁹⁵ Cú Chulainn and other warriors, it seems, are defined by the tools of their trade. What, then, is one to make of the warrior who possesses such weapons but also utilises sporting implements as weapons? Cú Chulainn is perhaps an anomaly in this respect as his actions with sporting implements wielded as weapons is not seen in the repertoire of the adult martial heroes. Cú Chulainn seems to wield these ‘weapons’ as a clear indication of

⁶⁹¹ For a discussion on gender shifting in the Ulster Cycle tales see Chapter Eight.

⁶⁹² Dickson notes that both men and women are ‘feminised’ when they are separated from their weapons as they are then transformed from a ‘powerful’ to a ‘powerless’ position. Dickson, ‘Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature’, p. 33.

⁶⁹³ Susan Schultz Kleine ‘Possessions’, in Peter Earl and Simon Kemp (eds), *The Elgar Companion to Consumer Research and Economic Psychology* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 1999), p. 458.

⁶⁹⁴ Kinsella, *The Táin*, p. 138.

⁶⁹⁵ Dickson, ‘Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature’, p. 130.

his exceptional (and youthful) abilities. In this sense, Cú Chulainn does not outgrow his ‘toys’ despite being engaged in very ‘adult’ encounters. Cú Chulainn simply employs them in a different manner, one which satisfies both his image as a child/youth (by virtue of these being ‘playthings’) and as a warrior (by being effectively lethal).

The appropriate ‘tools of the trade’ were essential to both the warrior’s ability to portray the idea of a hero and indeed to perform the necessary deeds aligned to his (or occasionally her) profession. The warrior’s combat equipment cache was extensive as there is evidence that Cú Chulainn and others utilised a number of different weapons in combat and in training. According to Ettlinger, regulations were observed in relation to the forging of important weapons and the ‘taking up of arms’ of the hero. ‘Lucky days and hours’ were pronounced and weapons forged or heroes who took arms on those days would be doing so under auspicious conditions.⁶⁹⁶

The combat equipment also acquired ‘personification’ and had individual meaning according to their decorations.⁶⁹⁷ Weapons acquired individual significance by receiving a name. The name was usually adjectival and expressed the function of the weapon. At this point, some weapons began to take on aspects of a personality. In this context, weapons seem to be spoken of as if they have human emotions and desires. Ettlinger suggests that some weapons are perceived in the tales as ‘sharing the excitement and impatience of their owner before the battle or as taking direct part in the struggle’.⁶⁹⁸

Such weapons are also endowed with the ability to prophesise. Ettlinger cites the tale ‘The Destruction at Da Derga’s Hostel’ (Mythological Cycle) by way of example, suggesting that it was taken to ‘forebode evil when spears and shields cried out and fell from their racks’.⁶⁹⁹ Shields, in particular, had an alternate function. Instead of predicting evil, they were able to call together all available help for a hero in dire need by way of what Ettlinger describes as a ‘shield-moan’. In the tale ‘The Tragic Death

⁶⁹⁶ Ellen Ettlinger, ‘Magic Weapons in Celtic Legends’, *Folklore*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (September 1945), p. 300.

⁶⁹⁷ Ettlinger, ‘Magic Weapons in Celtic Legends’, pp. 300-1.

⁶⁹⁸ Ettlinger, ‘Magic Weapons in Celtic Legends’, p. 301.

⁶⁹⁹ Ettlinger, ‘Magic Weapons in Celtic Legends’, p. 301.

of the Sons of Uisnech', King Conchobar's son Fiacha, using Conchobar's weapons, takes cover underneath the shield 'and the shield roared at the greatness of the need wherein he lay'.⁷⁰⁰

The tale 'The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn' also shows evidence of the practice of 'naming' important weapons (or at least the weapons of important people). Cú Chulainn, predicting how the combat with Tuarchall will transpire, explains how he will use King Conchobar's weapons. Cú Chulainn states what he plans to do to his foe thus: 'I will take in my hand Conchobar's great spear, the Venomous; it shall pierce the shield over his breast and, after holing the heart within him, shall break three ribs in his side that is the farthest from me'.⁷⁰¹

The naming of implements is seen in sport as well, both in ancient and modern times. For instance, the staves of top class experts in the ancient art of Silambam fencing in India were given distinctive names. According to Raj, the name of the staff is 'usually proclaimed in the body of a couplet or some doggerel rhyme'.⁷⁰² Raj also suggests that it is considered necessary to know the name of the opponent's staff as the name often indicated the composition, pliability, strength and other properties of the staff that might prove critical to defending oneself against strikes. Raj notes that at the beginning of contests the combatants 'would eulogise the exploits of their staves in previous contests one after another, each thus trying to boost up his morale'.⁷⁰³

Anne Ross notes a similarity between the naming of weapons and the naming of some *fidchell* boards. In particular, Ross suggests that the naming of weapons and chessboards alike indicated that these objects are accredited with supernatural powers and qualities.⁷⁰⁴ These qualities are clearly reflected in the names given to the objects. In the tale 'The Kingship of Ulster', Conchobar is said to have three houses, *Craebruad*, the Red Branch, *Tete Brec*, the Twinkling Hoard and *Craebderg*, the

⁷⁰⁰ Ettlinger, 'Magic Weapons in Celtic Legends', p. 302.

⁷⁰¹ Cross and Slover, 'The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn', p. 149.

⁷⁰² Raj cited in Raj, 'The Origin and the Historical Development of Silambam Fencing', p. 94.

⁷⁰³ Raj cited in Raj, 'The Origin and the Historical Development of Silambam Fencing', p. 94.

⁷⁰⁴ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 95.

Ruddy Branch. It was at *Tete Brec* that all the weapons were kept. According to the tale:

[a]ll the javelins and shields and swords were kept
 [there]... the place twinkled with the gold of sword-hilts and the gold and silver glimmering on the necks and coils of grey javelins, on shield-plates and shield-rims, and in the sets of goblets, cups and drinking-horns.⁷⁰⁵

Significantly, the tale goes on to describe the individual weapons that were held at *Tete Brec*. The following is a list of some of these weapons and the personalised names that each have been given: there was *Ochain*, ‘the ear of beauty’ which was Conchobar’s shield; other shields there are called, *Duban*, ‘black shield’, *Comla Catha*, ‘the door of battle’ and *Lamthapad*, ‘swift to hand’. The various swords were called *Coscrach*, ‘triumphant’, *Echtach*, ‘death-dealing’, *Ir*, ‘angry’, *Nithach*, ‘the wounder’, and *Cainnel* ‘a bright torch’.⁷⁰⁶

The importance of such weapons to a warrior society is clear in the way these weapons are treated. They are kept safe in the king’s house, decorated lavishly in precious metals with fine handiwork, and given individual names. The names themselves are interesting too, in that they show their use as offensive, as in the case of the sword ‘the wounder’, or as defensive weapons, such as the shield, ‘the door of battle’.⁷⁰⁷ According to Sayers, shields had edges that could be sharpened and they may also have been used as offensive weapons. For example, Sayers notes in ‘The Cattle Raid of Cooley’, that ‘[w]hen the warrior did the ‘edge-feat’ with it (his sharp-edged sword), he would cut alike with his shield or his spear or his sword’.⁷⁰⁸

Kleine indicates that ‘[we] use material possessions of attachment for defining ourselves, who we are, who we are not, who we are becoming; also who we are

⁷⁰⁵ Kinsella, *The Táin*, p. 5.

⁷⁰⁶ Kinsella, *The Táin*, p. 5. Iron weapons in a bronze age may go part way to explaining the depiction of weapons as shining with extraordinary brightness. Such weapons have been claimed to be the ‘lightning attributes of divine beings’ although Ettlinger proposes that such an exaggerated description may be the result of the sight of arms that were brighter than any other. See Ettlinger, ‘Magic Weapons in Celtic Legends’, p. 298.

⁷⁰⁷ This practice of naming lethal weapons may have an unusual parallel in modern sport where violent names are adopted by or imposed upon certain athletes. Examples include gridiron and ice hockey players with violent names such as ‘the enforcer’ and ‘the hurricane’. This practice may be likened to the naming of weapons in these sports and/or field positions as the players’ bodies themselves can be metaphorically (or literally) weapons.

⁷⁰⁸ Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 51.

connected with and who we are as unique individuals'.⁷⁰⁹ Cú Chulainn is defined by his relationship to and with the weapon the *gae bolga*. All of Cú Chulainn's other skills and implements are possessed also by others (warriors, teachers, kings and so on). These other warriors, teachers and kings certainly may not possess all these things at once but they are at least connected with certain feats, skills, and even taboos. Cú Chulainn alone, however, wields the special weapon the *gae bolga*. His request to Aife to leave Connla's instruction of the *gae bolga* to him connects the father and the son in a special way. Cú Chulainn as the sole possessor of the weapon, a possession which is intimately connected with his identity, is likely to be altered once Connla is taught to use it. Connla, by all accounts, is destined to surpass his father. The fact that Connla is killed early in his life puts an end to that possibility. Moreover, the fact that Cú Chulainn is the one who ends up slaying his own child with that weapon is both tragically poetic and telling in terms of the symbolic significance of the *gae bolga* and its relationship to the position of supreme warrior.

Kleine also suggests that 'special possessions facilitate *self-continuity* (by connecting to past, present and future self) and *self-change* (disconnect from past by dispossessing a possession that represents something one wishes to leave behind)'.⁷¹⁰ In death, the link between Cú Chulainn and the *gae bolga* is not severed (possibly if it had been the cause of his death, either accidentally or purposely, the link may have been severed). Cú Chulainn's fate is sealed as he transgresses his taboos but in death, as in life, the warrior maintains that symbolic (if not literal) link between identity and possession of that special weapon.

6.4 Transitions

Those weapons referred to most often in the Ulster tales are outlined below with examples from the Ulster Cycle tales to indicate their transitional use as game implements. Implements used for training often had multiple uses. Sometimes the transition from sport tool to weapon was dictated by situational and temporal factors. At other times, the transition was more structured. Some implements were exclusively sport tools or they were weapons. In order to facilitate a discussion of the

⁷⁰⁹ Kleine, 'Possessions', p. 456.

⁷¹⁰ Kleine, 'Possessions', p. 456. Emphasis in the original.

fluid transition of implements, a ‘starting point’ and structure of sorts is advantageous. Accordingly, the following classification (into categories of ‘weapon’ and ‘sporting implement’) have been made with regard to the perceived primary use of each item. This is not to suggest that any one weapon or sporting implement can or should be seen as having *begun* in that category.⁷¹¹ It suggests only that a categorisation has been *made* which more readily allows an examination of the movement of certain objects in and out of certain realms. This categorisation has been done somewhat arbitrarily, adhering only to generalised notions of what type of things can be regarded as sporting implements or as weapons and influenced by this author’s vantage point in twenty-first century society. The categorisation of ‘weapons’ is based on the description of Cú Chulainn’s warring implements described in the *Táin* as he parades himself to the hosts after the *Breslige* battle. The passage indicates the weaponry Cú Chulainn possessed:

[A] dark-red purple shield with five concentric circles of gold and a rim of white bronze [and] ... a gold-hilted, ornamented sword with great knobs of red gold at its end. In the chariot beside him was a long shining-edged spear together with a sharp attacking javelin with rivets of burning gold.⁷¹²

The description of his weaponry given in this passage, coupled with the additional suggestion from Sayers of a broad-bladed dagger (small sword) and sling formed the central reservoir of weapons available to Cú Chulainn and most probably to the other Ulster warriors.⁷¹³ The tales provide frequent reference though to what Sayers suggests are ‘rarer or unique arms’ such as the *gae bolga*, *deil chliss*,⁷¹⁴ stones, balls and sharpened stakes.

The categories and implements attributed to each category are summarised in the table below.⁷¹⁵ Following this, each of the inclusions is examined more fully.

⁷¹¹ This is also not to be considered an exhaustive list of all weapons mentioned in the tales but instead these weapons are used to exemplify the types of transitions that can be identified.

⁷¹² O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 190.

⁷¹³ Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, pp. 49-50.

⁷¹⁴ This weapon is rarely translated. Sayers suggests ‘iron ball’ and indicates the possibility of a ball and chain type weapon. See William Sayers, ‘Three Charioteering Gifts in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and *Mesca Ulad: Immorchor Deland, Foscul Díriuch, Léim dar Boilg*’, *Ériu*, Vol. 32 (1981), pp. 163-167.

⁷¹⁵ This list does not represent an exhaustive list of weapons, transitional or otherwise, in the tales. Instead this table acts as a rough structure from which to discuss the transitional nature of many of the implements used in sport-like activity and in combat in the Ulster tales.

Table 6a. Categories of Implements

Initial Category	Inclusions
1. Sporting implements that transition	Hurley stick and ball (and ‘apples’) Board game pieces
2. Weapons that transition	Sword Spear/Javelin Sling shot/stones <i>Deil chliss</i> (‘iron ball’)
3. Other items that transition	Chariot
4. Weapons that do not transition	<i>Gae bolga</i>

The tales do not provide any evidence of sporting implements that were used exclusively for ‘game’ purposes. Even seemingly innocuous items, such as board game pieces, are utilised as weapons. In contrast, there is one weapon, the *gae bolga*, which, although marked as an item in the list of feats, is not mentioned as being practiced in the tales.

The following description of the game of hurley is from the tale ‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’:

And Cú Chulainn saw the beautiful, bright youths playing hurley and games; and though he was fatigued after his march and travel, he went to their hurley, and if one of the youths was exulting, he held no converse with him until he had taken the ball from him over the border of the goal.⁷¹⁶

This description indicates which implements are utilised but is not particularly forthcoming in terms of the specific features of the tools. In fact, the hurley stick and ball are not described in very much detail in the tales at all. Often references to the items are simply statements of possession and indication of use (although not in what fashion they are used). In Recension II of the *Táin*, there is a passage indicating that

⁷¹⁶ Whitley Stokes, ‘The Training of Cúchulainn’, *Revue Celtique*, Vol. 24 (1908), p. 117.

Cú Chulainn's initial hurley stick was made of bronze and that his hurley ball was made of silver.⁷¹⁷

Hurley is a popular training game and the sport is mentioned in several tales, operating to denote those playing as warriors. Those who participated in hurley were invariably those of the privileged classes. Hurley could be seen as a game of children but as only Cú Chulainn is mentioned as having had a hurley stick and ball at a very young age it is difficult to tell for certain. It may well be that Cú Chulainn is so precocious in his development that the passages indicating his having such items may simply act as a reinforcement to the audience of the kind of warrior he is to become. Possessing the hurley stick and ball at that young age denotes perhaps one of amazing, even superhuman potential. In the 'boyhood tales', Cú Chulainn is said to have (in recension II of the *Táin*) used the hurley ball as a missile to kill a vicious hound.⁷¹⁸

In a rather mythological episode of the *Macgnímrada*, Cú Chulainn, while attempting to locate the wounded Conchobar, encounters a mysterious, possibly otherworldly, man. After wresting him, Cú Chulainn uses his hurley as a weapon against him. O'Rahilly's translation continues: 'Wherupon Cú Chulainn rose to his feet and striking of his opponents head with his hurley, he began to drive the head like a ball before him across the plain'.⁷¹⁹

In the hound-killing episode of the *Macgnímrada*, the passage clearly indicates that Cú Chulainn has no 'reasonable means of defence' as the hound approaches.⁷²⁰ Evidently, the hurley stick and ball are not considered to be weapons (at least not 'reasonable' weapons) prior to the use as such in this passage. Employment as weaponry in this instance is a spontaneous event which involves a clear moment of transition from toy or game piece to weapon.

⁷¹⁷ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 158.

⁷¹⁸ In recension I, Cú Chulainn casts aside his hurley and ball and uses his bear hands to strangle, and then throw, the hound, against a pillar stone. See O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 141.

⁷¹⁹ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 139.

⁷²⁰ Cross and Slover, 'The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn', p. 141.

It seems, however, that at other times the hurley stick is indeed perceived as a weapon. During the *Táin*, for instance, the boy-corps decide that their friend Cú Chulainn should not be left alone to fight and so they decide to send 150 of their number to help him. They carry not swords, shields and spears but instead are carrying their hurley sticks. Ailill orders 150 of his troops to go out to meet them and all are killed.⁷²¹

Other game pieces are also subject to the transition into weapons. The normally sedate practice of board games and the implements used in them is upturned in the tale ‘The Exile of the Sons of Uisnech’. In this instance, one character, seeing a spy who may give away their position, throws a *fidchell* piece at the spy, taking out his eye. It may be that such occurrences are the result of utilising the most appropriate object at hand to fulfil the need that one has at the time. There is no evidence that a warrior would ‘practice’ the art of chess piece throwing in order to improve his or her repertoire of martial skills. The warrior women who train the heroes in martial arts do not seem to include such things as ‘available object hurling’ in their educational framework. Yet there are clearly instances where an available and possibly non-combat related object is employed as a weapon.

From a vantage point in the twenty-first century, the object denoted by the word ‘spear’ is decidedly a weapon, albeit one carrying somewhat primitive associations. The weapon itself bears resemblance to the sporting implement, the javelin. In the Ulster tales these items are similar but separate entities though the precise difference between these objects is not indicated. On his journey to Emain Macha, Cú Chulainn took with him several objects including his ‘little javelin for casting’ and ‘toy spear with its end sharpened by fire’.⁷²² Used as training tools and as a way to pass time on a long journey, these objects were also used as weapons. The use of spears in both combat and training circumstances can be contrasted with the use of the *gae bolga* which is only ever used as a weapon.

Another object that could be considered primarily as a weapon, but which certainly has the demonstrated capacity to operate in other realms is the sword. Unlike the

⁷²¹ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, pp. 170-171.

⁷²² O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 158.

spear, the sword had no ‘juvenile’ or ‘play’ version. Despite this, the sword was used in the training activity referred to as the ‘stripping game’. With accurate and perfectly timed blows the participants tore clothes off their opponents without drawing blood. This activity seems removed from the cut, thrust and hack of combat involving a sword. Yet, perhaps, this is to underestimate the sword fighter, who it seems was trained in sword *finesse* as well as in the more violent use of the implement.

As evidenced above, the implements used for training often had multiple uses. Sometimes the transition from sport tool to weapon was dictated by situational and temporal factors. At other times, the transition was more structured. Some implements were exclusively sport tools or they were weapons.

While not essentially used as a sporting or game implement, another weapon that can be considered as transitioning is the sling shot. The use of a sling shot was as much about a show of dexterity and keenness of eye as it was about power and strength. Like the weapons mentioned above, the sling shot allowed the warrior to utilise a range of skills and techniques in the effective and efficient use of the weapon. The effective use of the sling shot, particularly in regard to capturing birds and animals alive, contributed greatly to the status of the warrior.⁷²³ Sometimes used as a hunting tool (to bring down birds for instance) and regularly used in combat, the sling shot was indeed a versatile implement.

What can be gleaned from the above is that there seems to be two types of transitions. The first type can be termed ‘Transition by Necessity’. Such transitions are not pre-meditated but are instead determined by the needs and circumstances that exist (or develop) at that time. The second type can be termed ‘Transition by Design’. In this second type, the transition is pre-meditated and is firmly determined before circumstances arise. Ordinarily this means that the implements in question are brought along expressly for that purpose. The next section looks more closely at the transitions that occur by examining what can be called the ‘toy-sporting implement-weapon continuum’.

⁷²³ The issue of sport-like activity in relation to warrior status is examined at length in Chapter Seven.

The Toy-Sporting Implement-Weapon Continuum

The toys that Cú Chulainn possesses as a child are not discarded as the child enters the realm of the boy-corps, nor are they entirely discarded when Cú Chulainn is defending the province in the *Táin*. The toys transition in their meaning and in their actual use. It is worth recalling that Sayers suggests that the ‘toy’ javelin may not be a toy at all but instead be a javelin/spear with no metal tip.⁷²⁴ If this is the case then the use of the handled end of the weapon in the death of Cú Chulainn is perhaps indicative of a return to that earlier state of being. Purposely using the blunt end, Cú Chulainn, even in a weakened state, may be indicating his supremacy. As the greatest warrior he can easily utilise weapons in their ‘play’ form.

Fluidity of the transition from benign object (toy) which has, nevertheless, the potential to be malignant to the sphere of war/combat where that object is brought into service, so to speak, as the situation requires. One weapon that is only ever used as a weapon and new in a game situation (although it must have been utilised in a training situation in order to learn to use the implement) is the one weapon that defines Cú Chulainn, namely the *gae bolga*. This weapon is examined more fully here.

According to Lowe, the *gae bolga* goes ‘further than traditional weapons: it is a nameless horror, an indefinable assault because it strikes from the inside out, not merely subverting the heroic identity but inverting it’.⁷²⁵ Cú Chulainn attacks both Loch and Fer Diad (as in the above description) with the *gae bolga*. Both are said to be wearing hornskin combat armour on their bodies.

The significance of the reference to the *gae bolga* in the list of feats is that by its inclusion, the list itself is revealed as undeniably martial in nature. Despite the somewhat innocuous descriptions of some of the feats (and indeed the implements used to complete these) the feats are unmistakably related to the combatative nature of a warrior existence. If there was some doubt as to the purpose of the list, the inclusion of the *gae bolga* remedies this.

⁷²⁴ Sayers, ‘Games, Sport, and Para-Military Exercise in Early Ireland’, p. 177.

⁷²⁵ Lowe, ‘Contagious Violence’, p. 95.

Lowe connects the *gae bolga* to the ethos of the hero: ‘The *gae bolga* is Cú Chulainn’s defining weapon because as a shape shifter he is perfectly placed to challenge the very core of the heroic ethos’.⁷²⁶ The nature of his shape shifting in this sense is his ability to encompass a number of oppositional binary categories at once. ‘He is a boy-man, beautiful but fierce, a defender of the Uliad but not entirely *of* the Uliad, and he stands guard at the edges of society’.⁷²⁷

Jeremy Lowe sees Cú Chulainn as a character which challenges any fixed definition of identity and which in fact undermines the very notion of heroism itself. Cú Chulainn is an ambivalent character who takes instability to its logical extreme. Cú Chulainn is what Lowe, borrowing from Kristeva, calls *abject* in that he both is terrifying and challenges all that is known yet he remains close to the society ever mindful of the threat that he poses. Lowe suggests that this threat is a very physical threat and that for all his efforts to control himself and that which happens around him, Cú Chulainn most often is the passive element, being used, manipulated and then being overcome by terrifying forces from within himself which take over his body manifesting in the warped state *ríastrad*. Lowe notes that this ‘warp-spasm’ is not a form of madness as Cú Chulainn, while in this state, goes on to perform his duties on the battlefield. In this sense, understanding Cú Chulainn as a supremely competent defender of the tribe is problematic. Cú Chulainn threatens his own society as much as he is expected to threaten those outside.

Cú Chulainn may be seen as a weapon in his own right. The contortions that he undergoes in the event of his rising fury are grotesque but also terrifying. Cú Chulainn can in this sense also be considered to be fluid and transitional as he moves from a vessel of passive reception on several occasions to a deformed and frightening entity when his *ríastrad* comes upon him. This is perhaps an extension of Lowe’s understanding of Cú Chulainn as fluid and a shape shifter.⁷²⁸

⁷²⁶ Lowe, ‘Contagious Violence’, p. 95.

⁷²⁷ Lowe, ‘Contagious Violence’, p. 95.

⁷²⁸ In a sense, the hero’s name change from Sétanta to Cú Chulainn in the third episode of the *Macgnímrada* can also be seen as part of Cú Chulainn’s transition. Cú Chulainn sheds his original name, voluntarily, to take on the rather obscure, totemic flavoured ‘Hound of Culann’.

Ann Dooley examines the transition of the warrior from the playing field to the killing field. Dooley discusses the concepts of inside and outside space with regard to the tension of wildness and civility in the youthful hero during the *Táin* (which occurs while Cú Chulainn is still only seventeen). She considers that Cú Chulainn makes incremental movements towards civility.⁷²⁹ Dooley notes that there is a division of ‘enactment space’ into the interior and exterior from the first incident in the *Macgnímrada*. The division is between the playing field and the palace and it is the implications of that division and the alterations to the spaces which are, according to Dooley, negotiated and expanded in that episode of the *Táin*.

Cú Chulainn himself can be seen to transition from ‘player’ to ‘warrior’ though Dooley also notes that his inherent ‘wildness’ requires constant negotiation. Cú Chulainn is innately unfamiliar with the civility and even the reverence required of the palace, the indoor space. To operate effectively in the indoor space, Cú Chulainn can be seen to both transition in himself and the conventions of the space. Cú Chulainn requires that a hard flat stone be brought into the house and that it must be placed in such a way that his feet and his head are level while he sleeps. Even once this is achieved there is a danger to others around him for his wildness still remains. In the hazy moments between sleeping and waking, Cú Chulainn strikes dead a servant sent to rouse him. Cú Chulainn’s transition, it seems, is not complete.

Cú Chulainn might be likened to a wild animal trapped inside a domestic house, a small but ferocious beast who, due to fear and unfamiliarity, strikes out until placated by familiar objects or surroundings. The tension, however, remains and within the interior space, though the wild appears tame, this tame ‘state of affairs’ is experienced only sporadically. In the *Macgnímrada*, while Cú Chulainn is negotiating his position in the indoor space, he is more secure in the outdoor space. The playing fields are where Cú Chulainn clearly feels most comfortable.

Cú Chulainn’s arrival at the playing fields follows on from a long, outdoor journey. He has just spent his time en route to the playing fields of Emain Macha playing active games with his ‘toys’. Cú Chulainn has been running, throwing the javelin and

⁷²⁹ Dooley, *Playing the Hero*, pp. 110-111.

hurling balls in a seemingly superhuman juggling game. To Cú Chulainn, while he may have never seen playing fields, such wide open and active spaces are familiar. He has a natural affinity for the outdoor ‘play’ space which can be contrasted with his apparent discomfort at being indoors. Not only is the hero ‘confined’ in the indoor space but he is unfamiliar with the conventions of such a space. Cú Chulainn brings his outdoor behaviour indoors and imposes it on the inhabitants of the king’s palace.

Outdoors, on the playing fields, Cú Chulainn is no less aware of the conventions under which the boy-corps operates but he is at least comfortable in the surroundings. Cú Chulainn’s treatment of the boys is unexpected and it belies his lack of knowledge of the space in terms of convention but the nature of the behaviour is not out-of-place on the playing/training fields in the same way that his behaviour in the palace is. Cú Chulainn responds to the physical, indeed martial, threat from the boy-corps in a legitimate way, that is, he retaliates with martial violence.

There is one more transgression of space that Cú Chulainn enacts, one which has prompted William Sayers to suggest that Cú Chulainn’s actions are expressly anti-regal. This transgression consists of Cú Chulainn’s invasion of the board game space. While Cú Chulainn is fleeing from the boys he runs into the space where Fergus and king Conchobar are playing *fidchell* and jumps over the playing board. Sayers suggests that this act, coupled with the transgressions of the boy-corps’ play and the palace hall, is expressly anti-regal as all three realms of the king’s space are violated.⁷³⁰

Cú Chulainn’s actions on the playing field are wrong because they challenge tradition. His actions in the palace (both in the hall and with respect to the *fidchell* board) also challenge tradition but, further, these actions transgress the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in an indoor space. Cú Chulainn’s actions indoors, then, challenge the *status quo* on several levels.

⁷³⁰ In the *Macgnímrada* it is said that King Conchobar divides his leisure time into thirds, watching the boy-corps at play, drinking and feasting (in the hall) and playing *fidchell*. By attacking the boys and running through the hall and jumping over the fidchell board, Cú Chulainn has violated the space of all three of the king’s favourite pastimes.

Cú Chulainn's decision to go to Emain Macha in the first place sets up this tension as Cú Chulainn is totally unaware of the rules and conventions of society. According to Sayers, Cu Chulainn goes into the unknown, 'in ignorance, and to a degree even cognitive blindness'.⁷³¹ There are three spatial signs which Cú Chulainn imperfectly recognises and whose rules he ignores; the playing field, the king's hall and the *fidchell* board.

According to Sayers' analysis, Cú Chulainn exhibits a similar five step pattern of behaviour in each episode of the *Macgnímrada* as he negotiates space and convention. He firstly fails to recognise and interpret the signs and conventions. Secondly, he imposes his heroic will in the form of rage, distortion and/or combat. Thirdly, Cú Chulainn forces an explanation of the rules. Fourthly, he exploits that newly acquired knowledge and, finally, he rewrites the rules within the general framework of the earlier conventions.⁷³²

Regarding spatial hierarchy in the king's hall, Sayers suggests that by asking if his bed can be raised so that his feet and head are level, Cú Chulainn is in fact demanding parity with the king as the spatial organisation and level of the palace compartments reflects the rank and relative import of the palace inhabitants. According to Sayers:

The remaining episodes display similar examples of wilful
childish behaviour that contravenes rules, then the
appropriation or exploitation of pre-existing conventions
and finally a redefinition of signs in order to accommodate
the new heroic dimension at the Ulster court.⁷³³

6.5 Conclusions

This chapter has examined the relationship between the sport-like activities of martial learning and actual combat situations. Initially, the nature of combat, in particular, single combat, was examined with several examples, drawn from the tales, recounted to give a clearer understanding of the encounters. The final section then went on to address the fluid transition of the sporting and military implements and the martial

⁷³¹ Sayers, 'Cú Chulainn, the Heroic Imposition', p. 84.

⁷³² This has implications for a discussion of the power of the sports 'hero' to rewrite rules and conventions. Such an examination can be found in Chapter Four.

⁷³³ Sayers, 'Cú Chulainn, the Heroic Imposition', p. 86.

skills of the warrior as the circumstances altered. At times, the utilisation of certain implements was shown to be determined by the availability of that implement in a time of need rather than relying on an actual decision on the ‘right’ tool for the encounter.

The following chapter looks at sport-like activity in relation to the gaining and maintenance of social status in the warrior society depicted in the Ulster tales. Specifically, Chapter Seven examines the venues for the display of feats and other sport-like. Further, there is a comprehensive analysis of the contribution of various sport-like activities to the social status of the warrior class.

Chapter Seven

Sport-Like Activity and Social Status in the Ulster Cycle

7.1 Introduction

Chapter Seven examines those sport-like activities which contribute to the image of the warrior. This includes a discussion of the nature and significance of the venues for such display, specifically the fairs and assemblies, the king's hall and the chariot. In this chapter there is also an examination of some of the more prominent sport-like activities which contribute to the social standing of warriors. These include racing activities and the possession of swift horses and adorned chariots, hunting and capturing live prey, the playing of board games and the use of physical challenges which both displayed the superior skills of the warrior who sets them and has the additional benefit of delaying the progress of an enemy. Finally, this chapter looks at the display of feats. Introduced in Chapter Five, the feats help to define the warrior and show that he (or she) has highly developed physical skill. Put on display during feasts, at assemblies, en route to combats and even in combat situations, martial feats, performed skilfully, reinforce the image of a warrior of whom all should be wary.

Thomas Charles-Edwards discusses the concepts of status and honour (and its oppositional concept, shame) in the Irish and Welsh tales, suggesting that:

Honour and shame are not merely two opposing valuations, two opinions of a person generally held throughout his range of acquaintance; they must be publicly declared in some way or another. This may be, but need not be, by verbal praise or satire. It may also be declared by ritual and symbolic action.⁷³⁴

Charles-Edwards suggests that once such judgement has been publicly made, the individual can be expected to alter his or her behaviour in recognition of the verdict and thus act as an honoured or shamed person. He notes that, 'Status, on the other hand, implies a hierarchy of social ranks within which individuals have their place. It implies systematic social differentiation using some general scheme of valuation

⁷³⁴ T. M. Charles-Edwards, 'Honour and Status in Some Irish and Welsh Prose Tales', *Eriu*, vol. XXXVI (1978), p. 123.

according to occupation, wealth or whatever it may be'.⁷³⁵ Charles-Edwards, though, does not go into detail regarding the nature of the ritual or symbolic action that publicly declares honour. Philip O'Leary, however, does highlight a medium for this type of recognition in the tales: martial contests.⁷³⁶

According to O'Leary, the principal method of achieving an increase in social status was via aggressive competition in a public arena. Martial success was the ultimate social mover. As O'Leary states, '[If] a hero could win a victory, he gained honour at the expense of his vanquished foe. In effect all that mattered was triumph or defeat'.⁷³⁷ At this point, O'Leary suggests that in effect, all that mattered was whether the hero was triumphant or not and that how one 'played the game was irrelevant provided that any truly questionable acts ... were unwitnessed and unreported'.⁷³⁸ O'Leary then makes the case, using several examples from the Ulster tales (and other cycles), that the society depicted in the tales did in fact have a concept of fairness, namely *fír fer*, which ran far deeper than a public set of literal rules of conduct in combat. O'Leary states that for the heroes in the Irish tales, the concept of *fír fer* was the 'single most powerful element in the early Irish honour code', one which could compel both public and private compliance. It is the evidence of use of *fír fer* in private situations which suggests to O'Leary that in *fír fer* one sees the potential for ethical growth rather than simple rule following behaviour dictated by a need to avoid public shame.⁷³⁹ It would seem that honour and prestige would not necessarily be afforded the victor as a matter of course but that indeed the methods used in pursuing such victory is a critical factor. What is clear, however, is that sport-like activities are linked to the achievement and maintenance of social status for the warrior-hero of the Ulster Cycle.

7.2 Sport-Like Activity and Displays of Heroics and Superiority

The notion of sport-like activity and display of heroics in pursuit of social superiority includes: the display of skills for an audience; pre-combat posturing or warding off a potential aggressor, and, playing *fidchell* and other chess-like games where these have

⁷³⁵ Charles-Edwards, 'Honour and Status in Some Irish and Welsh Prose Tales', pp. 123-4.

⁷³⁶ Philip O'Leary, '*Fír fer*: An Internalised Ethical Concept in Early Irish Literature?', pp. 1-14.

⁷³⁷ Philip O'Leary, '*Fír fer*: An Internalised Ethical Concept in Early Irish Literature?', p. 1.

⁷³⁸ Philip O'Leary, '*Fír fer*: An Internalised Ethical Concept in Early Irish Literature?', p. 1.

⁷³⁹ O'Leary, '*Fír fer*: An Internalised Ethical Concept in Early Irish Literature?', p. 13.

hierarchy issues attached. While Chapters Five and Six have dealt in part with the nature and early learning of sport-like skills and martial feats as depicted in the Ulster tales, Chapter Seven examines the employment of these and other skills in relation to the ‘display’ of physical skill. Like many other forms of physical (sporting) entertainment in history and, indeed, in the twenty-first century, the idea of sporting entertainment as simple display and the appreciation and applauding of remarkable physical skill barely scratches the surface of the complex array of meanings that can be attributed to a particular event.

Donald Kyle, writing of sport in the ancient world (though not specifically on the Irish tales), suggests that physical performances were the ‘fields of play on which status and social orders were (re)constituted’.⁷⁴⁰ These physical performances took the form of hunting, dancing, runs, processions and, importantly, combats and mock warfare. Indeed, according to Kyle, these performances contained elements of several critical social and cultural events such as rites of passage, mating displays, festivals and other rituals of community.⁷⁴¹ The contests in Chapter 23 of the *Iliad* exemplify this type of sporting display. Despite being funeral games to mark the death of Patroclus, the games served alternate purposes. As Dickie suggests, in the games, as in war itself, the ‘men strive to win prizes which they see as tokens of recognition on the part of others of their worth’.⁷⁴² Like the funeral games, the games and sports and the performance of *cles* (feats) played a crucial role in defining the status of the members of the warrior class in the Ulster tales.

For the purposes of this chapter, demonstrations of sporting or martial skills and/or physical abilities in the Ulster tales can be seen to encompass two varieties. Firstly, there are individual displays which demonstrate competence, even superiority of skill to a principally static audience. This type of display would regularly take place in the king’s hall, on the back of a chariot, at a fair or assembly and even on the battlefield in preparation for the fray. These martial feats of dexterity are accomplished with the use of weapons, agility and strength and typically do not require the presence of

⁷⁴⁰ Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, p. 37.

⁷⁴¹ Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, p. 37.

⁷⁴² Dickie, ‘Fair and Foul Play in the Funeral Games of the *Iliad*’, p. 15.

another person to complete, though the performance of such feats may often be a pointless exercise if there is no one there to see it.

The second type of physical display is often posed as a challenge where the warriors (contestants) hope to defend the honour of the kingdom and thereby gain, or confirm, a certain amount of social status and respect. This type of encounter is characterised by a sport-like activity or martial skill or feat involving one or more (direct or indirect) opponents where successfully ‘outdoing’ the opponent indicates superiority. There are, however, less examples of this type of display of superiority in the tales than there are of the first kind. Possibly this reflects the very individual nature of the supreme hero, Cú Chulainn, and the centrality of this character to many of the Ulster tales.

The following section examines firstly one of the primary venues for the display of games, sports and physical skill, the *aonach*, or Irish fair, and then moves on to examine two more important venues for the display of physical and martial skill, namely, the king’s hall and the chariot in motion.

7.3 Venues for the Display of Physical Superiority

This section examines three prominent sites or venues for the public display of physical skills and martial feats. These three sites are, firstly, *aonachs* (fairs or assemblies) as venues for provincial gatherings, secondly, the king’s hall/house in times of great feasts and also in the reception of guests of a diplomatic nature, and, finally, the rear of the warrior’s chariot while it is in motion. All three of these venues offer the warrior a chance to publicly display the feats and skills for which they are renowned.

a) Fairs or Assemblies

Sports and games were a traditional part of many ancient ceremonial gatherings. The *aonachs* (fairs or assemblies) of pre-Christian Ireland incorporated races, challenges, contests and para-military displays along with the reciting of laws, feasting, trading and other communal interactions. Additionally, such fairs were an occasion for the temporary cessation of ‘ordinary’ affairs. At the assembly of Táilteann, for instance, there was enacted a sort of suspension of time, even a renewal of time. The fair was

to be held ‘without wounding or robbing any man, without trouble, without dispute, without reaving’ and also ‘without challenge of property, without suing, without law sessions, without evasion, without arrest’.⁷⁴³ Profane time, with its debts and quarrels, was suspended for the sacred phases of the festival.⁷⁴⁴

There was also the opportunity to renew or even ‘reset’ other elements of society. The social order, for instance, was re-affirmed although new status could also be granted. Confirmation of this was highly visible in the seating arrangements for the feasts as the most accomplished and valuable members of society took their place in the most prestigious places, usually closest to the king. Sports and games played an important role in this process. As Rees and Rees note:

There were horse-races and chariot-races through which new orders of merit were established ... poets, pipers, fiddlers, tympanists, bone-players, horn-players, and roarers, all exerted their powers before the king⁷⁴⁵ and he bestowed upon each art its rightful honour.

Rees and Rees are referring to the larger festivals such as those at Tara, Tailtu and Uisnech, although it seems reasonable to assume that the assemblies in smaller provinces followed a similar pattern. Settlement of differences and recognition of the law was an important part of the procedure at the assemblies. It was a time to confirm the laws of the land and to announce new ones.⁷⁴⁶

Fairs and assemblies feature in several of the Ulster Cycle tales. In each, insight can be gained in regard to a number of the activities and events that occurred at that particular festival. According to one Ulster Cycle tale, ‘The Sick-bed of Cú Chulainn’, there was a seven-day festival held over Samain (present day Halloween) at Mag Muirthemne every year. In explanation of what went on during this festival it is said that there was not ‘anything in the world that they would do at that time except sports, and marketings and splendours, and pomps and feasting and eating’.⁷⁴⁷ It is

⁷⁴³ From the text the *Metrical Dindshenchas*, cited in Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, p. 171.

⁷⁴⁴ Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, p. 172.

⁷⁴⁵ Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, pp. 170-1.

⁷⁴⁶ Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, pp. 170-1.

⁷⁴⁷ T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, ‘The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn’, in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover (eds), *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1936), p. 176.

explained in the tale that every Samain it was customary for every man to give an account of their combats for the past year. These men, whom one must assume are from the warrior class, are asked to produce the tips of the tongues of their foes which had been collected over the previous twelve months. Apparently, some less than scrupulous warriors would substitute animal tongue tips for human ones in order to make their cache appear larger. At this particular gathering in this story, the men are waiting on two others to arrive and while they are waiting one of the men suggests that certain elements of the festival can begin saying ‘Let us for the present engage in games of chess; and let the druids sing, and let the jugglers perform their feats’.⁷⁴⁸

Another tale, ‘The Debility of the Ulstermen’, describes another such assembly at Emain Macha and in fact this tale explains the name of the place Emain Macha (‘the twins of Macha’).⁷⁴⁹ Everyone who can attend, both men and women, are expected to attend the fair, although the mystical wife of Crunnchu, Macha, does not attend and begs her husband not to go either, lest he mention her at the assembly (which will, apparently, result in the discontinuation of their union). Crunnchu insists on attending ‘like every one else’ and Macha instructs her husband not to mention her existence.⁷⁵⁰ Clearly it is commonplace for all to attend such gatherings, and if one major purpose was to reconfirm old laws and announce new ones then it seems critical that everyone attend or at least be represented there by at least one family member. The tale tells something of the kinds of events scheduled at this fair and mentions ‘races and combats, tournaments, games and processions’.⁷⁵¹

Most significantly for the etymology of Emain Macha, the tale describes a race between Macha and a chariot pulled by the king’s horses, a pair which the king had been boasting about. The king’s pair had ‘carried the day in the contests’ before Crunnchu had unwisely suggested that his wife could outrun them. Macha, despite being heavily pregnant with twins, is forced to attend the assembly to race against the king’s horses. Macha races and wins the event but is forced to deliver her twins at the

⁷⁴⁸ Cross and Slover, ‘The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn’, p. 177.

⁷⁴⁹ T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, ‘The Debility of the Ulstermen’, in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover (eds), *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1936), pp. 208-210.

⁷⁵⁰ Cross and Slover, ‘The Debility of the Ulstermen’, p. 208.

⁷⁵¹ Cross and Slover, ‘The Debility of the Ulstermen’, p. 209.

finish line.⁷⁵² The activity of racing itself is discussed in a later section of this chapter.

The assembly or *aonach* was one of the principal places where the entire population could witness the supremacy and skill of the warriors via the games, sports and contests which formed part of them. In the next section, a second venue for the display of status-confirming physical activity is examined. Unlike the assembly, the king's hall was a setting inhabited exclusively by the nobility and the privileged classes. The following section includes a brief analysis of the functional and symbolic significance of the king's hall in relation to the games, feats and contests held there.

b) The King's Hall

The king's hall, or more generically the king's house, was an important venue in the Ulster tales, one which carried with it significant social and political meaning. The king's hall was variously the venue for celebrations encompassing great feasts, entertaining the nobility and welcoming foreign dignitaries. Most importantly for this thesis, the king's hall was often the location of the display of warrior feats as a form of entertainment, often during feasts. Ross suggests that the king's hall was regularly fortified to an extent by being 'surrounded by a defensive rampart, having a parapet walk and a stockade'.⁷⁵³ Speaking of various Celtic structural techniques and defensive structures, Chadwick suggests that 'in each case the resultant stronghold served its purpose adequately within a context in which there was interplay between social, economic, military and environmental factors'.⁷⁵⁴

The feasting hall, as represented in the tales, was comprised of a large central space with smaller spaces, possibly used for housing guests overnight, coming off the main hall. Chadwick notes that the compartments, or open-fronted cubicles, were assigned to particular grades of guests according to social status.⁷⁵⁵ In the tale 'Bricriu's Feast', the title character, Bricriu, builds a spacious house for the accommodation and

⁷⁵² Cross and Slover, 'The Debility of the Ulstermen', p. 210.

⁷⁵³ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 87.

⁷⁵⁴ Chadwick, *The Celts*, p. 130.

⁷⁵⁵ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, pp. 124-125.

entertainment of his guests. The tale carries this description of the building, which supposedly surpassed all other buildings of the time:

The house was made in this fashion: on the plan of Tara's Mead-Hall, having nine compartments from fire to wall, each fronting of bronze thirty feet high, overlaid with gold. In the fore part of the palace a royal couch was erected for Conchobar high above those of the whole house ... Around it were placed the twelve couches of the twelve tribes of Ulster ... then a balcony was made by Bricriu on a level with the couch of Conchobar and as high as those of the heroes of valor.⁷⁵⁶

From the description above it is clear that the feasting hall (whether it be the king's or one in which the king attends) represents, in a highly visible manner, the social standing of each guest and their social relationship to others in the room. It is also worthwhile to note that even though Bricriu is hosting the feast, he constructs a glass walled room for himself from where he can view proceedings 'as he knew the Ulstermen would not allow him within'.⁷⁵⁷ Symbolically, the king's hall was a place of great power. Its size and architecture attested to the significance of the individual who resided in it. The king's hall was, therefore, the embodiment of the home-ground advantage when hosting foreign dignitaries. The positioning of any (rudimentary) furniture and furnishings as well as the distribution and location of people reflected the hierarchy of those in attendance. Ultimately, it was the king who had to be seen as occupying this top echelon.

This structure is further borne out by the positioning of favoured individuals close to the king, and often at his feet. After Cú Chulainn takes up arms, slays the sons of Nechta and returns to Emain Macha in a 'war rage', the child is subdued by being dipped in vats of cold water. Then, once he has calmed down, he is dressed and takes up his position at the knee of Conchobar, which according to the *Táin* (Recension I), was his resting-place always after that.⁷⁵⁸ In fact, in another tale, 'The Intoxication of the Uliad', there is a specific reference to the 'hero's seat beside the king' where Cú

⁷⁵⁶ T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, 'Bricriu's Feast', in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover (eds), *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1936), pp. 254-255. A similar description is given describing Conchobar's house in Cross and Slover, 'The Wooing of Emer', p. 153.

⁷⁵⁷ Cross and Slover, 'Bricriu's Feast', p. 255.

⁷⁵⁸ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 148.

Chulainn sat.⁷⁵⁹ The place close to the king, at his feet seems a privileged place in the schema but it also clearly indicated the person's subservience and allegiance to the king.

As mentioned above, the king's hall was both a functional and symbolic space. The hall functioned as a place of meeting, a venue for feasting and drinking and as a large, and therefore important, area joining the smaller, hierarchically ranked compartments. The heroes would regularly perform feats on ropes stretched across the hall, as the description in the tale 'The Wooing of Emer' suggests: 'The chariot-chiefs of Ulster were performing on ropes stretched across from door to door in the house at Emain Macha'.⁷⁶⁰ Presumably the ropes were set at height above the floor which would seem to serve two important purposes. Firstly, the heroes would be able to be seen by everyone in the hall. The fact that they are elevated reinforces both the risk factor associated with the feats and also reinforces the superiority of the performers by placing them at height. Secondly, the king, from his elevated couch, would have secured a prime viewing position, perhaps aligning him symbolically if not literally with the warrior chiefs who bore allegiance to him.

There are other references to feats performed in the king's hall or feasting hall where it is quite unlikely that the warrior chiefs used ropes. The 'wheel feat' that three of the premier Ulster warriors perform while in Bricriu's feasting hall is described thus:

[The youths] were performing the wheel-feat. Then Loegaire seized the wheel until it reached half way up the sidewall. Upon that the youths laughed and cheered him. It was in reality a jeer, but it seemed to Loegaire a shout of applause. Conall then took the wheel ... He tossed it as high as the ridge-pole of the hall. The youths raised a shout at that. It seemed to Conall that it was a shout of applause and victory. To the youths it was a shout of scorn. Then Cú Chulainn took the wheel – it was in mid-air when he caught it. He hurled it aloft till it cast the ridge-pole from off the hall; the wheel went a man's cubit into the ground in the outside enclosure. The youths raised a shout of applause and triumph in Cú Chulainn's case. It seemed to Cú Chulainn, however, it was a laugh of scorn and ridicule

⁷⁵⁹ Jeffery Gantz, 'The Intoxication of the Uliad', in Jeffery Gantz (ed.), *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 196.

⁷⁶⁰ Cross and Slover, 'The Wooing of Emer', p. 154.

they gave vent to.⁷⁶¹

With reference to the above passage, Sayers does suggest that the exercises were often carried out in a social context and that ‘onlookers would evaluate the performance’.⁷⁶² In the case of the wheel feat, as outlined above, the audience cheers or jeers in accordance to what they witness. Presumably the onlookers have an understanding of what counts as poor, fair, good and excellent examples of such a feat. The audience jeers Loegaire and Conall but raise a shout of ‘applause and triumph’ when Cú Chulainn performs it.⁷⁶³ Sayers supposes that this was also surely the case for the feats performed on ropes across the banquet hall. The king’s hall provided an indoor venue, the assembly an outdoor one, but the third venue for physical display of heroics and superiority is a mobile one, the chariot in motion. The next section examines this portable ‘stage’ of sorts and the significance of such physicality displayed within it.

c) The Chariot in Motion

The chariot was a defining possession of a chariot-chief or hero in the Ulster tales. Each chariot and chariot team of (two) horses were peculiar to a particular warrior. The chariot and teams’ strength and quality were of an appropriate level to the warrior it carried. In the ‘Boyhood Deeds’, Cú Chulainn, while taking up arms, breaks seventeen chariots before the king offers his own chariot, charioteer and team of horses to the youngster. As Cú Chulainn puts it, the chariots ‘are no good at all, nor are [they] worthy of [him]’.⁷⁶⁴ However with Conchobar’s chariot, ‘Cú Chulainn mounted, tested the chariot, and it endured him’, to which Cú Chulainn retorts: ‘This chariot is good and worthy of me’.⁷⁶⁵

The chariot provided a mobile stage for the display of feats. Clearly, the chariot was a vehicle for travelling to the battle but the heroes in the Ulster Cycle did not fight from the chariot. According to Sayers, the heroes ‘might perform feats there and cast javelins but they dismounted to fight on foot’.⁷⁶⁶ Chariots were the primary form of

⁷⁶¹ Cross and Slover, ‘Bricriu’s Feast’, pp. 270-271.

⁷⁶² Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 67.

⁷⁶³ Cross and Slover, ‘Bricriu’s Feast’, pp. 270-271.

⁷⁶⁴ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 144.

⁷⁶⁵ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 144.

⁷⁶⁶ Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 50.

transportation for the warriors in the Ulster tales and mastery of the vehicle was paramount. Decker suggests of the Egyptian chariots that the mastery of the chariot was difficult as the basket was unsteady and that learning to shoot arrows accurately from the ‘shaky platform’ was only achieved through constant practice.⁷⁶⁷ There is no suggestion by Decker that more complex movements were practiced or displayed in the backs of the chariots. This is possibly a function of both necessity (the chariot was rather unsteady/unstable) and utility (there was no point to completing additional/non-military skills in a chariot).

The chariots of the Ulster heroes could certainly be said to give a rather rough ride at times as is evidenced by the passage in the *Táin* where Fergus returns with the split body of Etarcomal dragging behind the chariot. The body is said to drift into parts over the rough spots and come together as one in the flat spots along the way.⁷⁶⁸ That the feats be performed in a moving vehicle on uneven and challenging terrain, however, seems to fit nicely with Sayers’ suggestion that the feats were often practiced in places essentially unstable and demanding.⁷⁶⁹ The instability of the platform, in the case of the chariot in motion, increased the difficulty and therefore also potentially increased the prestige attached to those activities. Cú Chulainn is also able to effectively capture birds (and deer) from the back of the chariot,⁷⁷⁰ as does Connla from a boat,⁷⁷¹ both of these serving as examples of an increased difficulty due to less stable groundings.

The chariot as the venue for the display of martial and hunting feats is also very visible and is an example of the superiority of the warrior. The use of a moving chariot allows for the identification of the warrior as he or she approaches. Performing ‘trademark’ tricks or combinations of tricks en route to a meeting or combat (or anywhere) possibly meant that the warrior was more easily identified. In the tale, ‘Bricriu’s Feast’, Medb asks her daughter, Finnabair, to describe the chariot

⁷⁶⁷ Decker, *Sports and Games of Ancient Egypt*, p. 47.

⁷⁶⁸ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bo Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster*, p. 185. It has been suggested by James Carney that this act bears resemblance to the treatment of Hector’s body in the *Iliad*. See Carney, *History of Early Irish Literature*, pp. 120-130.

⁷⁶⁹ Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 67. The back of the moving chariot is just one example of an unstable place for practicing or performing feats. Sayers suggests that Scáthach’s ‘Feat Basket’ which is performed in a yew tree is another example of this.

⁷⁷⁰ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 150.

⁷⁷¹ Cross and Slover, ‘The Tragic Death of Connla’, p. 172.

and the hero as it comes towards her. Finnabair, among other descriptors of the scene notes that the hero ‘leaps the hero’s salmon-leap into the air and does many like swift feats besides’.⁷⁷² An almost identical description of Cú Chulainn approaching in his chariot is given in ‘The Wooing of Emer’ as Fial describes the scene for Emer.⁷⁷³ It is not only feats, though feats feature prominently, which are of interest in a discussion of sport-like activities which contribute to the status of warriors. The following section examines a number of sport-like activities, including martial feats, which do have a bearing on the warrior’s social status.

7.4 Common Sport-Like Activities Contributing to Social Status

As indicated in the discussion of the venues for such displays, there are many different circumstances under which games and sport-like activity can serve to confirm or even bolster a warrior’s reputation or status. The following section outlines five different categories of sport-like activity which typically serve as a demonstration of an individual’s social status. The five categories are: racing activities; hunting; board games; the display of martial feats; and, physical challenges.

a) Racing Activities

Racing activities seem to be one of the oldest forms of contest. Races are to be found in the oldest of Greek mythological tales and literature. In a Greek tale, Atalanta is said to have raced prospective suitors, her aim to beat her admirer and not have to marry him.⁷⁷⁴ The Funeral Games of Homer’s *Iliad* describes both foot racing and chariot racing as events in the games to honour the fallen hero Patroclus.⁷⁷⁵ Some of the oldest known information about Irish fairs and assemblies also suggests that foot races and horse racing events were commonplace at these gatherings.⁷⁷⁶ This section examines the occurrence of racing events in the early Irish Ulster Cycle of tales. Specifically it addresses races in three formats: firstly, on foot between humans;

⁷⁷² Cross and Slover, ‘Bricriu’s Feast’, p. 265.

⁷⁷³ Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 157.

⁷⁷⁴ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, pp. 4-5, suggests that the term ‘winning a girl’s hand’ was a literal ‘winning’, often, a contest between prospective husbands. He notes that the oldest surviving Greek legends are filled with episodes involving races of all kinds (as well as other contests like wrestling). The Atalanta legend is but one example of these. As will be discussed later, the Irish tales contain similar examples, although often these involved board games.

⁷⁷⁵ Homer, *The Iliad*, pp. 419-434.

⁷⁷⁶ See Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 10, and also Sean Egan, ‘The “Aonach Tailteann” and the Tailteann Games Origin, Function and Ancient Associations’, *CAHPER Journal*, May-June, 1980, pp. 3-5, 38.

secondly, between horses and/or horse-drawn chariots; and finally, between horses (chariots) and humans.

1. Foot racing

Atalanta, a woman purportedly raised by a bear when rejected by a father who desired a male child, was taught to hunt by a group of hunters who found her in the forest.⁷⁷⁷

Atalanta, who was renowned for her swiftness of foot, was a principal hunter in the famed Calydonian Boar Hunt and also wrestled victoriously over Peleus at the funeral games for Pelias. Importantly for this study, Atalanta, faced with pressure to marry, agreed to marriage on the condition that potential suitors surpass her in a footrace.⁷⁷⁸

The Irish tales also contain episodes where the suitor must engage in competition in order to (literally) win the hand of a woman.

However, the reference to foot racing in the Ulster Cycle of tales is limited to one impromptu race amongst the wives of three of the Ulster heroes (and of course the 50 women that each wife travelled with). This ‘race’ begins with a quickening of walking pace which then erupts into a running race, with robes hitched, to reach the door of the feasting hall in the tale Bricriu’s Feast.⁷⁷⁹ There is, therefore, no pre-arranged starting place and the finishing spot is conceived through the somewhat devious suggestions of the fork-tongued host, Bricriu, who incited the women to compete against the others for the privilege of entering the hall first. Similarly, there are no ‘rules’ or formal structure as in the stricture of a turning post in the running race outlined in the *Iliad*. The competition reaches its climax as the parties of women arrive at the door of the hall and, of course, it is Cú Chulainn’s wife who is first there.

Clearly there is prestige to be gained from running races only indirectly here as the important aspect is who enters the hall first and not who wins the race *per se*. The next section examines the racing of horses and chariots and, unlike the example of Bricriu’s Feast, these contests carry with them great prestige for the winners.

⁷⁷⁷ Howell and Howell, ‘The Atalanta Legend in Art and Literature’, p. 128.

⁷⁷⁸ Howell and Howell, ‘The Atalanta Legend in Art and Literature’, p. 132. Suitors who failed to beat Atalanta were killed.

⁷⁷⁹ Cross and Slover, ‘Bricriu’s Feast’, pp. 259-261.

2. Horse and Chariot Racing

Lugh, the mythological figure, and supposed father of Cú Chulainn, is said to have invented horse-racing.⁷⁸⁰ However, in the tales, the references to ‘horse racing’ often meant racing in chariots. Some sources suggest that horse races were a part of the assemblies and fairs which were regularly held in Ireland (and which there is reference to in the tales) and that these races, along with chariot races, established new orders of merit.⁷⁸¹ As was the case in other ancient societies, horses were important animals. Heroes are often connected with animals and it seems important that Cú Chulainn’s horses were both born on the same day as Cú Chulainn.

The early Irish laws include a passage on horses and chariots being present at assemblies and it is noted that a person who is injured or killed by a horse or chariot at an assembly can receive no recompense for such accidents as they have ‘willingly exposed’ themselves to that danger.⁷⁸² Similar limits on liability existed for being injured by a tool in an area where that tool is clearly in use. For example, injury by a hammer in a blacksmith’s shop, injury by a flying chip during carpentry and injury at a mill during milling all carry no legal liability.⁷⁸³ The significance of this is that the presence of horses and chariots at an assembly was so commonplace, and the risk of injury so likely, that the legal tracts have included it as one of the exceptions to legal liability. One could imagine that such a law would be unnecessary if the horses and chariots were in attendance as a means of transport only but the idea that there was indeed racing events (with an increased likelihood of injury to both competitors and spectators) would make the existence of such a law understandable.

It seems, then that horse racing and chariot racing were a regular occurrence at assemblies, though few descriptions of this activity exist in the Ulster tales. One is not privy to the rules and tactics involved in the Irish chariot race. There may have been impromptu races but certainly the inclusion of chariot racing in the assembly would suggest there were at least some pre-existing regulations to these contests.

⁷⁸⁰ Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, p. 143.

⁷⁸¹ Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, pp. 170-1.

⁷⁸² Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 150.

⁷⁸³ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, pp. 149-150.

Despite a dearth of information on racing, the importance of horses and chariots in the tales should not be underestimated. There are numerous accounts in the tales that describe the appearance and adornment of chariots and horses in their various manifestations in the Ulster tales. For example, the tale, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, gives a clear description of what the configuration of the hero’s chariot and horses look like. Fial describes what she sees to her sister Emer as Cú Chulainn approaches in his chariot. The horses, it seems, are separated by a long pole. Of the horses themselves, Fial claims to see ‘two steeds, alike in size, beauty, fierceness and speed, bounding side by side’.⁷⁸⁴ Fial goes on to describe the chariot itself:

I see a chariot of fine wood with wicker work, moving
on wheels of bronze. A pole of white silver, with a
mounting of white bronze. Its frame very high of
creaking copper, rounded and firm. A strong curved
yoke of gold; two firm-plaited yellow reins; the shafts
hard and straight as sword-blades.⁷⁸⁵

Another tale, ‘The Cattle Raid of Cooley,’ gives further description of the two-wheeled chariot that Cú Chulainn possesses:

[A] beautiful five-pointed chariot, broad above, of white
crystal, with a thick yoke of gold, with stout plates of
copper, with shafts of bronze covered with silver ... with
a thin-framed, dry-bodied box surmounted with feats of
cunning, straight-poled, as long as a warrior’s sword.⁷⁸⁶

Despite the conflicting descriptions, which may be explained as simply as Cú Chulainn enhancing his chariot as he grows older, one thing is clear. The chariot of a hero is adorned with precious metals and characterised by fine workmanship. Additionally, this passage suggests the practice of martial feats in the body of the chariot. In this particular part of the tale, Cú Chulainn is on his way to meet Ferdiad at a ford to engage in single combat and it was a common practice to perform feats in the chariot box en route to such an encounter. Indeed, the performance of ‘feats’ in the back of the chariot was a sign of a proficient, and even dangerous, warrior.

⁷⁸⁴ Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 156.

⁷⁸⁵ Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 156.

⁷⁸⁶ T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, ‘The Cattle-Raid of Cooley’, in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover (eds), *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1936), p. 302.

The tale, ‘Bricriu’s Feast’ contains a description of Laeg, Cú Chulainn’s charioteer, which indicates that a whip or prod was used to encourage the horses. Laeg holds in his hand ‘a goad of red gold with which he guides the horses’.⁷⁸⁷ Charioteering, it seems, was a rather prestigious occupation although far more prestigious were the warriors who fought and performed skills in the rear of their chariots.⁷⁸⁸ Women, as well as men, could be charioteers, although there are many more examples of men. Warrior women, and what Dickson prefers to call viragos, tended to ride in chariots. Characters such as Queen Medb of Connacht, and the warrior queens, Scáthach and Aífe, are regularly described as having chariot skills.

3. A Race Between a Human and a Chariot

The Ulster tale, ‘The Debility of the Ulstermen,’ tells the unusual story of the events leading up to the Ulstermen being gripped by something approximating labour pain in their hour of greatest need, such as when they are attacked or go forward into combat. In this story, Macha is forced to race against the king’s horses, despite being nine months pregnant, in order to save the life of her boastful husband.⁷⁸⁹ She appealed to the king and the crowd to postpone the race but when this request was refused she vowed to curse the men of Ulster. The story proceeds:

‘I am Macha, daughter of Sainreth mac Imbaith. Bring up the horses beside me!’ It was done, and she outran the horses and arrived first at the end of the course. Then she gave vent to a cry in her pain, but God helped her, and she bore twins, a son and a daughter, before the horses reached the goal. Therefore is this place called Emain Macha, ‘the Twins of Macha’.⁷⁹⁰

All who heard the cry were gripped by pain and had no more strength than a woman in labour. Macha then cursed the Ulsterman for the next nine generations to suffer such pain whenever ‘a time of oppression’ falls upon them. Clearly, from the passage above, the importance of maintaining one’s status through sport was a crucial aspect

⁷⁸⁷ Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 157.

⁷⁸⁸ The tale ‘How Cú Chulainn was Begotten’ indicates that one of Conchobar’s sisters, Dechtire, was the charioteer for Conchobar himself.

⁷⁸⁹ Macha’s husband boasts of his wife’s athletic talent and is then challenged to prove his claim or be put to death.

⁷⁹⁰ Cross and Slover, ‘The Debility of the Ulstermen’, p. 210.

of the assembly. The king was not willing to grant even a day's grace to Macha, perhaps because that may well have indicated a weakness on his part or, at the very least, diminished his reputation as the owner of the fastest horses in the province.

While it can be reiterated that there is not much indication of the rules and regulations surrounding such events, the short passage above gives a few general clues. The race, for instance, most probably started with the contestants standing side by side. In a race to determine status and confer prestige one might be less inclined to imagine a handicap race. Additionally, perhaps owing to the purpose of this race, the fact that Macha is, at the time, nine months pregnant does not seem to have any bearing on the structure of this event. Additionally, the finish line was clearly pre-determined as the passage refers to the 'end of the course'. One might imagine a permanent course location for the yearly assemblies.

Aside from races of various sorts as examined in this section, another method of procuring status and prestige through sport-like activity was via the age-old practice of hunting. In the next section the pursuit and capture of birds and animals as a show of skill and status in the Ulster tales is examined.

b) Hunting

Hunting or trapping animals and birds for food was a widespread phenomenon in the ancient world. There were many techniques and weapons designed and used specifically for that purpose. As discussed in Chapter Two, the use of hunting, also, as a show of physical skill, power and superior status was not uncommon in antiquity and was particularly common for royalty. According to Baker, there was great power and prestige to be gained in being a successful hunter.⁷⁹¹ The principal purpose of the royal hunt, however, was to hunt down and kill the most dangerous of animals, whereas, in the Ulster tales, the game were not necessarily dangerous and, indeed, were not killed in the pursuit of prestige but instead were captured alive. The focus of this section, however, is not the capture or killing of animals for sustenance but is instead the use of weapons to acquire animals which then serve as a testament to the

⁷⁹¹ Baker, *Sports in the Western World*, p. 4.

warrior's skill. Such weapons used for the capturing of prey for prestige reasons include the sling shot and stones, swords and even the voice and/or vocal vibration.

The key point here is that the heroes use hunting not as a form of sustenance but instead as a way of proving their abilities. When birds are the 'prey', often they are captured alive or stunned, and then revived and sometimes set free. The same also applies to deer and the hero Cú Chulainn, returning in rather an agitated state having just completed his first combat, asks his charioteer whether it is more prestigious and worthy of a warrior to capture the animals alive or dead. Cú Chulainn is then informed that it is in the former state that the capturing is most worthy.⁷⁹² Cú Chulainn, of course, is able to capture the birds and the deer and makes his way back to Emain Macha with these creatures alive and tethered to the chariot.

In the tale 'The Tragic Death of Connla', while Connla, Cú Chulainn's son, is travelling to Ireland in a 'skiff of bronze', he is either amusing himself or honing his skills:

In the skiff he had a heap of stones. He put a stone in his staff-sling and launched a stunning shot at the sea-birds, so that he brought them down, and they alive. Then would he let them up into the air again. He would perform his palate-feat, between both hands, so that it was too quick for the eye to perceive. He would tune his voice for them, and bring them down for the second time. Then he revived them once more.⁷⁹³

This passage is similar to the one outlined above when Connla's father, Cú Chulainn, captures birds as he makes his way back from his first combat. Connla's performance in capturing the birds is watched by the Ulstermen from the shore and they are more than disconcerted by the skill of this boy. They reason that if a boy, of whatever tribe he belongs to, can perform such skills, they would hate to imagine what the full grown men could do.

⁷⁹² Kinsella, *The Tain*, p. 90.

⁷⁹³ Cross and Slover, 'The Tragic Death of Connla', p. 172.

Things for the supreme hero, it seems, do not always work out in his favour. In the tale, ‘The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn,’ the women of Ulster, spurred on by the king’s wife Ethne, want some birds, two each in fact, and they ask Cú Chulainn to get them.

‘Yoke for us the chariot, O Loeg!’ said Cú Chulainn. At that Loeg yoked the chariot, and Cú Chulainn went into the chariot, and he cast his sword at the birds with a cast like the cast of a boomerang, so that they flapped against the water with their claws and wings.⁷⁹⁴

But there were not enough birds for Conchobar’s wife to have a pair so when a flock of magical birds came by a while later Cú Chulainn rose up to pursue them despite the protestations of his charioteer, Laeg, who could tell they were birds with special power. Cú Chulainn did not appreciate being told he could not capture the birds and goes forth to try anyway.

‘Place a stone in my sling, O Loag!’ Loag thereon took a stone, and he placed it in the sling, and Cú Chulainn launched the cast at the birds, but the cast missed. ‘Alas!’ said he. He took another stone and he launched this also at the birds, but the stone flew past them. ‘Wretch that I am,’ he cried; ‘since the very first day that I assumed arms, I have never missed a cast until this day!’ And he threw his spear at them, and the spear went through the shield of the wing of one of the birds, and the birds flew away, and went beneath the lake.⁷⁹⁵

This tale however, represents Cú Chulainn as not entirely himself. Cú Chulainn may well have been weakened by the magic of the birds and subsequently is retired to his ‘sick-bed’. Suffice to say that when Cú Chulainn is well, and no magical forces intervene, he has no trouble at all in acquiring birds and beasts captured alive, as is the most expert way of obtaining them. However, the notion of magical and mystical intervention is a common theme in the next section, that of board games.

c) Board Games

This section discusses the nature and significance, magical and otherwise, of board games. It includes a discussion of the naming of chess boards, the elaborate designs

⁷⁹⁴ Cross and Slover, ‘The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn’, p. 178.

⁷⁹⁵ Cross and Slover, ‘The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn’, p. 179.

and expensive materials used in making the boards and the honour of winning games as well as the practice of letting the more senior person win. Not usually for commoners, the board games *fidchell* and *brandub* were taught to the children of the aristocracy as part of a well-rounded education. According to Ross, games, both board and field, played an important part in the social life of the pagan Celts.⁷⁹⁶

Fidchell, regularly played by the privileged classes, has the literal translation of ‘wooden wisdom’ or ‘wooden knowledge’. Reference to the game also occurs in the Welsh tales as *gwyddbwyd*, which has the same literal meaning.⁷⁹⁷ Jackson identifies *fidchell* as ‘some sort of board game’ and claims, like Ross, that it was a popular pastime. Jackson also notes that the game is commonly translated and referred to as ‘chess’, although he readily admits that it cannot really have been chess.⁷⁹⁸ Ross concurs saying that while it was not strictly ‘chess’ as modern society know it, it did seem to have two sets of ‘men’ that were pegged into position on the board.⁷⁹⁹ Mac White is more vehement in his distancing the origins of *fidchell* (and indeed two other ancient Irish board games *brandub* and *buánfach*) from chess and even from draughts. In fact, Mac White goes to some length to discredit some of the theories that link chess and *fidchell*. While he notes that European chess dates to around the twelfth century and is descended from an Indian game, *fidchell* is mentioned in the ‘Laws’ which dates it to the seventh century at least.⁸⁰⁰ Draughts, it seems, cannot be traced back beyond the thirteenth century and some of its characteristics are possibly borrowed from chess.

The board game *brandub*, which means literally ‘black raven’, was another popular board game.⁸⁰¹ A king-piece and four supporting pieces occupied the centre of the board. Rees and Rees believe that comparison with the Welsh *tawlbwrdd* and the Swedish *tablut* about which more is known, suggests that there were eight opposing pieces distributed along the sides of the board.⁸⁰²

⁷⁹⁶ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 93.

⁷⁹⁷ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 93.

⁷⁹⁸ Jackson, *The Oldest Irish Tradition: A Window on the Iron Age*, p. 23.

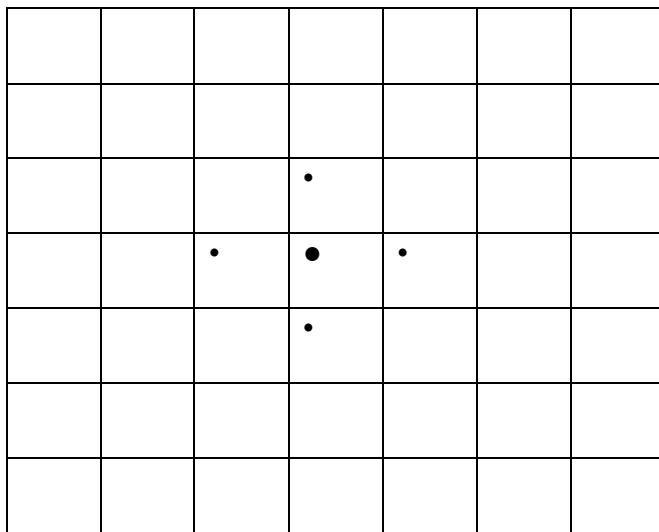
⁷⁹⁹ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 93.

⁸⁰⁰ Kelly’s discussion of the laws of fosterage indicates that board games must be taught to sons of nobles or kings and the game *fidchell* is mentioned by name. See Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, p. 87.

⁸⁰¹ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 95.

⁸⁰² Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, p. 154.

Figure 7a: Probable plan of *brandub* board.⁸⁰³



Comparison again with these other games suggests a board with 49 ‘holes’ or squares (7x7), like one recovered in a lake-dwelling in Westmeath. According to a poem which portrays Ireland as a *brandub* board, Tara is the central square and the four squares around it are the provincial capitals. The king-piece is the central square and the four defenders are the provincial kings. Tara was the seat of kingship, the capital. It was regularly under siege and in need of defending. The game *brandub* implies that Tara, and the cosmos of which it is the centre, are surrounded by hostile forces.⁸⁰⁴

Apart from its mystical nature, evidence from the tales suggests that the gaming board was also a prized possession. Ross notes that so important was the chessboard that, like the weapons of great heroes, they were given individual names. In the tales, King Conchobar’s chessboard, for instance, is named Cendchaem, ‘smooth head’. Ross suggests that the chessboard, like those weapons that were individually named, were accredited with supernatural powers and qualities.⁸⁰⁵

In the ‘Cattle Raid of Fróech’, Fróech arrive in Crauchan, the capital of the province Connacht, to woo the daughter of Queen Medb and King Ailill and spends time

⁸⁰³ Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, p. 155.

⁸⁰⁴ Rees and Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, p. 155.

⁸⁰⁵ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 95.

playing *fidchell*, firstly with his own party then for three days against Medb. So taken are they by the game and so brilliant were the magical gemstones which lit the room that neither Medb nor Fróech perceived night from day. The description of Fróech's *fidchell* board is telling as it indicates the importance of the board and therefore also of the game. 'The board was of white gold, and the edges and corners were of gold, while the pieces were of gold and silver, and a candle of precious stone provided light'.⁸⁰⁶ The *fidchell* board mentioned in the Mythological Cycle tale 'The Wooing of Étaín' also contains a description. Mider's board is made of 'silver and the men were of gold, a precious stone glittered in each corner of the board and the bag for the men was woven in rounds of bronze'.⁸⁰⁷ Clearly, the *fidchell* boards were significant as a great deal of care and effort had evidently been taken to construct the object. Towards the end of the visit, Fróech comments how she has been good to Medb by not beating her at the game, 'lest she be dishonoured'.⁸⁰⁸ This might suggest the social and political importance of this game.

Board games were a favourite pastime in the households of the kings and nobles. It is worth noting that in the tale, 'The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn,' King Conchobar spends one third of his day playing board games (the other two thirds he spends feasting and watching the boys at play respectively). Anne Ross suggests that while it was the King described in this tale, that kind of day fairly typifies a day in the life of any high-ranking nobleman in the Iron Age, provided of course that he was not engaged in warfare at the time.⁸⁰⁹

In the *Táin* (Recension II), Cú Chulainn and his charioteer are found playing *búanbach*, possibly to pass the time. It would seem an unusual thing, though, that this warrior in the middle of a raiding campaign should bring along the game board. Yet they seem to have been at it for a while as the text makes reference to the charioteer (who has many skills and who clearly multi-tasks) winning every second game as well as noticing every individual that came onto the plain.⁸¹⁰

⁸⁰⁶ Jeffrey Gantz, 'The Cattle Raid of Fróech', in Jeffery Gantz (ed.), *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p.117.

⁸⁰⁷ Jeffery Gantz, 'The Wooing of Étaín', in Jeffery Gantz (ed.), *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 52.

⁸⁰⁸ Gantz, 'The Cattle Raid of Fróech', p. 118.

⁸⁰⁹ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 93.

⁸¹⁰ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bo Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster*, p. 182.

Playing these board games and playing them well were possibly two very different things. Among the many ‘gifts’ attributed to Cú Chulainn were ‘the gift of playing *fidchell*’ and ‘the gift of playing *brandub*'.⁸¹¹ Cú Chulainn, of course, played these games superbly. One would expect no less from the greatest of Irish heroes. In ‘The Wooing of Étaín’ (mentioned above), Mider and Echu play *fidchell* with the added element of a wager. They compete twice and both times Mider loses the game and thus the wager and he hands over the 50 bridled horses and 50 fiery boars respectively. Echu’s foster-father warns Echu against Mider and when Mider returns to play *fidchell* again Echu imposes a number of tasks upon him. Mider completes the tasks but is angry when he fronts up to Echu for a third game of *fidchell*.

Interestingly enough, the wager in this case is not fully developed when they play. They agree that the winner will name the stake. After Mider wins he claims for himself a kiss (with arms around her) from Étaín, Echu’s wife. Echu is less than impressed but, reluctantly, he asks Mider to come back in a month to claim his ‘prize’. It seems, however, that this was all part of Mider’s grand plan and the story goes on to recount his intentions leading up to the wager. The previous year, Mider had come to woo Étaín, but he had not been successful. He spoke to her of her beauty and her goodness and asked her to come with him. The tale then proceeds:

Étaín had replied ‘If you obtain me from my husband, I will go with you, but if you do not, I will stay’. After that, Mider went to Echu to play *fidchell*, and at first he had lost in order that he might have reason to quarrel. That is why he fulfilled Echu’s demand, and that is why he afterwards proposed an undetermined stake.⁸¹²

Being a Mythological Cycle tale, when Mider and Étaín finally do get together against the wishes of Echu, they turn into swans and fly away.⁸¹³ The significance, however, of the description in terms of the links to gambling and to the descriptions of the board (though not much is said of the progression of the game) should not be downplayed.

⁸¹¹ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bo Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster*, p. 152.

⁸¹² Gantz, ‘The Wooing of Étaín’, pp. 55–56.

⁸¹³ The tale does not end there but continues with more trickery and bargaining over Étaín. In the end Mider does ‘keep’ Étaín and Echu is tricked into sleeping and procreating with his own daughter.

Testament to the compelling nature of *fidchell* is the description of the events in another tale, ‘The Sick-bed of Cú Chulainn’. In this tale, Cú Chulainn plays a game of *fidchell* with his charioteer Loeg. So engrossing is the game that when his wife, Emer, and 50 of her women friends creep past them with the intent of murdering Fann (with whom Cú Chulainn has had a ‘fling’) neither Cú Chulainn nor Loeg hear them approaching.⁸¹⁴ Clearly board games are considered sufficiently compelling that players lose track of time, fail to perceive night from day and, as indicated in the example above, simply miss critically important events whilst they are engaged in them. The ability to play *fidchell* and other board games well and, indeed, the capacity to win regularly was a requirement of sorts for the nobility. The next section examines the role of feats (as displayed in combat and in social situations) in the determination of status.

d) Displays of Feats

Physical (and martial) supremacy is regularly factored into the status of individual warriors in the ancient world. As Kyle suggests:

Homer’s nobles are (or have been) athletes, competitors who demonstrate physical and moral excellence in public contests as a metaphor for war and leadership. Competition before spectators reveals a hero’s true character and establishes his worth.⁸¹⁵

The practicing, and indeed the display, of feats in the Ulster tales is taken very seriously. The warriors practice the feats (Cú Chulainn is said to do so each morning with great enthusiasm) so as not to disremember them. Despite this, Sayers notes that while feats of dexterity, agility, strength, breath control and precision in weapons handling would be ‘excellent callisthenics for training basic abilities needed in hand-to-hand encounters’, they would not really come close to what was necessary for ‘actual combat’.⁸¹⁶ According to Sayers, some feats ‘like flipping swords and shields, could put an opponent off his guard during an exchange of blows’, but most of the feats ‘seem to have been ... for “display and intimidation” only, providing at best a

⁸¹⁴ Cross and Slover, ‘The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn’, p. 193.

⁸¹⁵ Kyle, *Sport and Spectacle in the Ancient World*, p. 70.

⁸¹⁶ Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 68.

psychological advantage'.⁸¹⁷ This evidence, suggests Sayers, meshes well with classical accounts of the Celts' emphasis on 'personal appearance and showy pre-battle tactics'.⁸¹⁸ In this section it is argued that it is precisely the contribution of the feats to status through 'display and intimidation' and their role in the 'showy' pre-battle period that is of critical import. In terms of their ability to be a show of status and be intimidating, it matters little that these feats may not lend themselves to combat as such. Posturing prior to the combat takes on a rather ritualistic format. Of the Celts in general Ross points out, that the 'heroes 'would begin by reviling each other, at the same time praising their ancestors and family, and their own prowess in feats of arms'.⁸¹⁹

According to Sayers, the 'distinction between feats of arms for show and true combat finds a larger parallel in what Nora Chadwick has called 'essential and non-essential fighting'.⁸²⁰ Quoting Chadwick, Sayers notes that the 'warlike' tendencies of the Celts might better be classified as 'non-essential' in that territorial aggrandisement was less frequently involved. Moreover, it must be emphasised that this 'non-essential' form of warfare was considered more of a sport than true warfare. It was also 'very much the concern of the aristocracy, and was one of several means by which prestige might be attained'.⁸²¹ By way of summary, Sayers suggests that the feats 'must have been a recognised part of military and para-military aristocratic life of the honour-based early Irish society, where appearance was as important as substance'.⁸²²

There are many references of feats as a show of status and superiority in the tales. In 'The Cattle Raid of Fróech', the title character Fróech is said to have feats like no one has ever seen before. Specifically the feat outlined is described thus, 'he casts his javelin on ahead of him, and before it can strike the ground, seven hounds with their silver chains have caught it'.⁸²³ Technically it could be argued that the skill here lies with the hounds although perhaps the thrower can claim some credit on account of the

⁸¹⁷ Sayers, 'Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle', p. 68.

⁸¹⁸ Sayers, 'Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle', p. 68.

⁸¹⁹ Ross, *The Pagan Celts*, p. 63.

⁸²⁰ Sayers, 'Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle', p. 68.

⁸²¹ Sayers, 'Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle', p. 68.

⁸²² Sayers, 'Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle', p. 68.

⁸²³ Gantz, 'The Cattle Raid of Fróech', p. 116.

expertise demonstrated in the throw. The hosts at the fort of Crúachu are, it seems, suitably impressed by this display, so much so that when a large crowd gathers to view the spectacle some even suffocate.⁸²⁴

In the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn does battle with his former friend and foster brother Ferdiad. The section entitled ‘The Encounter with Fer Diad’ has several passages which indicate the progression of action towards the combat situation. The adversaries reminisce about their time with Scáthach, Uáthach and Aífe, acknowledging that they have a close bond. Then, to begin the ‘combat’ Cú Chulainn asks Ferdiad to choose the first weapons as he was the first to arrive at the ford. To this request Ferdiad replies: ‘Do you remember at all the choice feats of arms which we practiced with Scáthach and Uáthach and Aífe?’ ‘I remember them indeed’, said Cú Chulainn. ‘If you do, let us have recourse to them’.⁸²⁵ In essence they agree to perform feats against each other rather than separately and it is at this point that the feats lose something of their ritual, showy nature in favour of more ‘serious’ combat usage. Prior to this, however, it seems that there are many conventions that must be adhered to before the fray begins. Much of this pre-action is demonstrative in nature and undoubtedly designed to intimidate one’s opponent.

It seems that there are many conventions that must be adhered to before the fray begins. Much of this pre-action is demonstrative in nature and undoubtedly designed to intimidate one’s opponent. It is tempting to claim that the posturing seen in the *Táin* might be somewhat akin to the pre-game performance of the ‘Haka’ by the New Zealand All Blacks rugby union side, but the meanings of this powerfully political tribal dance are far more intricate and volatile than the meanings that could be afforded the display of feats by the Ulster heroes.⁸²⁶ Perhaps a more valuable comparison can be made regarding the practice of some teams and individuals in modern sport of demonstrating wildly superior skills in the warm-up period of the competition. The author of this thesis has herself witnessed such displays by teams of gymnasts participating in state level competition in Australia. The gymnasts complete

⁸²⁴ Gantz, ‘The Cattle Raid of Fróech’, p. 116.

⁸²⁵ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 222.

⁸²⁶ See, for instance, Suzanne Renner, ‘Haka: Voice of the People’, *ICHPER-SD Journal (The Official Magazine of the International Council for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, Sport, and Dance)*, Spring 1999, pp. 31-35.

general warm-up and then start warming up their skills. Mostly this involves a practice of those skills to be used in competition but, occasionally, and as observed by this researcher, this involved the completion of far more difficult skills which were never intended to be used in competition that day but which served the purpose (intended or not) of intimidation.⁸²⁷ Such skill demonstrations can be likened to the posturing skill displays of the Ulster hero Cú Chulainn.

In the tale ‘The Wooing of Emer’, reference is made to the performance of feats at social functions, possibly for entertainment purposes. As mentioned above, the king’s hall in Emain Macha is described as the venue for, ‘great and numerous gatherings of every kind, and wonderful pastimes. Games and music and singing there, heroes performing their feats, poets singing, harpers and players on the timpan striking up their sounds’.⁸²⁸ More specifically, the chariot-chiefs are described as ‘performing on ropes stretched from door to door … Fifteen feet and nine score was the size of that house’.⁸²⁹ The chariot-chiefs were said to be performing the ‘spear-feat,’ the ‘apple feat’ and the ‘sword-edge feat’. Of course the hero Cú Chulainn surpassed all the others in these feats. This ‘surpassing’ of the others in feats by Cú Chulainn is possibly due to his making certain changes to the feats to make them more difficult. In ‘Bricriu’s Feast’, as mentioned above, Loegaire, Conall and Cú Chulainn all complete the ‘wheel feat’ but Cú Chulainn begins his throw while the wheel is still in motion after Conall’s effort. This is made clear in the text as it states that Conall had begun his throw by taking the wheel from ‘on the ground’.⁸³⁰

Another example of feats used as both entertainment and as a show of superiority is in the tale ‘The Wooing of Emer’. Forgall the wily, Emer’s father, who is determined to thwart Cú Chulainn’s efforts to woo Emer, dresses in disguise as a foreigner, as if

⁸²⁷ This practice can be explained by the possibility that the skills were considered too risky in terms of losing points as well as unnecessary for the level of competition the gymnasts were competing at. The display of these skills (often performed with some level of coach assistance) served as a message to other competitors – ‘I am better than I might first appear’ or ‘take notice of me’. The effect is sought solely in the pre-competition warm-up with actual apparatus warm-up perhaps being considered too valuable a time to waste on posturing and attempts to ‘psych out’ opponents. Of course many athletes engage in a pre-game ritual or actions which are intimidatory to opponents, the difference here is that these athletes were using superior skill demonstrations as a form of intimidation, rather than the more typical ‘trash talking’ or jostling that might occur.

⁸²⁸ Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 154.

⁸²⁹ Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 154.

⁸³⁰ Cross and Slover, ‘Bricriu’s Feast’, pp. 270-271.

from Gaul, and pretends to be an ambassador representing the king of Gaul. The chariot-chiefs perform feats for him and his entourage.⁸³¹ Possibly this demonstration serves two purposes. The foreigners can at once observe the mastery of martial skills and be entertained. While such visits may have occurred in order to increase trade or simply to open diplomatic channels, the presence of warriors displaying their skills definitely indicates that both the martial nature of the event and the importance of such warriors to the defence, and even prestige, of the province. As mentioned above, Sayers has suggested that the king's court or hall, while being both of social and aristocratic import was also a militarised setting.⁸³²

Along with racing events, hunting and board games, the display of feats had been examined in terms of their ability to elevate or confirm the status of an individual through a show of supreme physical superiority. The next, and final, section relating games, sports and physical ability to status, is the unusual practice of laying and surmounting physical challenges.

e) Physical Challenges

This section examines the specific physical challenges that contribute to social status in the Ulster tales. The physical challenges in the Ulster tales can be conceived of as a state of affairs that must be achieved before the next step, progression or action can be undertaken. Physical challenges may be laid by women against potential suitors, by the pursued against those pursuing or by teachers wishing to separate those with sufficient talent and those without. Regardless of the situation in which the challenge is laid, attention to that challenge must be paid. This section will examine some of these physical challenges beginning with the tasks that Emer requires Cú Chulainn to complete before she will agree to marry him.

In ‘The Wooing of Emer’, Cú Chulainn is set three physical challenges he must complete before Emer will agree to marry him. After Cú Chulainn admires Emer’s breasts and refers somewhat cryptically to ‘fair plains’, Emer responds by announcing that, ‘[n]o one comes to this plain who does not slay as many as a hundred on every

⁸³¹ Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 162.

⁸³² Sayers, ‘Martial Feats in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle’, p. 46.

ford from the ford of Scenn Menn at Ollbine to Banchuing Arcait'.⁸³³ This requirement of the potential suitor, then, becomes the first of several physical challenges that Emer sets for Cú Chulainn. Emer's second requirement again involves taking human lives, although this time some restraint and precise skill is required:

No one comes to this plain ... who has not achieved the feat of leaping over three walls and slaying three times nine men at one blow, one of each of my brothers being in each group of nine, and yet preserve the brother in the midst of each nine of them alive; and then, accompanied by them and my foster-sister, bring out of Forgall's stronghold my weight in gold.⁸³⁴

So with this task there is also the element of acquiring riches by force as well as the skilful killing of some but not others of large groups of men. Emer's final physical challenge for Cú Chulainn does not involve bloodshed: 'None comes to this plain ... who does not go without sleep from summer's end to the beginning of spring, from the beginning of spring to May-day and again from May-day to the beginning of winter'.⁸³⁵ Remembering that the location is the northern hemisphere, this represents a period of some fourteen months during which Cú Chulainn must remain awake.

Travellers and potential students of the Warrior Queen Scáthach, such as Cú Chulainn, must also face a physical challenge. In order to reach Scáthach's camp, it was necessary to cross the 'Bridge of the Cliff' or the 'Bridge of Leaps'. The tale 'The Wooing of Emer' tells of Cú Chulainn's training in arms at Scathach's camp and relates the challenge of the bridge clearly, '[for] thus was that bridge: it had two low ends and the mid-space high, and whenever anybody leaped on one end of it, the other end would lift itself up and throw him on his back'.⁸³⁶ Cú Chulainn tried several times, unsuccessfully, and when those around him jeered he went into a frenzy and used the 'hero's salmon leap' to get to the middle of the bridge, then quickly jumped again and landed on the island.⁸³⁷

⁸³³ Cross and Slover, 'The Wooing of Emer', p. 160.

⁸³⁴ Cross and Slover, 'The Wooing of Emer', p. 160.

⁸³⁵ Cross and Slover, 'The Wooing of Emer', p. 165.

⁸³⁶ Cross and Slover, 'The Wooing of Emer', p. 165.

⁸³⁷ Cross and Slover, 'The Wooing of Emer', p. 165.

Physical challenges also appear in the tales as a way to slow or even stop a pursuant enemy.⁸³⁸ In the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn sets several challenges for Medb's army which are following him. Most often this involves a physical challenge of strength and precision at once and there are clear instructions left in the form of an ogam inscription regarding the nature of the feat to be emulated. The ogam serves as a warning for those who come across it. The army cannot advance past that area without one of their party first having achieved the feat. In this case, unlike the challenges which Emer sets and which Scáthach's bridge represents, the task is one that Cú Chulainn has already achieved. One of Medb's army need to complete the challenge in the exact manner as Cú Chulainn has set out (by example and in writing) or they must backtrack and go another (more time-consuming) way.

Early in the *Táin*, the hosts are following Cú Chulainn and he sets two physical challenges for them. The first is a challenge to make an identical ring of sapling as Cú Chulainn has made. The relevant passage in Recension II is as follows:

Cú Chulainn went into the wood and cut a prime oak sapling, whole and entire, with one stroke and, standing on one leg and using but one hand and one eye, he twisted it into a ring and put an ogam inscription on the peg of the ring and put the ring around the narrow part of the standing-stone at Ard Cuillenn. He forced the ring down until it reached the thick part of the stone.⁸³⁹

Fergus, the exiled Ulsterman, is the only person who can decipher the ogam and the task that must be performed.⁸⁴⁰

The second challenge is far more gruesome. In the O'Rahilly translation of Recension I, Cú Chulainn is busy preparing another obstacle for the army when Medb's scouting party, two warriors and their charioteers, happen upon him. Cú Chulainn 'cut down a forked branch with one blow of his sword and fixed it in the

⁸³⁸ In one case, Cú Chulainn uses a physical challenge to slow down Medb's army so he can honour his word and keep a tryst with a woman.

⁸³⁹ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 150.

⁸⁴⁰ Some translations suggest that Fergus was excluded from those permitted to fulfil the task. See for instance, Kinsella, *The Tain*, p. 70.

middle of the stream so that a chariot could not pass on this side or on that'.⁸⁴¹ The four men approached and Cú Chulainn cut off their heads and impaled them on four prongs on the forked branch in the stream. The challenge for the hosts, which was again set out in an ogam inscription on the branch, was that one man must pull out this branch with one hand before the party can proceed past that point.

The physical challenges may relate to the taboos that haunt the characters in the Ulster Cycle. Superstition and tradition dictate that the advancing army cannot simply ignore the challenge. Adding to the threat is a more tangible consequence:

Fergus said: 'I swear to you that if ye flout that ring and the royal hero who made it and do not spend a night here in encampment until one of you make a similar ring, standing on one foot and using one eye and one hand as he did, even though (that hero) be hidden underground or in a locked house, he will slay and wound you before the hour of rising on the morrow, if ye flout it'.⁸⁴²

Discussing Cú Chulainn's first physical challenge to the hosts, Ann Dooley suggests that the action of throwing down the withe with the ogam inscribed 'magically' prevents the army from going any further.⁸⁴³ In fact, Dooley reads the recension II passage as if the withe will return to Cú Chulainn with information for him on who transgresses the orders.⁸⁴⁴ O'Rahilly's translation of the Recension II passage reveals her ideas about the withe. O'Rahilly translates the 'it' as 'that hero' to clearly indicate that she considers that it will be Cú Chulainn who takes revenge and not the withe itself. How the information will be passed on to Cú Chulainn is unclear. That Cú Chulainn will know is the important fact. How he will know is not further entertained, perhaps leading Dooley to suspect some magical involvement.

It could be noted, however, that magical intervention, while it is expected that others in the places which are clearly 'otherwordly' (such as when Cú Chulainn is en route to visit Scáthach or when he engages with Fann or the Morrígan) are able to engage magic, the suggestion that Cú Chulainn himself can conjure up a magical withe for

⁸⁴¹ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: Recension I*, p. 134.

⁸⁴² O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 151.

⁸⁴³ Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bo Cúailnge*, p. 30.

⁸⁴⁴ Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bo Cúailnge*, p. 32.

use during the *Táin* is unprecedented. Cú Chulainn, while of possible otherworldly parentage, operates exclusively in the mortal realm. Although magic can, and does, affect him, Cú Chulainn's talents are physical and mortal (albeit borderline mortal at times) and he is therefore not the instigator of such magic. For Cú Chulainn to be able to enact magic of that sort would detract from his representation as a warrior-hero in these tales. It also begs the question that if Cú Chulainn has the ability to wield magic of that sort then why is such action not more prevalent in the tales? Why resort to magic with a withe and not engage it at more crucial times? Again it must be reiterated that Cú Chulainn as a magical being would be counter-productive to the image of him as the ultimate warrior-hero in the heroic Irish literature of the Ulster Cycle.

Moving back to the tales, while Fergus is attempting to emulate the second feat Medb expresses her anger saying that he has already broken seventeen chariots to pieces, implying that had Fergus not been on the hosting, they would have already reached the Ulstermen. Fergus perhaps bears Medb's wrath either because she thinks he is purposely holding them up or because he is the one (the only one that could have) that has read the ogam and understood the task. Perhaps without Fergus there, the hosts would have gone on in ignorance of the ogam. The former scenario seems more likely, though, as Medb soon accuses Fergus of intentionally delaying their advance. Medb says to Fergus, 'We know why you are acting thus: it is to hold us back and delay the host until such time as the Ulstermen recover from their debility and give us battle, the battle of the Táin'.⁸⁴⁵ The physical challenge, then, in this case, might be seen as a collaborative effort. Cú Chulainn sets the challenge but is cognizant of the fact that without the presence of Fergus in the enemy ranks the full extent of both the challenges and the consequences will not be revealed. This tactic of delay by Cú Chulainn, in this sense, relies on Fergus for it to be effective. It also points to the notion that opponents must both understand the 'game' that they are engaged in. If each party is adhering to a different set of rules, or if there is one set of rules which is being interpreted differently, then there will necessarily be a resulting confusion. The ritualistic and rule-governed nature of the physical challenges is brought to the forefront here. Such challenges, like the challenges which can be seen to exist in

⁸⁴⁵ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 155.

sporting contests, are meaningless unless there is agreement and understanding of the rules and interpretation of those rules.

Another manifestation of physical challenge is brought about by the Celtic custom of the Hero's Portion. Posidonius writes about this custom:

There was a custom at Celtic feasts in ancient times, that when the joints were set before the guests the bravest man would take the thigh. If anyone else laid claim to it, then the two rose up to fight til one of them was slain.⁸⁴⁶

According to Chadwick, at a feast where many heroes are gathered together, the award of the choicest portion never occurs without challenge. As Chadwick explains:

... a claimant must make good his right, first of all by producing his own credentials, boasting his own deeds of valour; and secondly by quashing the objections and counter-claims made by his opponents and rivals.⁸⁴⁷

Like Posidonius, other ancient writers who describe the feasts of the Celts relate scenes that are remarkably similar to those in the Irish Sagas. Chadwick quotes Diodorus Siculus who writes of the Gauls:

When they dine ... they have hearths with big fires and cauldrons and spits loaded with big joints of meat. They honour distinguished men with the best portions of meat ... And when they are dining some of the company often fall into an altercation and challenge one another to single combat ... Whenever anyone will accept their challenges they set about glorifying the valour of their forefathers and boasting of their own prowess; and at the same time they deride and belittle their opponents.⁸⁴⁸

⁸⁴⁶ M. A. O'Brien, 'Fled Bricrenn', in Myles Dillon (ed.), *Irish Sagas* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1968), p. 78.

⁸⁴⁷ Nora Chadwick, 'Scéla Muicce Meicc Da Thó', in Myles Dillon (ed.), *Irish Sagas* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1968), p. 82.

⁸⁴⁸ Chadwick, 'Scéla Muicce Meicc Da Thó', pp. 82-83.

In the tale ‘Bricriu’s Feast’, Bricriu incites three great Ulster warriors to fight for the honour of receiving the ‘Hero’s Portion’ (sometimes referred to as the ‘Champion’s Portion’). In order to prove they are the greatest the men agree to cut off the head of a beastly monster on the condition that the next night the monster could cut off their heads.⁸⁴⁹ O’Brien relates this practice to a custom evident at Celtic feasts in ancient times:

... men in their gathering, having received some silver or gold coins, or even a certain number of jars of wine, have taken pledges that the gifts promised would really be given and having distributed them among their friends and relations, would lie down on boards, face upwards, and allow some bystander to cut their throats with a sword.⁸⁵⁰

As well as the story of ‘Bricriu’s Feast’, the tale ‘The Story of Mac Datho’s Pig’ also has as its central theme the right of the greatest champion at a feast to receive the Hero’s Portion. Like in ‘Bricrui’s Feast,’ the champions are involved in an argument which ensues from the decisions regarding the portion and each is required to ‘show off’ his skills in order to be considered for, and ultimately win, this contest of sorts. An adjudicator is often needed and regularly it is the king or queen who is required to judge on the matter. The criteria are not clear cut, but numbers of warriors and the calibre of those warriors seem to feature prominently in the decision.

Physical challenges appear in the tales for several reasons, not least for literary purposes. The physical challenges also sit very well with the heroic nature of the Ulster Cycle tales. Those with power and influence are not expected to prove themselves worthy using intellectual nor (in the predominantly human world of the Ulster tales) magical means. The physicality of the body, most specifically the ability to physically overcome obstacles using strength, force or skill is paramount to both the progress of the tales and the cohesion of the characterisation of the warrior. These physical challenges advance the stories in which they occur and add to the image and power of the heroes involved despite there being virtually no direct combatative engagement.

⁸⁴⁹ Cross and Slover, ‘Bricriu’s Feast’, pp. 277-280.

⁸⁵⁰ Posidonius cited in O’Brien, *Fled Bricrenn*, p. 78.

7.5 Conclusions

This chapter has examined the role of sport-like activity in the determination and maintenance of the social standing of Ulster Cycle warriors. The display and recognition of skill involved in the games and sport-like activities mentioned here contribute significantly to the warrior's status. As a result, the achievement of the social status requires a venue which is highly visible. It has been shown that there are several important venues for such displays. These are the fair or assembly, the king's hall and the chariot in motion and each contributes differently to the production of social status as derived through sport-like activity. This chapter has also outlined several of the more common sport-like activities which function as vehicles for social standing. These include racing activities, hunting, board games and the display of feats as well as other physical challenges. It has been shown that each of these vehicles require that the hero participate in, or have a knowledge of, sport-like activity.

To this point, the activities and contributions of women and men to sport-like activity in the tales has been examined in relation to a number of themes. Chapters Five through Seven have covered several areas related to sport-like activity in the Ulster tales, namely, the making of a hero, physical and martial learning, combat, and, in this chapter, social status of the warrior-hero. Chapter Eight, however, examines specifically, and more thoroughly, the nature and significance of women's relationship to and participation in sport-like activity. Chapter Eight does not just simply review the contributions of women mentioned thus far. Instead, it looks more widely at the place and position of women in the tales and draws out more information on the role of women, in particular strong and militant women, in relation to sport-like activity.

Chapter Eight

Women, Warriors, Viragos and Sport in the Ulster Cycle

8.1 Introduction

The historical record, both literary and archaeological, as well as mythology and folk tales, provides several examples of women participating in sport and war in the ancient world. However, there are very few societies existing before the late twentieth century where women's participation in sport, games, warfare and martial skill training was acceptable and encouraged. Women warriors, or 'viragos' (as Nancy Dickson terms the strong and warrior-like women of the Ulster tales), were largely ignored by scholars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Early academics were appalled by the independence of such women, especially their sexual autonomy, and later scholars thought the virago to be 'deliberately malignant', forcing men to behave badly or exposing men's flawed behaviour.⁸⁵¹

The link between sport and masculinity coupled with an emphasis on certain characteristics, such as strength, speed and aggression, has resulted in an ideological and actual distancing of women from sport. As Jennifer Hargreaves suggests:

Throughout their histories, modern sports have been powerful sources of male imagery. The idealised male sporting body – strong, aggressive and muscular – has been a popular symbol of masculinity against which women, characterised as relatively powerless and inferior, have been measured.⁸⁵²

However, within certain ancient societies some women did enjoy some freedom to pursue such activities although often such pursuit was conditional.⁸⁵³ In other ancient societies, individual women have carved out a place for themselves in the male-dominated realms of sport and war. Such women are indeed exceptional as they often go against social expectation as they pursue such goals. Accounts of 'real' warrior women fall into this category and the stories of such women as Boadicea, Joan of Arc

⁸⁵¹ Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', p. 1.

⁸⁵² Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females. Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sport* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 145.

⁸⁵³ For instance, the woman must be a virgin, have no brothers or the menfolk must be away or depleted in some way. See Clover, 'Maiden Warriors and Other Sons', pp. 34-49.

and the female pharaoh Hapshetsut, are just a few of the tales of strong, militaristic women that can be found in the histories of ancient and medieval societies around the world.

Mythology and literature provide additional examples of strong women engaging in practices related to sport and war. For instance, Carol Clover examines the maiden warriors of Germanic literature, particularly those of Old Norse but she also links to evidence from Albania and to Icelandic law.⁸⁵⁴ In her paper, Clover suggests that ‘collective fantasy has much to tell us about the underlying tensions of the society that produced it and when the subject is one such as women, which the ‘legitimate’ sources treat only scantily, the literary fantasy takes on a special importance’.⁸⁵⁵

In many cultures, stories of militant women are not complete until the woman has rejoined ‘ordinary’ society after being ‘tamed’ by marriage, rape or otherwise discredited, as in the case of the Amazons who were portrayed as men-haters and mutilators. Such tales served as examples for women of what not to do. They also prove an invaluable warning to males as they demonstrated what might happen if they ‘allowed’ such behaviour from women. Women, it seems, in positions of military (and thus social) power, were depicted as in no way ‘up to the task’. The upshot of this is the idea that a woman occupying such a position of power would invariably lead to turmoil and destruction, primarily in the military campaign itself but also within society at large.

It has been suggested that the depiction of the warrior women in the tales, including, no doubt, women displaying skill in traditionally masculine pursuits, has a negative literary intent. Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin suggests that it is the writers of the sagas who seem to adhere to an agenda regarding the place of women in society. She suggests that this objective was two-fold: ‘teaching women that their position in society’s structure was fixed and that rebellion or independent action would not be tolerated and also to negate the status of the ancient goddesses’.⁸⁵⁶ According to Ní

⁸⁵⁴ Clover, ‘Maiden Warriors and Other Sons’, pp. 34-49.

⁸⁵⁵ Clover, ‘Maiden Warriors and Other Sons’, p. 36.

⁸⁵⁶ Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘*Re Tóin Mna: In Pursuit of Troublesome Women*’, in James Mallory and Gerard Stockman (eds), *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Belfast and Emain Macha: December Publications, 1994), pp. 116-117.

Bhrolcháin, the tales present two paradigms for women. The first is ‘beneficial, positive and passive, the second malevolent, negative and independent and it is the latter which abound’.⁸⁵⁷ It is Ní Bhrolcháin’s belief that the powerful females of the Irish pantheon were transformed into ‘troublesome women’ whose sexuality was now ‘dangerous’ to human men.⁸⁵⁸ This second category, the ‘troublesome women’, clearly includes warrior women.

Nevertheless, the Ulster tales do provide a number of examples of women participating in sport-like activity. Despite the issue of some of these women being potentially otherworldly figures, and thus not necessarily subject to the same social codes as those who may be counted as ‘human’ female characters, such women do seem to be portrayed in a positive light, at least in as far as their physical capabilities are concerned.

The Irish tales prove a welcome addition to the present understanding of strong women in the ancient world, be they militant or sporting. The women of the Ulster tales spend little time at leisure and even less time depicted as playing games or engaging in martial training or other sport-like activity. While there are several warrior women, there is no body of texts to inform of the early martial training and physical development of such women as there exists for the hero Cú Chulainn. In the search for illumination on these warrior women and the climate in which they lived, played and enacted their warrior skills, one must necessarily look more carefully.

While women’s involvement in sport-like activity in the Ulster tales has been examined to some extent in previous chapters of this thesis, a separate chapter allows the role and significance of women to be collated and contextualised in the face of overwhelming male domination. This chapter, then, is designed to emphasise, rather than marginalise, the contribution of women in sport-like activity in the tales. Chapter Eight examines women’s contribution to, and participation in, sport, games, martial training and physical activity of the Ulster tales. It begins with a brief summary of the legal and social status of women in the Ulster tales and moves to a discussion of the depiction of strong, warrior-like women in the tales. The specific

⁸⁵⁷ Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘*Re Tóin Mna*: In Pursuit of Troublesome Women’, p. 115.

⁸⁵⁸ Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘*Re Tóin Mna*: In Pursuit of Troublesome Women’, p. 116.

issue of the role of women in physical training and sport-like activity in the tales is then examined. Finally, this chapter analyses the types and uses of weapons that women utilise in the tales to gain advantage in the decidedly male dominated arenas of sport-like activity and war.

8.2 The Legal and Social Status of Women in the Ulster Cycle

The most celebrated characters in the Ulster tales are undeniably the warriors. Kings, and occasionally queens, do play a significant role also but, in terms of power gained through physicality, or physical action or skill, it is the male warriors which are clearly dominant. Like their contemporaries, early Irish society did not permit equality of action or responsibility for all. Lisa Bitel has completed an extensive study of the legal position of women in early Ireland in her book, *Land of Women: Tales of Sex and Gender from Early Ireland*. Certainly, the women in early Ireland were no goddess-queens, but neither were most of them prisoners or slaves. They were not the social or political equals of men, but, as Bitel suggests, equality was not a concept comprehensible to the early Irish.⁸⁵⁹ As Bitel suggests:

What the texts reveal are several well-defined, well-articulated social roles for women – lover, wife, mother, economic partner, holy woman, warrior woman – each with its own behavioural code and symbolic meanings. Yet the texts also repeatedly announce variations on these roles, the violations of their boundaries.⁸⁶⁰

What is clear is that early Ireland had a set of gender relations that were as flexible and as complex as any which exist today.⁸⁶¹

Women, like men, were regularly fostered out to further the social and educational needs of the family. As mentioned previously in this thesis, fosterage was customary and predictable for the aristocratic society depicted in the Ulster Cycle.⁸⁶² As Bitel notes, if there were conflicting or insufficient kinship bonds, one solution was fosterage. Fosterage, a form of vocational training, also supplied a child with what

⁸⁵⁹ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 11.

⁸⁶⁰ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 16.

⁸⁶¹ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 16.

⁸⁶² Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 93.

Bitel describes as a ‘blanket’ of ties.⁸⁶³ Bitel makes the point that Irish fosterage was not intended to assist the foster child in climbing the social ladder but, instead, was designed to have the child acquire the relevant skills to allow him or her to take up their pre-determined role in society.⁸⁶⁴ As a result, very different education and provisions were afforded the children of higher ranking parentage in relation to those of less highly ranked biological parents. However, while male foster siblings formed extremely close, almost filial, ties throughout the course of their fosterage, neither female foster siblings nor foster brothers and sisters seemed to achieve a similar bond.

While both male and female children were put into fosterage at around age seven, the skills taught and thus the education received by children varied not only by sex but also by rank of the natural parents. According to Bitel, presumably the foster father taught the foster son and the foster mother passed on skills to the female foster child.⁸⁶⁵ A girl learned ‘wifely skills’: sewing, embroidery and the use of kitchen equipment for instance.⁸⁶⁶

There is one female character, however, who was not only taught ‘wifely’ skills but who was educated in martial skills and combat. Medb took on a very masculine role of leader in battle in the *Táin*. A woman taking on a male role in the Ulster tales is not a particularly uncommon occurrence. Despite this, Ní Bhrolcháin suggests that women may be killed, sacrificed or rehabilitated socially if they reverse their roles with men and behave inappropriately.⁸⁶⁷ Medb’s behaviour in the *Táin*, for example, could be considered inappropriate. According to Ní Bhrolcháin, Medb’s character was deliberately rewritten to ‘accentuate her ineffectiveness as leader of battle and cattle-raids and the inappropriateness of following a woman’.⁸⁶⁸

According to Erica Sessle, who espouses a less certain view than Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘the function of myth in pre-literate society was to express the ideology of the society’.⁸⁶⁹

⁸⁶³ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 93.

⁸⁶⁴ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 94.

⁸⁶⁵ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 94.

⁸⁶⁶ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 94.

⁸⁶⁷ Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘*Re Tóin Mna: In Pursuit of Troublesome Women*’, p. 118.

⁸⁶⁸ Ní Bhrolcháin, ‘*Re Tóin Mna: In Pursuit of Troublesome Women*’, p. 116.

⁸⁶⁹ Erica Sessle, ‘Misogyny and Medb: Approaching Medb with Feminist Criticism’, in J. P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (eds), *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Belfast and Emain Macha: December Publications, 1994), p. 135.

Access to this mythology, however, has only been possible via the literary forms of oral transmission. Sessle suggests that ‘in medieval Ireland, stories based on oral traditions were transcribed by people whose theological worldview was radically opposed to the one being recorded’.⁸⁷⁰ It is not surprising then that Sessle notes that the Irish scribes were not ‘passive recorders of history’ and as such she considers that the texts are literary compositions rather than unbiased recordings of the past.⁸⁷¹ For her part, Sessle is not trying to prove or disprove whether the scribes intended to discredit Medb. Sessle suggests that Medb’s actions can be understood within the context of her own gender (as a Celtic sovereignty goddess) rather than as a female trying to fulfil a male kinship role.⁸⁷²

Sessle is of the opinion that Medb’s actions have been misinterpreted and that the negative characterisation of Medb results from the interaction between Ailill and Fergus as failed kings and Medb as the sovereignty goddess.⁸⁷³ She goes further to suggest that any understanding of Medb’s significance in the tale must start with an examination of her character as a sovereignty goddess and not as a mortal woman.⁸⁷⁴ According to Sessle, Medb, as a sovereignty goddess, achieves fulfilment of her role but that it is the failure of the men (Ailill and Fergus) that results in Medb’s transformation and, as a result, the negative interpretation of her.⁸⁷⁵ Without a suitable mate, Medb is a ‘harpy’ and her character becomes a negative one, an anti-goddess of sorts. According to Sessle, ‘the disastrous events in the *Táin* are a result of the lack of a rightful union between the goddess and the king – a union that should bring prosperity to the land’.⁸⁷⁶ As a result of this transgression, Medb’s unions with Ailill and Fergus only create tragedies.⁸⁷⁷

However, while Medb may have transgressed against male authority she did not try to become it. She can be seen to have lured men into battle and the society may be perceived to have suffered a great deal as a result. The male characters, though, are

⁸⁷⁰ Sessle, ‘Misogyny and Medb’, p. 135.

⁸⁷¹ Sessle, ‘Misogyny and Medb’, p. 135.

⁸⁷² Sessle, ‘Misogyny and Medb’, p. 136.

⁸⁷³ Sessle, ‘Misogyny and Medb’, p. 136.

⁸⁷⁴ Sessle, ‘Misogyny and Medb’, p. 136.

⁸⁷⁵ Sessle, ‘Misogyny and Medb’, p. 137

⁸⁷⁶ Sessle, ‘Misogyny and Medb’, p. 138.

⁸⁷⁷ Sessle, ‘Misogyny and Medb’, p. 138.

equally responsible for Medb's negative transformation and thus the ultimate turmoil. As Sessle suggests, 'although Fergus may imply that a woman's advice can only have negative results ... both he and Ailill must share in the accountability for the failure of the *Táin* and the misogyny of Medb's interpretation'.⁸⁷⁸ Medb is, nonetheless, a formidable character and one who possesses martial skills. Medb, however, is not shown to engage in martial learning nor does she play any role in imparting such knowledge to others. The task of teaching martial skills falls to other characters in the tales. Predominantly, these martial educators are women.

Dickson posits a thesis which is useful as a foundation to help position the female warrior and teacher of martial skills in the gender frames of the Irish tales. While Dickson does not delve into the aspect of sport-like activity in relation to women (or men) and their various roles and responsibilities in the Ulster tales, Dickson's thesis can be used to form the basis of a discussion on sport-like activity which traditionally (in the tales) falls within the masculine realm. According to Dickson, though, the female warrior is not locked into behaviour as determined by her sex and, in fact, the Irish viragos adopt masculine behaviour and/to operate within the masculine realm.⁸⁷⁹ This is in contrast to the depiction of Medb in the *Táin* as discussed above.

Hargreaves claims that 'masculinity and femininity are relative concepts which are socially and historically constructed'.⁸⁸⁰ In the Irish tales, it seems, while there is clearly an awareness of two genders, 'gender shifting', as Dickson calls it, is not an uncommon practice. Dickson suggests that 'while other women base their competition for status on the social position of their husband, viragos rely on their own martial and political abilities to compete with men for power and position'.⁸⁸¹ On the battlefield viragos fight for physical domination while psychologically viragos fight for masculinity, for masculine gender.⁸⁸²

Additionally, Dickson notes that although the virago moves into the realm of men and assumes occupations normally reserved for men she (the virago) is not ultimately

⁸⁷⁸ Sessle, 'Misogyny and Medb', p. 138.

⁸⁷⁹ Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', p. 43.

⁸⁸⁰ Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, p. 145.

⁸⁸¹ Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', abstract.

⁸⁸² Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', p. 2.

responsible for men's actions nor for their reactions to her behaviour. As Dickson notes, 'while the virago does not cause men's inadequacies, she often reveals them'.⁸⁸³

The women of the Ulster Cycle tales assume masculine occupations by ruling territory (such as Medb, Scáthach and Aífe); fighting for justice (Nessa) or fighting for military supremacy (Aífe). As Dickson notes, 'in none of these situations does another character in the story or the author intervene to suggest that these women did not have the right to behave as warriors or kings'.⁸⁸⁴ The women of the tales were not meant to pose a serious threat to the male heroes but according to Ann Dooley, 'the fact that a challenge is mounted means that a cultural question is actually posed by the texts'.⁸⁸⁵

Bitel takes a much darker view and insists that warrior women like Scáthach and Aífe and other women who took up arms appear in the tales quite readily but that while these women were a match for their male attackers and competitors, they all had trouble managing normal gender relations. As Bitel suggests every one of these militant, manly women was threatened, either with sex procured under dubious circumstances (that is, blackmailed) or actually raped.⁸⁸⁶ Bitel admits that, 'although they triumphed for a time, brandishing their spears and threatening men, eventually women warriors fell to rape or some other retribution at a warrior's hands'.⁸⁸⁷

Interestingly, the notion of gender shifting or at least gender ambiguity can also be applied to the most prestigious and influential of male warriors. According to Jeremy Lowe, Cú Chulainn himself can be seen as occupying a position of uncertain sex and sexuality.⁸⁸⁸ In this, Lowe suggests, Cú Chulainn poses a threat to men and he is threatened by women. Examples of this can be seen in the 'Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn', where Cú Chulainn cannot face the nakedness of the women, and also in the story *Mesce Ulad* where the female satirist Richis displays herself naked to CuChulainn to prevent him from fighting. In the LL version of the *Táin*, Medb's act

⁸⁸³ Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', p. 1.

⁸⁸⁴ Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', p. 17.

⁸⁸⁵ Dooley, *Playing the Hero: Reading the Irish Saga Táin Bo Cúailnge*, p. 11.

⁸⁸⁶ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 215.

⁸⁸⁷ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 215.

⁸⁸⁸ Jeremy Lowe, 'Kicking Over the Traces: The Instability of Cú Chulainn', *Studia Celtica*, Vol. 34, 2000, pp. 127-129.

of urination (or in some readings ‘menstruation’) halts Cú Chulainn and the advancing Ulster army. As Lowe suggests:

if Ann Dooley is right to see these ploys as instances of ‘gender assertion’ on the part of the women, then they work precisely because the gender of Cú Chulainn is so ambiguous and unstable – the defiant openness of female sexuality exposes the contested nature of his own.⁸⁸⁹

Several extensive studies have been conducted relating to the sexuality and physicality of the female characters in the Ulster Cycle.⁸⁹⁰ There are far fewer examples of examinations of their role and significance in matters of sport-like activity and martial training. Studies on Medb, Emer and the Morrígan abound, while characters such as Scáthach, Aífe and Dordmir are virtually ignored despite their critical roles in the physical and martial (and also in the sexual) development of Cú Chulainn and other important martial heroes. The next section introduces (or in some cases re-introduces) the strong women of the Ulster Cycle which will, in turn, facilitate a discussion of women’s role in sport-like activity in the tales.

8.3 The Strong Women of the Ulster Cycle

This section provides a general overview of some of the principal female characters in the Ulster tales. Although several of these characters have been mentioned in previous chapters, the purpose of outlining these character biographies here is two-fold. Firstly, some of the characters mentioned in this chapter make only brief appearances in the tales or only appear in one tale and for this reason a listing here will help give a clearer (though not comprehensive) indication of the breadth and depth of female characters as portrayed in the tales. Secondly, with a list such as this included here, the following sections can more readily, and less laboriously, refer to

⁸⁸⁹ Lowe, ‘Kicking Over the Traces’, p. 127.

⁸⁹⁰ For instance see: L. M. Bitel, ‘Do Not Marry the Fat Short One: The Early Irish Wisdom on Women’, *Journal of Women’s History*, Vol. 6, No. 4/Vol. 7, No. 1, Winter/Spring, 1995, pp. 137-159; Moyra Caldecott, *Women in Celtic Myth. Tales of Extraordinary Women from the Ancient Celtic Tradition* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1992); Rosalind Clark, *The Great Queens: Irish Goddesses from the Morrigan to Cathleen Ní Houlihan*; Mary Condren, *The Serpent and the Goddess. Women, Religion, and Power in Celtic Ireland* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989); and Joanne Findon, ‘Gender and Power in *Serglige Con Culainn* and *The Only Jealousy of Emer*’, in Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland (eds), *Language and Tradition in Ireland: Continuities and Displacements* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003), pp. 47-61.

these characters in a more comprehensive discussion of women and sport-like activity in the tales.

Aífe

Aífe, the daughter of a king of the Greeks,⁸⁹¹ is described as ‘the hardest woman-warrior in the world’.⁸⁹² Aífe is the chief of a territory nearby to Scáthach’s own lands. Aífe and her army were regularly engaged in conflict with the tribe of Scáthach. Cú Chulainn fights against Aífe’s men and then with Aífe herself. Cú Chulainn stays with Aífe for a year and continues to learn warrior skills.⁸⁹³ Aífe is impregnated by Cú Chulainn and gives birth to Connla, Cú Chulainn’s only son and one whom Cú Chulainn unwittingly slays when the child is seven years old.

Dechtire

Another character, Dechtire, who is King Conchobar’s sister and Cú Chulainn’s mother, is depicted as a charioteer. Dechtire drives the chariot for her brother in the tale, ‘The Birth of Cú Chulainn’.⁸⁹⁴

Deirdre

Before Deirdre’s birth, Conchobar’s druid, Cathbad, prophesies that while she will be beautiful, she will also bring ruin and death to the Ulstermen. Although several Ulster warriors wish her to be executed at birth, Conchobar decides instead to foster her secretly and marry her once she is of age. Deirdre, however, falls in love with Naoise, son of Uisnech, and she takes him and his two brothers away with her. Lured back treacherously by Conchobar, the three sons of Uisnech are killed. Deirdre, after staying unhappily with Conchobar for a year, commits suicide by hurling herself from a chariot and striking her head against a boulder.⁸⁹⁵

⁸⁹¹ Stokes, ‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’, p. 135.

⁸⁹² Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 166. Notice that there is a gender marking here. Aífe is not the ‘hardest warrior’ for that descriptor should apply to a male. This is somewhat similar to the categorisations of today where the media alerts us to (at present) Usian Bolt being the fastest on Earth. There is no need for the descriptor ‘male’. It can be very safely assumed that the fastest will *necessarily* be male. By contrast when the media writes of ‘the fastest woman on Earth’ they are describing a lesser category.

⁸⁹³ Stokes, ‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’, p. 135.

⁸⁹⁴ Jeffrey Gantz, ‘The Birth of Cú Chulaind’, in Jeffery Gantz (ed.), *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 131.

⁸⁹⁵ T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, ‘The Exile of the Sons of Usnech’, in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover (eds), *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1936), p. 247.

Dordmir/Dornolla

Dordmir is the first of many female warrior/teachers that Cú Chulainn visits in the tale ‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’. Upon the arrival of Cú Chulainn and his two comrades, Dordmir asks them why they have come and they reply that it is to learn ‘warfare and feats of knighthood’.⁸⁹⁶ This tale, according to Stokes, is the earliest version of the story. Other stories which relate Cú Chulainn’s training aboard, such as perhaps the one in Kinsella’s *The Táin*, mention that Cú Chulainn stayed with Domnall (and his hideous looking daughter Dornolla) en route to Scáthach’s camp. In this version, Domnall trained Cú Chulainn and Dornolla vied, unsuccessfully, for his affection. Dornolla is depicted as a large, ‘loathsome’ and disfigured woman who fell in love with Cú Chulainn and was refused by him.⁸⁹⁷ Dornolla, Donall’s daughter is described in ‘The Wooing of Emer’:

Her form was very gruesome, her knees were large,
her heels turned out before her, her feet behind her;
big dark-grey eyes in her head, her face as black as a bowl
of jet. A very large forehead she had, her rough bright-red
hair in threads wound round her head.⁸⁹⁸

Her name itself means ‘big fist’ but no mention is made of her as a skilled warrior or as having performed feats. It is clear that the versions of Cú Chulainn’s journey to gain additional warrior training differ in several respects. Cú Chulainn’s first stop is in Scotland but his companions and those who run and teach at the camp are varied. Possibly Dornolla and Dordmir are incarnations of the same figure and, as suggested above, the depiction of this character as a warrior and educator may in fact belong to an earlier tradition.

Eis Enchenn

Eis Enchen is the mother of three warriors whom Cú Chulainn has killed. She actively fights Cú Chulainn by attempting to knock him off a small path by striking his toes as he tries to clear the path for her.⁸⁹⁹

⁸⁹⁶ Stokes, ‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’, p. 111.

⁸⁹⁷ Kuno Meyer (Translator), ‘The Oldest Version of Tochmarc Emire’, *Revue Celtique*, 11, 1890, p. 445.

⁸⁹⁸ Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 163.

Emer

Emer is daughter of Forgall the Wily and wife of Cú Chulainn. Emer is a prominent character in several Ulster Cycle tales; not least ‘The Wooing of Emer’ which tells of Cú Chulainn’s bid to make Emer his wife. Cú Chulainn is seeking an appropriate candidate for a wife and he sets his sights on Emer who is somewhat of a female paragon, possessing six gifts of womanhood: beauty, voice, sweet speech, skill in needlework, wisdom and chastity.⁹⁰⁰ In ‘The Wooing of Emer’, when Cú Chulainn boasts of his fosterage and the skills he has acquired as a result of that arrangement, Emer follows up with her own list of attributes attained through her own fosterage, and concludes that to her ‘is attributed every noble grace of demeanour among the hosts of Erin’s women’.⁹⁰¹ In a tale which depicts a later stage in their lives, ‘The Intoxication of the Ulstermen’, Emer, by then Cú Chulainn’s wife, was said to be ‘the sixth best woman that Erin contained’.⁹⁰²

Fann

Fann is an otherworldly figure. She is abandoned by her husband, Mannanan Mac Lir and responds by having an affair with Cú Chulainn.⁹⁰³ Cú Chulainn falls in love with Fann and his wife, Emer sets out to attack and kill Fann and take Cú Chulainn back.

Macha

Macha is essentially a goddess. She is most notable as the source of the Ulster warriors’ ‘debility’ which afflicts the adult male population over nine generations. Whilst heavily pregnant with twins, Macha raced on foot against the king’s horse and chariot team. She begged the king and the crowd to postpone the race but she was forced to race nevertheless. Macha won the race and gave birth to twins at the finish line but she then cursed the Ulstermen to suffer pains or ‘pangs’ similar to a woman in childbirth at the time of their greatest need such as when they are being attacked by foreign invaders.

⁸⁹⁹ Kinsella, *The Tain*, p. 33.

⁹⁰⁰ James MacKillop, *The Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 181.

⁹⁰¹ Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 160.

⁹⁰² Cross and Slover, ‘The Intoxication of the Ulstermen’, p. 216.

⁹⁰³ MacKillop, *The Oxford Dictionary of Celtic Mythology*, p. 205.

Medb

Medb is queen of Connacht and daughter of a king. Her name means ‘she who intoxicates’,⁹⁰⁴ and she lives up to this name by being depicted as highly sexualised, her taking supposedly one man after another to her bed. There are indications that Medb is a sovereignty goddess, required to mate with an appropriate male in order to ensure the survival of the land and society. In all her unions, Medb is the dominant partner.

In the ‘Pillow Talk’ episode of the *Táin*, Medb describes herself as one of six daughters and says categorically that she was the ‘noblest and worthiest’ of them all. Among other ‘bests’ she claims she was the best of the six ‘in battle and fight and combat’.⁹⁰⁵ This indicates not only that Medb herself has martial skills (and possibly has been trained in them) but that also her sisters have. Later in the same tale, Medb again boasts of her martial prowess thus: ‘... single-handed I am victorious in battles and contests and combats, and it would be a reproach to my husband that his wife should be more courageous than he, but it is no reproach if they are equally courageous’.⁹⁰⁶

In the Ulster Cycle, Medb and her husband, Ailill, rule Connacht. In the *Táin Bo Cúailnge*, Medb and her army embark on a mission to capture the famous brown bull of Cooley. This is important to Medb in order that the bull can join her herd and therefore make her possessions equal to that of her husband. She is accused of poor battle tactics which eventually cause her to lose the war. She is conniving and unscrupulous. In the *Táin*, Medb is depicted doing very little fighting herself though when she does, her skills are formidable. The character, Cethern describes Medb in the *Táin* and the wounding she gives him:

There came to me there a woman, tall, beautiful, pale and long-faced. She had flowing, yellow-golden hair. She wore a crimson, hooded cloak with a golden brooch over her breast. A straight, rigid spear blazing in her hand. She gave me that wound and she too got

⁹⁰⁴ Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend*, p. 147.

⁹⁰⁵ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 137.

⁹⁰⁶ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 138.

a slight wound from me.⁹⁰⁷

Despite this superior skill at arms and the fact that Medb surrounds herself with the trappings of Iron Age power, in terms of her own physicality she embodies a traditional female image.

Nessa

Nessa was the mother of Conchobar Mac Nessa, king of Ulster in the Ulster tales. In the tale, ‘The Birth of Conchobar’, Nessa’s twelve tutors are slain and so Nessa goes from being a gentle and docile woman to being a warrior set on revenge. Nessa is renowned for this warrior stance she adopts and it is then that she becomes known as Nessa (‘ungentle’) rather than her original name Assa (‘docile’ or ‘gentle’) ‘because of the greatness of her prowess and her valor’.⁹⁰⁸

Nessa destroyed and plundered with her ‘company’ and she is said to have great prowess and valour. However, despite her martial skill, Nessa is separated from her weapon whilst swimming and is threatened with death if she does not agree to Cathbad’s terms which include becoming his wife. She agrees to the terms because she says its better than being slain and laments the loss of her weapons which reduces her choices considerably.

Scáthach

Scáthach means ‘Shadowy’ and she is possibly an underworld figure. Stokes’ translation of ‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’ suggests that Scáthach is the daughter of the king of Scythia.⁹⁰⁹ She is one of the most respected teachers of martial skills and feats in the known world. Scáthach carries on various wars with neighbouring tribes, not the least notable of which is the tribe headed by another woman, Aífe. In the tale, *Tochmarc Emire*, Forgall the Wily states that it is believed that if a warrior, particularly Cú Chulainn, visited Scáthach and studied the ‘warrior’s art’ with her, he would be able to beat any hero in Europe.⁹¹⁰ Forgall also intimates that Scáthach is so

⁹⁰⁷ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 237.

⁹⁰⁸ T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, ‘The Birth of Conchobar’, in T. P. Cross and C. H. Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1936), p. 132.

⁹⁰⁹ Stokes, ‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’, p. 117.

⁹¹⁰ Kinsella, *The Tain: Translated from the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 28.

wild and ferocious that Cú Chulainn himself might be harmed. Scáthach also has prophetic powers and has prophesised that a child-like youth would come to her.

Scáthach is called Cú Chulainn's 'foster mother' and it seems that any person who has a hand in raising or educating a child receives that title ('foster'). At the end of his instruction, Cú Chulainn pays 'fees' to Scáthach for their training. Scáthach's camp was said to be 'East of Alba', on 'an island.' It has been suggested that this place may be in the Otherworld. There is a bridge of sorts that prospective students must master and cross before being allowed to learn at the camp. Called the 'Pupil's Bridge' or the 'Bridge of Leaps', the crossing of this bridge required exceptional physical and problem-solving skills. Scáthach can recognise training and skill easily (and hearing of the skill is enough) so without even seeing Cú Chulainn, Scáthach says 'Plainly ... this is someone who has had his full training somewhere'.⁹¹¹

Sayers suggests that Scáthach is likely 'an epicized hypostasis of the war goddess'.⁹¹² That is, he sees Scáthach as but one version or persona that the war-goddess or Morrígan adopts in her dealings with Cú Chulainn. For her part, Scáthach does teach Cú Chulainn many feats, including the *gae bolga*, the fearsome weapon capable of hideous disembowelment, which Cú Chulainn alone has been taught how to operate.

Uáthach

Uáthach is Scáthach's daughter and she lives with Scáthach at her warrior camp in Alba. There is evidence to suggest that Uáthach herself has had martial training as the passage above indicates when it lists Uáthach as one of the warriors who perhaps should be able to, but in fact cannot, perform the dart feat which Cú Chulainn displays. Uáthach is not depicted as performing warrior feats in the tales and in fact she takes on a traditionally female role, first as gushing potential suitor then eventually as actual lover of Cú Chulainn.

All of the female characters outlined above contribute in some way to the powerful and independent depiction of women that can be seen throughout the Ulster Cycle.

⁹¹¹ Kinsella, *The Tain: Translated from the Irish Epic Táin Bó Cúailnge*, p. 29.

⁹¹² William Sayers, 'Women's Work and Words: Setting the Stage for Strife in Medieval Irish and Icelandic Narrative', *The Mankind Quarterly*, Vol. 31, 1990, p. 61.

The next two sections of this chapter examines the role that these women play in, firstly, in a section dealing with sport, games and martial training and secondly, in a section that discusses the selection of weapons that are utilised by the women of the Ulster tales.

8.4 Women, Sport-Like Activity and Martial Training in the Ulster Cycle

The Ulster tales contain reference, directly and indirectly, to a number of instances of women who participate in sport-like activity and martial training. This section examines the contribution of women to the martial education of warrior heroes as well as outlining women's engagement in activities such as footracing, charioteering and board games. While a number of the examples below have been examined (to varying degrees) in previous chapters, they are included and elaborated upon here in order to present a more unified picture of women's involvement in sport-like activity in the tales.

In terms of relevant tales, 'The Wooing of Emer' contains many salient references to female characters being involved in sport-like activity. Both Scáthach and Aífe, Cú Chulainn's two martial arts teachers, feature heavily in the tale. In 'The Training of Cú Chulainn', which is essentially a longer version of the second half of 'The Wooing of Emer', a third warrior woman, Dordmir, also features, exhibiting her prowess in regard to martial feats and taking some responsibility for Cú Chulainn's martial development.

The warrior women who contribute to Cú Chulainn's knowledge of feats and other martial skills are crucial to his success and dominance as a hero. The learning of the *gae bolga* feat, for instance, is an essential element in later combats and the teaching of this weapon alone is enough to show the import of the warrior women and their warrior training camps. Cú Chulainn could simply not achieve what he does without them. The position of the women educators cannot be overestimated. The warrior women, Dordmir, Scáthach and Aífe, are of paramount importance to the development of the heroes' martial capacities and ultimately to his supremacy as

defender of Ulster.⁹¹³ Nowhere in other ancient literature is such responsibility in relation to sport-like activity afforded to women as it is in relation to the teaching of martial skills to Cú Chulainn.

Physical and martial feats are taught in year-long stays at training facilities headed by women. Importantly, these women are not simply figureheads, as a chief executive officer of a sporting organisation today might be. Scáthach is the principal and most prestigious trainer in her establishment and she oversees the physical preparation and readiness of those attending her camp.

Though difficult to find and travel to, entry to Scáthach's camp is not guaranteed by simply 'showing up'. There is a rigorous test which must be passed before a warrior can be fully accepted into the camp for training. Even then, Scáthach may not commit her full training knowledge to all warriors and for this reason Cú Chulainn singles her out specifically, with some insider knowledge gained from Uáthach (Scáthach's daughter), to force her to train him.

At the camp of the female warrior, Dordmir, there is also a physical task which must be completed successfully before a warrior could stay and be trained by her. The tale 'The Training of Cú Chulainn' is the only tale which mentions the warrior woman Dordmir's camp and its role in Cú Chulainn's martial learning. As was typically the case, the host would demonstrate their skills for visitors. The fact that Dordmir is a woman does not alter this ritualistic tradition.

The physical feat, explained below, is displayed first by Dordmir and then copied to varying degrees of success by the potential students. Variously, in this translation at least, she is termed a druidess, a damsel, a warrior and a knight-woman and this passage, explaining the physical feat mentioned above, indicates the high level of training which Dordmir has:

⁹¹³ There is also a reference to a fourth warrior training camp in Munster run by Uáthach of the Glen (evidently a different character to Scáthach's daughter, Uáthach). Little information can be gleaned regarding this warrior woman and her camp but, unlike all the others that Cú Chulainn visits, this camp is within Ireland itself and not abroad (or in the Otherworld) as is the case with the camps of Dordmir, Scáthach and Aífe.

This is the feat which the damsel on that day shewed [*sic*] the youths: a five-barbed spear was brought to her, and she thrust its shaft into the earth, with its sharp, razorlike point straight above it. The druidess then leapt aloft into the air and came down again, so that she left her breast and her bosom on the point of the sharp-edged spear. And she brought no tear in her dress nor in her raiment, and she was a long time resting thus on the point of the spear.⁹¹⁴

Dordmir then challenges the visitors to try and emulate this feat. Neither Conall Cernach nor Loegaire the Victorious were able to perform it.⁹¹⁵ Cú Chulainn, of course, is able to complete the task and Dordmir invites him to stay and study, mentioning coyly that she could offer only ‘attendance and war-service’ to Conall and Loegaire because they are ‘past it’ and not up to the task. Specifically, she says:

O you other twain, keep; so long as ye shall live,
that from which ye have hitherto got fame and
distinction; for your blood has dried up, and
your sinews have hardened; and henceforth your
honour is not with feats of knighthood nor with
the study of warfare, but if ye like attendance or
war service, that can be attained with me.⁹¹⁶

Perhaps as a result of this less than glowing assessment, Cú Chulainn’s companions decide not to stay. Cú Chulainn alone is deemed worthy and it is he who stays. He remains for a year and learns feats under the tutelage of Dordmir.

Apart from Dordmir herself, there is no mention of any other women attending or resident at Dordmir’s camp. It is clear, however, that both males and females reside at Scáthach’s camp, though it is more difficult to ascertain the capacity in which the women and girls are there. Scáthach’s daughter, Uáthach, is a skilled warrior like her mother and it is indicated that she has, in fact, been taught martial skills by Scáthach at the camp. It is not clear, though, whether Uáthach’s training in arms was out of the ordinary or whether other women, or even all the women, at the camp were so trained.

⁹¹⁴ Stokes, ‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’, p. 113.

⁹¹⁵ These are Cú Chulainn’s companions in this version of the tale. In other versions alternate travelling companions are mentioned.

⁹¹⁶ Stokes, ‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’, p. 113.

Lending more weight to the notion that other women were trained as warriors is a passage which suggests this in a rather indirect way. In the tale, ‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’, the (male) warriors are attacking Cú Chulainn with darts and he performs a feat that no one else has been able to perform before:

Cú Chulainn came down slowly, cunningly, lightly and made stay and rest on the end of the dart that was next him, and afterwards came to the second dart, and reached the third dart, and so from dart to dart, till he came to the last dart. Touching the dart feat, it was found neither with Uáthach, nor with Scáthach, nor Aífe, nor Ablach, nor the queen of the Land of Snow, nor Eisín chinne, nor with knight or lady who had received instruction how to perform the dart feat, until Cú Chulainn came.⁹¹⁷

From this list it is clear that there were women warriors of note and that of all the warriors and teachers of martial skills who might have known and performed this skill, all are female. The comment ‘nor with knight or lady who had received instruction’ also suggests that this practice of teaching ‘ladies’ to perform these skilful feats is not unknown and might even be commonplace in certain circles.

Despite being a warrior and a martial skills teacher of great notoriety, Scáthach is not without her own adversaries. Scáthach dreads Aífe, whom she considers to be the hardest warrior woman in the world. It seems that Scáthach is not quite as skilled as Aífe in combat either, despite Aífe once being a student of Scáthach. Cú Chulainn, for instance, easily gets into a position to hold a blade to Scáthach’s chest, threatens her death and asks of her three promises. On the other hand, against Aífe, Cú Chulainn must resort to trickery in order to distract her and gain the upper hand. They meet in combat on the ‘rope of feats’ and Aífe smashes Cú Chulainn’s weapon, leaving only a tiny portion of his sword remaining.⁹¹⁸ Aífe is tricked by Cú Chulainn into looking around for her chariot and horses and Cú Chulainn is able to overpower her.⁹¹⁹

⁹¹⁷ Stokes, ‘The Training of Cú Chulainn’, p. 127.

⁹¹⁸ Kinsella, *The Tain*, p. 32.

⁹¹⁹ Cú Chulainn’s resort to trickery to defeat Aífe is reminiscent of the Greek tale of Atalanta. When Atalanta proves too skilled a runner to be beaten in a footrace, a potential suitor uses trickery to beat her and claim her hand in marriage. See Howell and Howell, ‘The Atalanta Legend in Art and Literature’, pp. 127-139.

Fierce warrior women such as Scáthach and Aífe are represented as the best martial trainers in the world. While their physical abilities are not questioned, it is their emotional state that is often called into question. Aífe is easily tricked, for instance, because of her emotional attachment to her horses and chariot. These two women warriors who train Cú Chulainn are indeed subdued and overpowered by Cú Chulainn in the tales. Importantly, though, this is not because their abilities to teach or perform feats of arms are called into question. In fact, it is precisely because they are such valuable instructors that Cú Chulainn finds it essential to secure training with each of them. The women are overpowered in the way that they are (emotionally then physically) because they are women. Though ‘fearsome’ the warrior women are no match, ultimately, for Cú Chulainn and this reinforces the premier position that he occupies in these tales. What is important to note, however, is the fact that no other man or woman is depicted as overpowering either Scáthach or Aífe.

It is interesting to note that, despite the positions of importance afforded to women in terms of expert martial training of heroes, not one woman trainer appears in the tale ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’. Despite all the responsibility afforded to women in the latter stages of the warrior’s education, the earlier stages (and arguably the more sport-like than war-like stages) are supervised by males. All those around the young hero and warriors are men. This tale has arguably the greatest number of references to sport-like activity in the descriptions of the boy-corps’ activities, yet not one female character is depicted as participating in such activities. In fact, women are not mentioned as assisting the boy-corps in its training even in a peripheral role. The only mention of women in the tale is the passage where 70 women bear their breasts at Cú Chulainn in an attempt to curb his violent warp spasm.⁹²⁰

The women of Ulster and certainly the wives of the heroes in Emain Macha do not possess the physical and martial abilities of the warrior women as discussed above. However, they do contribute in other ways to an understanding of women and sport-like activity in the tales. The character Macha, for instance, engages in direct competition with the king’s horses.

⁹²⁰ Cross and Slover, ‘The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn’, p. 151.

The tale, ‘The Debility of the Ulstermen’, features Macha in a race against the king’s best pair of horses after her husband boasts of her abilities at an assembly. There is, however, no reference to any other women participating in the sport-like activities at the assembly. This race can certainly be seen as a unique occurrence. It can also be seen to be related to male pride in that the king is unwilling to accept any talk of his own horses not being the fastest (fastest in comparison to all things and beings it would seem) and the king is clearly threatened by the notion that anything or anyone is faster. The race then has little to do with the fact that Macha is a woman and everything to do with the threat to the king’s superiority that a potentially faster runner presents. Moreover, it is the king’s determination to maintain his superiority that leads directly to Macha’s display of athleticism. For her part, Macha is not seeking to display her prowess and in fact she engages in the contest only under threat of her husband’s death should she refuse.

Macha does not set out to engage in sport-like activity (though she is quite clearly capable of superior performance at such). In fact she implores both the king and the crowd to postpone the race due to her condition of being nine months pregnant. One supposes that Scáthach, Aífe and Dordmir have practiced and perfected the athletic feats they display and teach to others, but with Macha one gets no real sense that she spends any time training for such running feats. It would seem though that her husband is well aware of her ability. While there is no suggestion that Macha practices her racing skills as such, it can be assumed that Macha has displayed these skills to her husband at least or there would be no reason for him to offer such a claim regarding her abilities at the assembly. A kind of ‘racing’ is also evident amongst the Ulster women in the tale *Fled Bricrend*. Incited by the words of Bricriu, a noted trouble-maker, the wives of the Ulster heroes engage in an impromptu footrace to the door of the feasting hall. The women race in order to be the first to enter the hall.

Although Bitel suggests that the women were the subject of ridicule in *Fled Bricrend*, the notion that women might be capable of and willing to participate in a footrace is not in question (or the subject of that ridicule). The humour directed at the women is not necessarily regarding the abilities of the women *to run*, but at the uncharacteristic sound of that actually occurring. There are, for instance, no witnesses to make jibes

about running styles. The women do hike up their skirts but there is no suggestion that the women are, for instance, being charged with being unfeminine or unladylike. While the footrace to the hall door is not one of the women in the tales' most prolific of athletic achievements, neither is it designed to be. These women are not 'warrior women'; they are the wives of the Ulster heroes. Despite the presumed pressure to behave in a dignified manner, however, the women are easily cajoled into a competitive, physical situation. Bitel's assessment of the gender differences played out in the tale is compelling. Women, for example, would never brag as they supposedly did in this tale. In what Bitel describes as a 'double dig', *Fled Bricrend* shows women 'not only aping men's boasts but boasting about men'.⁹²¹

It must be stressed that these women are not viragos. They have had no warrior training, as did Scáthach or Aífe, they were not even queens as was the militant Medb. The women were wives, and, moreover, they were the wives of martial heroes. With this social role came certain responsibilities and restrictions as to behaviour and *Fled Bricrend* plays up to these stereotypes to create a humorous action sequence. The choice of the wives and the setting of the feasting hall are neither accidental nor incidental to the tale. Had it been the warrior queen Medb or Scáthach or Aífe that was depicted and had the setting been related to warfare, the resultant tale and the possibilities for action would have been vastly different.

Women in groups or gatherings might, as Bitel suggests, drown out the words of men's lawmaking and negotiating. Women's words, especially once achieving a critical mass, were clearly counterproductive to the maintenance of order as decreed by men.⁹²² The separation of male and female traits and tendencies as suggested by the tale, *Fled Bricrend*, especially as it was aligned to physical contest, serves to link 'female' disorder, raucousness, and disruption with the activity of foot racing and, by extension, with all sport-like activity for women. In fact, as Bitel notes, it was the women who were seen as the source of potential social upheaval, the 'volatile factor in the equation of public peace'.⁹²³ Bitel suggests that, 'according to the storytellers, despite all the rules governing social intercourse, they [women] had a disturbing

⁹²¹ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 159.

⁹²² Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 159.

⁹²³ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 158.

tendency to ignore men's rules, alliances, and negotiations and to elope, seduce, argue and generally cause mayhem'.⁹²⁴

The tale parodies women's roles and rights with a heavy reliance on an understanding of gender differences. The women are parodied as they engage in 'non-feminine' behaviour of boasting and racing and simultaneously parodied engaging in 'typically' female behaviour of 'prattling' in the 'war of words' which develops. Under such circumstances, the fact that the women are engaged in sport-like activity (the race) is overshadowed by the events prior to and immediately following the race. The women are incited into participating in the race and, as a result, it is not structured, defined or ordered.

The character Medb once again provides an interesting addition to an understanding of women's participation in sport-like activity in the Ulster tales. An examination of Medb's encounters also informs the subject of gender relations in general in the tales. Medb is often described as travelling in a chariot. In the *Táin* she travels in a chariot to see her Druid and in this case she travels in it with her male charioteer.⁹²⁵ A long description is given in the *Táin* of how Medb usually travels:

with nine chariots for herself alone, two chariots before her, two behind, two on each side and her chariot between them in the very middle. And the reason used to do that was so that the clods of earth cast up by the horses' hooves or the foam dripping from the bridle-bits or the dust raised by the mighty army might not reach her and that no darkening might come to the golden diadem of the Queen.⁹²⁶

This is an unusual reference to Medb in that she is the commander of the great Connacht army and while in this masculine role most of her activities are free of the trappings of female body image such as this.

McCracken speaks of the Ulster tales and Medb in particular as she unites the theories she has about women's lack of acceptance in battle with the association of women and

⁹²⁴ Bitel, *Land of Women*, p. 158.

⁹²⁵ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 142.

⁹²⁶ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 142.

the debilitating functions of the female reproductive body.⁹²⁷ Medb, despite being the protagonist of the foray in the *Táin*, finds herself unable to continue fighting, at a particularly crucial time of a battle, because she begins to menstruate. Medb is incapacitated quite suddenly by this and the men around her, most notably Fergus, are a little peeved, with Fergus voicing his concern with Medb. Medb responds by telling him that she simply must attend to it there and then. Of course, Fergus comments that their defeat is expected since they have been led by a woman. As McCracken sums it up:

The *Táin* promotes the idea that women's bodies are unsuited to leadership in battle through representation of the female body's natural functions as debilitating in the context of war: women's blood ... is shown to be incompatible with battle.⁹²⁸

In the 'Pillow Talk' episode of the *Táin*, Medb describes herself as one of six daughters and says categorically that she was the 'noblest and worthiest' of them all. Among other 'bests' she claims she was the best of the six 'in battle and fight and combat'.⁹²⁹ This indicates not only that Medb herself has martial skills (and possibly has been trained in them) but also that her sisters have these skills.

Later in the same tale, Medb again boasts of her martial prowess thus, '... single-handed I am victorious in battles and contests and combats, and it would be a reproach to my husband that his wife should be more courageous than he, but it is no reproach if they are equally courageous'.⁹³⁰ It would seem extremely important to Medb that she be as good if not better than her husband. In her boasting of these martial exploits Medb takes on the role perhaps of the warrior, for they are depicted as very boastful of their own deeds. In addition to the masculine 'martial' role, Medb also boasts unashamedly about her sexual proclivities and her never being 'without one lover quickly succeeding another'.⁹³¹ In bolstering her own masculinity, Medb seems to try to emasculate her husband Ailill by saying that he is dependent on a

⁹²⁷ McCracken, 'The Amenorrhea of War', p. 628.

⁹²⁸ McCracken, 'The Amenorrhea of War', pp. 630-1.

⁹²⁹ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 137.

⁹³⁰ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 138.

⁹³¹ O'Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 138.

‘woman’s marriage-portion’.⁹³² He objects to this description of him and does his own boasting. On the matter of sexual proclivities, when Medb is trying to convince Daire to loan her his bull Donn Cúailnge, she not only offers him 50 heifers, some land and an expensive chariot, but she also offers him her own ‘intimate friendship’.⁹³³ While it seems that the tales do have a rather relaxed view of extramarital sex, Medb’s boastings and offerings do, however, have a masculine feel.

In terms of women engaging in other sport-like activities, there is reference in the tales to both charioteering and to the playing of board games. In some versions of the tale, ‘The Birth of Cú Chulainn’, it is mentioned that Dechtire is Conchobar’s daughter and charioteer.⁹³⁴ This information is noteworthy as it gives Dechtire a clear place in the party that sets out to chase a flock of birds away but more importantly, it gives Dechtire a solid reason to be there as she eventually becomes the mother of Cú Chulainn. However, Dechtire’s presence in the party, and at the rather enchanted house of lodging, could well have been explained using a more ‘feminine’ role than charioteer. As there is no specific action that Dechtire is said to engage in as Conchobar’s charioteer, the reference may as well have been omitted. Yet there it stands, a decidedly nonchalant reference to a female in the role of charioteer. The ease of reference and the lack of concern that this information in the tale seems to bring would suggest that women charioteers were not necessarily an unusual occurrence. Aside from this highly physical aspect of female participation, there are also instances of women in the tales engaging in the more sedentary practice of board games. Both Fann, in ‘The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn’ and Medb, in the *Táin*, are adept at *fidchell* and are represented as winning (often against males) regularly. For instance, Fann suggests that she has been a good wife to her husband and by way of evidence suggests that ‘for his life he could not win from me the odd game at chess’.⁹³⁵ Clearly, Fann’s worth as a wife is in some way measured by her ability to play the game and play it well.

In the Ulster tales the women are represented in a role which even today, one will seldom see a woman, that of the most expert and knowledgeable coach or trainer.

⁹³² O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 138.

⁹³³ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 140.

⁹³⁴ Gantz, ‘The Birth of Cú Chulaind’, p. 131.

⁹³⁵ Cross and Slover, ‘The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn’, p. 196.

The women though are also portrayed as being vulnerable, for instance, Scáthach loves her horses so much she is easily tricked by Cú Chulainn into averting her gaze and mind from the tussle they are in to look to where she believes they might be in trouble. Additionally there are the accounts of sexual intimacy and sexual favours afforded to the male warriors as the women warriors submit to their wishes – and while this may be observed (perhaps incorrectly) in the modern world of female groupies of sport, the women warriors in the tales occupy a very different position and therefore one might say status. Scáthach and Aífe are warrior chiefs in their own right; they command armies and would seem to enjoy great status in the fact that they are considered some of the greatest martial skills trainers of the world. Yet they continue to be represented as incorporating the position of power and the knowledge of skills with the emotionality and vulnerability ‘expected’ of women.

As a literary figment, the warrior women do not make much of a challenge to the accepted hierarchy, yet as several authors contend Ireland of the time of the tales encompassed a more liberal view of women’s roles than many other European societies of the time (and beyond). One does not read of these warrior women heading home after a long day supervising the training to take care of the washing and food preparation. Yet the slaves and servants are most regularly women. The contention holds though, that for the modern reader, and possibly for the ancient or medieval listener, the prospect of a strong female athletic presence is tempered by the representation of Scáthach and Aífe as not only flawed but flawed in a typically feminine way (as emotional and vulnerable) despite their prominent roles in the traditionally masculine arena of martial and physical skill education.

While this section has focussed primarily on the participation of women in sport-like activity, the following section examines the tools, devices and, indeed, weaponry that women utilise in order to carry out that participation. The section below, then, is both an outline of these items and a comparison of their use by women in contrast with men.

8.5 Weapons of Sport and War for the Women of the Ulster Cycle

Women are depicted as wielding several types of weapon in the Ulster tales. While many of these are similar if not identical to those of males and male warriors, others

are uniquely female in either their substance or their operation. This section examines the use of weapons by women in the tales.

Dickson identifies three categories of weapon: masculine, feminine and sexual.⁹³⁶ Masculine weapons, such as the sword and phallus, are external, hard weapons which directly threaten the physical well-being of the intended victim. Feminine weapons, on the other hand, are soft and internal weapons which, according to Dickson, can force compliance without direct contact. Feminine weapons include words, breasts and vagina.⁹³⁷

Dickson notes that the choice of weapon might seem to depend on the nature of the fight.⁹³⁸ However, the tale she examines shows that this is not the case and, in fact, Dickson goes so far as to suggest that:

Tochmarc Emire provides a kaleidoscopic vision of the various ways strife between men and women is played out: swords are deflected with words, but words can redirect swords; swords as well as words can force sexual relations; sexual encounters are battles with genitalia as weapons; and, underlying all these variously-weaponed conflicts is the fight for control of future generations.⁹³⁹

Dickson here alludes to her identification of a thread which she considers brings together the apparently disparate elements of this wooing tale. Dickson suggests that the theme which binds the elements of *Tochmarc Emire* is competition for sexual control and, encompassed by this, the question of reproductive control.⁹⁴⁰ Dickson firmly states that, in the tales, one's choice of weapons define one's gender.

⁹³⁶ Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', p. 128.

⁹³⁷ Dickson notes that although words might not appear to be weapons to modern readers, in the Irish tales they can be lethal. Dickson points to the verbal prohibition or demand *geis* which is seen to have the power to kill and notes that the words for 'to satirise' have the primary meanings of 'to cut' and 'to incise'. See Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', p. 129.

⁹³⁸ One would expect, suggests Dickson, that the fabricated weapons such as swords and spears would be used for dominance in the social and political arenas, biological weapons used for control of sexual and reproductive rights and words used in both arenas. See Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', p. 129.

⁹³⁹ Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', p. 129.

⁹⁴⁰ Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', pp. 142-144.

Dickson notes that when women warriors are surprised without their weapons or drop their weapons, they do not resort to feminine weapons such as words. It seems that because warrior women have taken on a masculine role, they must now operate within the realm of the masculine. In the situation where the woman warrior is without masculine weapons, she is reduced to a social position less than women with the normal weapons available to women not necessarily accessible.⁹⁴¹

Clover suggests that in Northern European literature the binary is not between biological men and women but between hard and soft, providers and dependents.⁹⁴² Dickson utilises Clover's approach to understanding gender in order to illuminate the position of women warriors in the Irish tales. Dickson suggests that the gender of the viragos is not fixed and is always amenable to change. For instance, Dickson notes that:

In *Tochmarc Emire*, gender is established and maintained through each individual's action and relationship to others, not by innate physical characteristics. Scáthach and Aífe are both hard; they are warriors and queens, providers and heads of families; they have dependent children as well as (male) warriors who rely on them for leadership and sustenance.⁹⁴³

In order to discuss the female participation in the antagonism between men and women in the texts, Sayers uses a pair of axes to plot the female actors on one axis (arranged in terms of a conception of power) and the mode of conflictual interaction with men on the other.⁹⁴⁴ Due to the nature of his inquiry, Sayers plots the conflictual interactions of men and women rather than those between women. The present study, however, includes altercations between women as well.

Sayers' principal question concerns whether or not there might be a non-Christian source for medieval western misogyny that may have complemented the Christian one, so clearly any conflict (regardless of the nature of that conflict) between two

⁹⁴¹ Dickson suggests that while it might seem like words are always available, that this is not the case. Dickson cites the work of Philip O'Leary who suggests that if words are unwitnessed, then they are not binding. The lack of available witnesses on the battlefield (and in the 'wilderness' where such encounters take place) means that words would not be the effective weapon that they are in other realms such as the fort or during gatherings outside the fort.

⁹⁴² Clover cited in Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', p. 133.

⁹⁴³ Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', p. 133.

⁹⁴⁴ Sayers, 'Women's Work and Words', pp. 58-59.

women is somewhat irrelevant to his research. Sayers looks at where and when women engage in different types of ‘action’ against men and what sort of women engage in which sort of conflict, again, against men. According to Sayers, the types of conflict engaged in by women can be divided into six principal categories: Kinetic or Overt Action; Verbal Action; Parallel Action; Women’s Work; Covert Action; and, Passive Deployment.⁹⁴⁵

Sayers does consider these categories to be illustrative, rather than rigorous, and he is not specifically discussing women in a sporting or even a martial context (although to some extent the action of the women is martial). These categories can, however, provide a framework, or at least a jumping off point, for a discussion of women and martial training and sport in the tales and, in particular, the array of ‘weapons’ used by women, successfully or otherwise. While not all of Sayers’ categories are relevant to a study of women and sport-like activity, certainly the first two categories, kinetic/overt action and verbal deceit, are. These two categories, then, as they apply to women in sport, games, martial training and combat, will now be considered.

a) Kinetic or Overt Action

Clearly, this type of physical engagement is one which places female characters firmly in the action by virtue of her ‘doing’ rather than observing or inciting. There is reference to women utilising traditionally male weapons of swords and shields as well as less traditional weapons such as the horsewhips brandished by Li Ban and another woman in ‘The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn’.

In the above-mentioned tale, Li Ban and another woman beat Cú Chulainn senseless with horsewhips.⁹⁴⁶ It is unusual that the hero Cú Chulainn in a sense allows himself to be beaten by these women; he seems to put up little resistance or at least is incapable of resistance. Cú Chulainn has killed women in other stories especially those who set out to harm him, yet in this case he has no answer to the attack. Cú

⁹⁴⁵ Sayers, ‘Women’s Work and Words’, p. 60. Sayers’ other four categories can here be defined. Parallel Action is action that runs parallel to men’s action. It is physical in nature but off the central male-dominated stage of narrative. Women’s Work is a subset of parallel action and encompasses typically domestic tasks. Covert Action involves the use of magic and/or illegal activity, while the sixth category, Passive Deployment, refers to when women are used as tools in the conflict by others to further their own ends.

⁹⁴⁶ Cross and Slover, ‘The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn’, p. 179.

Chulainn is not seen to be overcome so easily in any other tale. This may be a literary function (that is, to have Cú Chulainn lured to the Underworld) but it also plays on the idea that women can be seductively dangerous. The beating incident, though, is still unusual in that Cú Chulainn should, by all accounts, perceive the situation as threatening and come out fighting. Yet in this instance Cú Chulainn is not seen to transform via the dangerous warp-spasm, he wields no tricky weapons and he does not utilise his defining weapon, the *gae bolga*. Instead, the warrior hero offers no resistance and he is beaten into a comatose state by the two women.

Li Ban can be seen to incite or at least contribute to Cú Chulainn being encouraged to fight. It is Li Ban's husband who requires Cú Chulainn's assistance in combat but he sends Li Ban to ask him rather than going himself.⁹⁴⁷ It is also Li Ban that offers Fann as a potential love interest for Cú Chulainn (presumably in return for helping Li Ban's husband).

Laeg goes to the Underworld (Alba) under direction from Cú Chulainn. Li Ban is careful to note that were he not under 'a woman's protection' that he would not be able to make the journey. Li Ban offers here not protection by force of arms but instead, her protection of Laeg is enacted via less active means. That is, Li Ban is recognised and respected in this place and it is due to Laeg's association with her that he is granted safe passage. Laeg indicates that it is certainly not something to which he is accustomed (that is, being under a woman's guard).⁹⁴⁸

Emer, upon finding out that Cú Chulainn has arranged a 'tryst' goes to slay Fann. Emer and her supporters arm themselves with more traditional weapons. According to the tale, 'knives were whetted by Emer to slay the fairy woman'.⁹⁴⁹ When Emer does go to kill Fann she takes 50 women with her (an unusual occurrence for a male (and unthinkable for a hero)). When Emer and her hoard arrive, Cú Chulainn and Laeg are playing *fidchell* and they do not immediately perceive the women. Again, this is very unlike the hero as depicted in the other tales. A decidedly more vulnerable and less astute Cú Chulainn is depicted throughout this tale. Once alerted

⁹⁴⁷ Cross and Slover, 'The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn', p. 181.

⁹⁴⁸ Cross and Slover, 'The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn', p. 182.

⁹⁴⁹ Cross and Slover, 'The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn', p. 193.

to their presence Cú Chulainn says calmly enough that he will protect Fann and makes the comment that ‘Emer will dare no deed of destruction’.⁹⁵⁰ Indeed, it does not come to blows but instead develops into an exchange of words (despite the presence of the ‘knives’).

Of course, the warrior women, as discussed in the previous section, all utilise a number of different traditional weapons in direct action against both male, and other female, warriors. Dordmir, Scáthach and Aífe are depicted as operating quite firmly in the masculine realm of behaviour and weaponry. Like the male heroes, it is their swords and spears which define them and which they wield so effectively in the tales.

Nessa does not even consider using verbal action to enact a revenge on Cathbad once her tutors have been slain. In fact, she immediately adopts a very active and physical method of revenge by becoming a warrior woman. Perhaps there is a slight difference to be seen here and in other warrior women forged out of family circumstance and with vengeance in mind. The transgression which Nessa seeks to take action for is a decidedly personal one. She is outraged at the brutal deaths of her tutors and clearly finds no comfort in the thought of dealing with the situation using traditional female action. It is clearly not enough to chant a curse or even to seek to have (male) others enact the revenge on her behalf. It is necessary, due to her intimate connection to the situation and her anger which needs an outlet, that she take revenge herself in a direct, physical and, presumably, satisfying way.

More interesting is the fact that, despite her upbringing as a woman in a male dominated realm, Nessa seems quite physically capable of wielding weapons, seeking out the offenders and generally behaving like a warrior, destroying and plundering across Ireland.

b) Verbal Action

Words, it seems, can be extremely powerful weapons. Sayers suggests that verbal action is a distinctively female category and identifies seven types. These are counsel, gossip, lies, satire, threat, curse and prophesy. The power of verbal action is

⁹⁵⁰ Cross and Slover, ‘The Sick-Bed of Cú Chulainn’, p. 193.

particularly evident when the words are chanted or sung but are still formidable as poetry or verse. Joan Radner examines the potency of words in her paper, ‘Men Will Die: Poets, Harpers, and Women in Early Irish Literature’.⁹⁵¹ Radner identifies the five ‘crafts’ of poetry as that which variously nourishes, sings, impels, judges, and establishes.⁹⁵² To summarise, poetry gives nourishment by having the ability to sustain life as food does and nurture in the same way as a nurse or foster parent. It sings or chants as in the employment of spells and magical acts. Poetry has the ability to impel or is capable of irresistible compulsion, not only in charms and invocations but also in the ordinary activities of life. It has, for instance, the ability to incite battle. Poetry judges and, as Radner suggests, poetry and the law were once part of the same profession. Poets themselves often were credited with the power to perceive the truth. Finally, poetry establishes. It creates and maintains things as they are. It is used in royal inauguration to recite histories and chart genealogies which legitimise the ruler’s reign and also to proclaim the king’s duties and taboos.

While these powers seem nurturing rather than dangerous, the poets’ powers were paradoxical. As Radner suggests, ‘If words could heal, could sustain prosperity, could create and maintain effective government, their words could also destroy through satire’.⁹⁵³ Further, Radner suggests that poetic satire was treated as a lethal weapon under the laws and appeared to be employed as a last resort for the enforcement of contracts and even as a cause of death.⁹⁵⁴ Harp music, also, had powers aligned to it. According to Radner, it can support wealth, fertility, and the continuation of society. It can also be destructive. In the tale *Táin Bo Fróech* [‘The Cattle Raid of Fróech’], for example, it is said that upon hearing Fróech’s harpers, twelve men died of weeping and sadness.⁹⁵⁵

Having established that both poets and harpers can elicit sounds (words or music) which can influence actions and events, both wonderfully and in a nurturing manner and dangerously and with a deadly outcome, Radner then examines the link between

⁹⁵¹ J. N. Radner, ‘Men Will Die: Poets, Harpers, and Women in Early Irish Literature’, in A. T. E. Matonis and D. F. Melia (eds), *Celtic Language, Celtic Culture: A Festschrift for Eric P. Hamp* (Van Nuys, CA: Ford and Bailie, 1990), pp. 172-186.

⁹⁵² Radner, ‘Men Will Die: Poets, Harpers, and Women in Early Irish Literature’, p. 177.

⁹⁵³ Radner, ‘Men Will Die: Poets, Harpers, and Women in Early Irish Literature’, p. 177.

⁹⁵⁴ Radner, ‘Men Will Die: Poets, Harpers, and Women in Early Irish Literature’, p. 177.

⁹⁵⁵ Radner, ‘Men Will Die: Poets, Harpers, and Women in Early Irish Literature’, p. 180.

these and women. At times, Radner likens women to poetry and harpers in that they are ‘passionate, selfish and potentially immoderate, ultimately beyond the control of, and threatening to control, even a king’.⁹⁵⁶ The sustaining power of the mother coexists with the dangerous and destructive power of female sexuality.

Given Radner’s exposition, it is hardly surprising that women choose words as a powerful tool to manipulate action. The use of words as weapons seems to fit and work well for the women of the Irish tales. Two examples of this are: In the tale, ‘The Exile of the Sons of Uisnech’, Deirdre uses ridicule and shame to get Naisi to take her with him;⁹⁵⁷ and in a number of tales, the druidess, Leborchem is described as someone whom could not be refused because she was a female satirist,⁹⁵⁸ the implication being that to refuse her would result in her scathing words having a decidedly devastating effect on the transgressor.

When Aífe and Cú Chulainn are engaged in combat and Aífe is getting the upper hand it is Cú Chulainn who uses verbal deceit (by telling her that her horses and chariot are falling over a cliff). He distracts her long enough for him to take control.⁹⁵⁹ This might be considered a little unusual as the use of words as weapons is a feminine fighting technique. Dickson offers the following summation:

The fight between Aífe and Cú Chulainn begins with two armed, masculine warriors facing each other. In this battle, Aífe almost triumphs using masculine weapons, but she is defeated by a man who uses feminine as well as masculine weapons ... Only when she lets down her guard, and presumably her sword, is he able to overpower her, first turning her back into a woman through a symbolic rape by placing his weapon on her breast, and second through an actual rape when he forces her to conceive a child for him.⁹⁶⁰

⁹⁵⁶ Radner, ‘Men Will Die: Poets, Harpers, and Women in Early Irish Literature’, p. 183.

⁹⁵⁷ Cross and Slover, ‘The Exile of the Sons of Usnech’, p. 243.

⁹⁵⁸ Cross and Slover, ‘The Exile of the Sons of Usnech’, p. 242.

⁹⁵⁹ Cross and Slover, ‘The Wooing of Emer’, p. 162.

⁹⁶⁰ Dickson, ‘Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature’, p. 140.

According to Dickson, Cú Chulainn thus exerts his mastery over Aífe in both the realms in which men and women fight. He is a truly formidable warrior, offers Dickson, because he is prepared to use all possible weapons.⁹⁶¹

It does not, however, seem as convincing as Dickson suggests that Cú Chulainn has exerted his mastery in both realms over Aífe. It could be argued that Cú Chulainn has not proven himself in the masculine realm at all and instead (as Dickson herself notes) shifts to feminine weapons when it seems all hope of recovering control in the masculine realm is lost. Should Cú Chulainn not have utilised deceptive words to distract Aífe, he may well have been completely overcome at that point.

Macha, the woman who outruns the king's horses, utilises physical action as she engages in the race. Despite not being the instigator of her own entry into the contest, having reluctantly agreed to race, she is a participant, a contender, the one who challenges (the king's horses and the king's conception of his own superiority), and the ultimate winner. While Macha might engage in verbal conflict by way of the curse at the end of the tale, the wounding of the king's pride (and thus the beginning of the conflict) does in fact utilise direct/overt physical action.

The power of women's words is clear in the *Táin*.⁹⁶² At one critical point in the tale, Cú Chulainn, despite being very concerned about Medb's approaching troops, decides he must travel to Tara to keep a 'tryst' with a handmaiden. He is cautioned by both his father and his charioteer that this may not be wise, given the impending potential for conflict. Cú Chulainn insists he must go otherwise 'men's contracts will be falsified and women's words be verified'.⁹⁶³ This sits well with the assertions that Arabagian makes that, in the Irish sagas, women elicited an attitude of mingled hostility and awe.⁹⁶⁴ Upon finding that the hosts have indeed passed them while Cú Chulainn was on his tryst both Cú Chulainn, and especially his charioteer, Laeg, were greatly angered, though this hostility was directed more at the Men of Ireland rather than the handmaiden. Laeg is concerned more with the fact that he had told Cú Chulainn that it was not wise to go see the handmaiden and was frustrated that he had

⁹⁶¹ Dickson, 'Armed and Dangerous: The Virago in Early Irish Literature', pp. 140-1.

⁹⁶² O'Rahilly (ed.), *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 150.

⁹⁶³ O'Rahilly (ed.), *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 150.

⁹⁶⁴ Arabagian, cited in Sayers, 'Women's Work and Words', p. 76.

been proven correct and, for his part, Cú Chulainn is rather concerned that they had not performed their duty as the guardians of the border.⁹⁶⁵

They found the trail of the men of Ireland going past them from one district to another. ‘Alas, my friend Laeg,’ said Cú Chulainn, ‘would that we had not gone to our tryst with a woman last night. The least that one who is guarding a border can do is to give a warning cry or shout or alarm or tell who goes the road. We failed to announce it. The men of Ireland have gone past us into Ulster.’ ‘I foretold for you, Cú Chulainn,’ said Laeg, ‘that if you went to your tryst, such a disgrace would come upon you’.⁹⁶⁶

Cú Chulainn, for his part, does not enter further into the debate. Presumably he has said all he needed to earlier when he decided to keep his ‘appointment’ rather than not. Cú Chulainn, it seems, is more wary of the consequences of crossing the woman (and the verbal-based threats that would certainly ensue) than he is about the hosts entering further into Ulster territory. This speaks volumes as to the power, albeit indirect, of women’s words. Whether or not the handmaiden had conspired to keep Cú Chulainn from the front line is not known, but as a weapon the power of a woman’s threat, or even an implied threat, is clear. This passage, at the very least, reinforces the notion that women are, indeed, troublesome at best or destined to bring about ruin at worst. This is a particularly salient point in regard to combat or warfare of any kind.

In the tale, ‘The Death of Connla’, rather than being the promoter of action, inciting the encounter, the woman, Emer, becomes the ‘locus of meaning in the tale and the voice for its [the tale’s] powerful critique of the warrior ethic’.⁹⁶⁷ Emer tries to convince Cú Chulainn that, firstly, the boy is his son, Connla, and secondly, that *legally* it is not a good idea to kill him. Emer vigorously opposes her husband’s decision to engage the boy in combat and in this case the woman can be seen to use words to be nurturing and, according to Findon, embody ‘the maternal values that

⁹⁶⁵ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 152.

⁹⁶⁶ O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúalnge: From the Book of Leinster*, p. 152.

⁹⁶⁷ Joanne Findon, ‘A Woman’s Words: Emer Versus Cú Chulainn in *Aided Óenfir Aífe*’, in J. P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman (eds), *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Belfast and Emain Macha: December Publications, 1994), p. 139.

promote the stability and future survival of society'.⁹⁶⁸ This is in strong contrast to the women who use words to incite and stir up trouble, but the end (that is, the offering a platform for the consideration of change) may be the same. It could be considered that the strong women of the Irish tales find the most appropriate way of dealing with (or causing if necessary) conflict, dissent and strife.

For his part, Cú Chulainn is not swayed by what he sees as almost an infraction of the realm of deeds (a male preserve) by the words of a woman:

Then Cú Chulainn said, ‘Forbear woman! I do not request a woman’s prohibition regarding great deeds [and] prohibitions of brilliant splendour. Triumphant deeds are not performed through the feminine assistance of women’.⁹⁶⁹

Findon notes the irony in his words; Cú Chulainn has been trained as a supreme warrior with the use of an exclusive weapon (the *gae bolga* – which is incidentally the weapon to which he must resort to in order to kill Connla) by a woman, Scáthach. Connla is defeated, in a sense, because a woman, Scáthach, has never taught Connla about the *gae bolga*. As Findon points out, ‘despite his words, Cú Chulainn’s ability to defeat Connla is entirely due to “the feminine assistance of women”’.⁹⁷⁰

Findon points out that although Emer is unsuccessful in preventing Cú Chulainn from killing his own son, the tale evokes a powerful message about the (mis)place of honour and the warrior society in general. Readers, or indeed hearers, of the tale, intimates Findon, would most probably sympathise with the protective woman who tries to prevent the death of a young child at the hands of a father blinded by the male honour code. Emer takes on this role in the absence of Connla’s real mother, Aífe, and foster-mother, Scáthach, and she (Emer) functions as the voice of reason trying to prevent the foolish and wasteful death of Connla.

Emer’s words were clearly not considered substantial enough or persuasive enough, either in themselves or from the reputation of the speaker, for Cú Chulainn to heed.

⁹⁶⁸ Findon, ‘A Woman’s Words’, p. 139.

⁹⁶⁹ Findon, ‘A Woman’s Words’, p. 142.

⁹⁷⁰ Findon, ‘A Woman’s Words’, p. 142.

Yet the mere potential for the threat of verbal action was enough for Cú Chulainn to keep his tryst with the handmaiden on the Táin despite this meaning he had to disregard his martial (and honourable) duties to go and meet with this woman. Findon makes an important point about the pursuit of heroic goals at the expense of family and society in the tale. Emer, she suggests, presents a compassionate alternative to male violence as she argues against the ‘emotional and destructive obsession with honour’.⁹⁷¹

8.6 Conclusions

As established in Chapter Two, from the earliest recorded histories of the ancient world and the sport-like activity engaged therein, the practice of sport has been a celebration of male ability and achievement. Linked closely with war and combat training, sport-like activity necessarily (by virtue of the social and practical definitions of a warrior) excluded women. As shown in Chapter Two and elaborated on in Chapter Eight, there were several individual exceptions to that ‘rule’. Women such as Boadicea, Hapsethut and Joan of Arc are historical, though rather idealised examples of the virago type in the ancient and medieval worlds. The Ulster Cycle of tales, despite being partially a product of the highly ecclesiastical Middle Ages, presents a number of women who not only venture into the male ‘territory’ of war and combat but who do so rather successfully.

The significance of this aspect of the tales for sport historians is that the women portrayed, women like Scáthach and Aífe in particular, offer an alternate possibility for the conception and, ultimately, understanding of the place of women in the sporting realm of the ancient and medieval world. Though fictional, the study of the contribution of such women to martial training (and to the sport-like activity that forms a major part of that training) cannot be understated, particularly given the dearth of alternate understandings of the role and significance of women in sport-like activity in the ancient and medieval periods.

These women are by no means a shining example of equality and they certainly do not play a part in a depiction of a reversal of the traditional gender order. In fact, to

⁹⁷¹ Findon, ‘A Woman’s Words’, p. 148.

some degree, the women depicted in the tales are operating within that traditional gender order but are somehow able to gain a little more ‘space’, both real and conceptual, for action, influence and respect than their European counterparts.

Women’s roles in sport-like activity in the Ulster tales are necessarily limited by the restrictions of their very existence as women. Despite this ‘limitation’ some women are characterised by their strong and competent behaviour (both emotionally and physically) and are able to play an important, even critical, role in the transfer of physical, martial knowledge as well as in other sport-like activity.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion: History, Philosophy, Sport and the Ulster Cycle

The scholarly study of sport in the ancient world is as old and enduring as the sub-discipline of sport history itself. Fascinated by the insights that historical research had to offer, historians and sport historians initially examined ancient civilisations in the hope of finding the genesis of modern sport and adding to an understanding of sport, games and recreations in the distant past. It is the contention of this thesis that much of the investigation of sport in the ancient world has been informed by two prominent traditions. These are, firstly, the penchant of sport historians for seeking knowledge related to the ancient Greeks and Romans, and, secondly, the privileging of archaeology and certain documents which, in the opinion of historians of the modernist tradition, offer *facts* and *truths* about ancient sport and games.

The above two traditions have led to a number of deficiencies related to the study of sport in antiquity. Firstly, less emphasis and value has been placed on other potentially rich sources of information and understanding. In this context, one avenue of inquiry related to an understanding of ancient sport that has been under-utilised is the contribution of myth and early narrative. While some historical research related to myth and narrative is evident in the body of knowledge that currently comprises ancient sport history, an extensive examination of the Irish tales in terms of its contribution has hitherto not been produced. The Ulster Cycle tales are part of a tradition of Irish narrative which stretches back to the early Middle Ages and beyond and it is the contention of this thesis that valuable information related to ancient sport history can be gained from an investigation of these tales. In light of this deficiency, this dissertation has therefore set out to provide an examination of the early Irish Ulster tales based on documents which have hitherto been ignored or marginalised by sport historians. It is the analysis of these stories which offers both supplementary and complementary interpretations of ancient sport.

Secondly, despite suggestion to the contrary, sport historians have continued to produce and promote increasingly thorough and valuable understandings of sport in ancient Greece and Rome while continuing to marginalise the sporting activities of other ancient societies. This second point is, of course, linked to the first, in that the

reliance on certain types of ‘evidence’ in the pursuit of ‘facts’ has led to an emphasis on ancient civilisations for which there is an abundance (comparatively at least) of archaeological sources and supporting documentation.

In the light of the deficiencies outlined above, this concluding section draws together the evidence and arguments surrounding the sport-like activity of the Ulster tales as discussed in previous chapters. In short, the principal focus of this thesis is the capacity of the Ulster Cycle tales to contribute to an understanding of ancient sport history. In this sense, this thesis makes a unique contribution to the scholarly study of sport history by merging two as yet unconnected areas. In this thesis, the reader has been asked to conceive of the Irish tales as *a history*, specifically as *a sport history*. The examination of the tales was never intended to provide insight into *the* history of sport and games in pre-Christian Ireland. Instead, this thesis offers these tales as potentially useful understandings of sport-like activity in the ancient world. Specifically, this thesis articulates three key aspects, namely, the frequency and significance of sport-like activity in the Ulster tales, the role of sport and games in the making of a Celtic ‘hero’, and the impact of women on the physical development of the hero.

The introductory chapters provided the grounding for an investigation of a number of themes related to the role and significance of sport-like activities in the tales. Chapter One introduced the Ulster Cycle and located this corpus of work both geographically and historically and indicated the methodological pathway that was to be employed in the examination of the tales. Additionally, Chapter One outlined the basic tenets of the postmodern understanding of history espoused in this thesis and, importantly, working definitions of essential terms, the most critical of which is the definition of ‘sport-like activity’ which, necessarily, was broad and encompassing.

Chapter Two reviewed the academic study of two important bodies of knowledge, namely, the academic study of sport in ancient societies and the scholarly literature surrounding the Ulster Cycle tales, while Chapter Three expanded on the notions of ‘truth’ and ‘historical truth’ and the application of these notions by historians, sport historians and academics studying the early Irish tales. While contributing little to the

examination of the Ulster tales *per se*, Chapter Three established the philosophical foundations for that examination in the remaining chapters.

Chapter Four addressed the role of sport-like activity in the development of the Celtic ‘hero’. The first section examined the role of the ‘hero’ in myth and legend. This was then followed by an analysis of the hero Cú Chulainn as the principal warrior and defender of the province of Ulster. Special attention was paid to the personal attributes and capabilities of the hero and the connection between these and physical dexterity and supremacy. The limitations of rules, boundaries and personal taboos were also discussed as was the physicality of the death of Cú Chulainn.

Chapter Five saw an examination of the Ulster tales with regard to the sport, games and martial training activities that are mentioned therein. Various types of activities, grouped according to the functions of the activity, were discussed as well as the rules, tactics and ethos that surround each. Chapter Five evaluated the close relationship between sport-like activity and early martial training.

Chapter Six examined the nature of armed combat in the Ulster tales, particularly single combat, a highly ritualistic and rule-governed form of martial engagement. This chapter discussed the related concept of *fír fer* ('fair play') which was shown to govern the warriors in their martial encounters. Chapter Six also investigated the use of toys and weapons in the Ulster tales, and paid particular attention to the nature and significance of the use and transition of such in and between the play setting of games and pastimes and the more serious arenas of organised martial learning, self-protection and combat.

Chapter Seven explored the importance of physical ability in the form of supreme sporting and martial skill as it impacts upon social standing and status in the Ulster tales. This chapter began with an elucidation of the connection between sport and social status in early Irish society and in the ancient world in general. The various venues utilised for the display of physical prowess and expertise were examined and this was followed by an analysis of the most common sport-like activities which contributed to social status.

Chapter Eight examined the contribution and participation of women to the sport, games, martial training and physical activity of the Irish Ulster tales. The specific issue of women and their role as teachers, indeed experts, in the physical training of heroes in the Irish tales was investigated. Chapter Eight also explored the nature and significance of women's 'combat' and use of weapons by women in the tales. A deconstruction of the descriptions of women's roles in sport and games in the Ulster Cycle tales exposed those groups or individuals who were empowered by the descriptions in the tales and those who were marginalised. It was revealed that Aífe and Scáthach, for instance, were marginalised, by being sexually exploited, in a context which involves sport-like activity. This occurred despite these women holding positions of great influence and being respected as knowledgeable and capable in terms of combat skills and the teaching of martial feats. This kind of marginalisation through sexual means occurs as a direct result of these characters being women.

Several important conclusions can be drawn from the information presented in this thesis. One of the most important is that the Ulster tales provide numerous and salient examples of sport-like activity in an ancient world context. Sport-like activity and martial training were shown to be intimately connected in the Ulster tales and the warrior hero relied on sport-like activity to define him. It has been shown, for instance, that duelling, as in single combat, includes a play-element in that it is a highly ritualistic and rule-governed activity. In the Ulster tales the ritual use of martial feats in a display of superiority prior to the onset of battle proper is an example of this play element.

Another significant aspect is that the conduct of combat, and in particular single combat, in the tales shows evidence of a fledgling sport ethic. Additionally, it was determined that, in the tales, various sport-like activities contribute to the social status of the warrior class. Social status for the heroes of the Ulster tales is determined in part by physical prowess in sport-like activity. As youths, this status is produced via the display of skill in games and sports such as hurley, wrestling and in the precise use of weapons such as in the stripping game. In adult warriors, social status is determined and/or maintained by the display of expertise in the social and martial arenas of the assembly, the king's hall and the chariot in motion. These activities

include racing activities (in particular the possession of swift horses), hunting and capturing live prey, the playing of board games, the use of physical challenges and the display of feats.

The tales include several references to the warrior ‘camps’ that function as physical education facilities in which warrior heroes complete their martial education. Moreover, it was determined that it was primarily women who were responsible for the expert teaching of martial feats and combat skills of the warrior heroes undertaking the final stages of their martial education. Finally, both weapons and sporting equipment were shown to transition from the realm of games and sport to that of combat and vice versa. Most implements of sport and war in the tales occupy a situational relevance and can be seen to transition as circumstance and availabilities change.

This study employed the philosophical underpinning of postmodernism to assist in the formation of additional understandings of sport in the Ulster tales. Moreover, the importance of this thesis lies in the possibility, offered by postmodern understandings of the past, of developing new and enlightened paradigms of sport. This examination of the Ulster tales can be seen to shed light on previously unexplored aspects of sport-like activity in the ancient world. The identification of the Ulster tales as a valuable source of information has provided illumination of the function and importance of sport and its role and significance in the society depicted in the tales. The understanding provided by this analysis may, in turn, encourage an increasing variety of sources and possibilities for the scholarly study of ancient sport.

However, this research, necessarily, can only so far in addressing some of the deficiencies emanating from the understandings of truth and the role of history as articulated by a modernist view. Certainly, there is more that can and should be explored. For instance, the Ulster Cycle of tales is but one branch of early Irish literature and it may be fruitful to examine other cycles, particularly the Finn (or Fenian) Cycle, which may elicit equally valuable understandings of sport-like activity in the past. Additionally, further study of the nature, significance and development of ethical behaviour in sport-like activity in and through the ancient and medieval worlds could be more fully understood by way of a more thorough cross-cultural examination

of the early practices of war and martial training as is evidenced by the early Irish notion of *fír fer* ('fair play'). Finally, it is through the continued inclusion and examination of potentially valuable, yet untapped, sources such as myth and fiction which may continue to provide a means of formulating new, and potentially empowering, understandings of the contribution of women to sport-like activity in the ancient world.

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Appendix One

List of Principal Characters in the Ulster Cycle

Aífe: A warrior woman with whom Cú Chulainn learns martial skills. She also bears Cú Chulainn's son.

Ailill: King of Connacht and husband of Queen Medb

Bricriu: A trouble-maker who incites his guests in the tale 'Bricriu's Feast'.

Cathbad: A druid and advisor to king Conchobar

Conchobar Mac Nessa (Conor Mac Nessa): King of Ulster in the time of the Ulster cycle

Connla: Cú Chulainn's son who is killed at an early age by his father

Crunnchu: Husband of Macha. His transgressions result in his heavily pregnant wife being forced to race against the kings chariot team.

Cú Chulainn [formerly Sétanta] (Cuchulainn, Cu Chulaind): A principal character in the Ulster tales, Cú Chulainn is the epitome of the warrior-hero.

Cu Roi: A shape-shifting sorcerer who appears as a giant and participates in the 'beheading contest' in the tale 'Bricriu's Feast'.

Dechtire (Dechtine): King Conchobar's sister and also his charioteer. She is also the mother of Cú Chulainn

Domnall: A warrior whom Cú Chulainn visits to gain martial skills.

Dordmir (Dordmair/ Dornolla): The daughter of Donmall and a woman skilled in martial arts. She and her father taught Cú Chulainn martial arts.

Emer: Wife of Cú Chulainn

Fann (Fand): Cú Chulainn's lover in the fairy world

Fedelm (Fedelma, Fidelma): A prophetess to the King Ailill and Queen Medb in the *Táin*.

Ferdiad (Fer Diad, Ferdia): Cú Chulainn's foster brother and friend. Ferdiad and Cú Chulainn engage in single combat in the *Táin*. Cú Chulainn finally kills Ferdiad using his *gae bolga* (a barbed spear).

Fergus Mac Roich: A one time ulster king, Fergus was once a tutor of Cú Chulainn, but he is exiled by Ulster and fights with the Connachta in the *Táin*. Fergus is the narrator of the 'Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn' section and is credited with revealing the story of the *Táin* to the poet Senchan.

Finnabair: Medb and Ailill's daughter

Forgall (Forgall the Wily): Emer's father. Forgall makes attempts to keep Emer from marrying Cú Chulainn.

Laeg Mac Riangabra (Loeg): Cú Chulainn's charioteer and confidant.

Loegaire (Loegaire the Victorious, Laoghaire): A warrior-hero of Ulster.

Lug (Lugh): The immortal father of Cú Chulainn.

Macha: Wife of Crunnchu. Macha is forced to race the king's chariot team while heavily pregnant to save the life of her husband. She places a curse on the Ulstermen which hampers them in battle.

Medb: Queen of Connacht. Medb leads the Connacht army in the *Táin* on a mission to steal the brown bull of Cooley. She is Ulster's principal adversary in the *Táin*.

Scáthach: Warrior woman with whom Cú Chulainn stays and learns martial skills including the use of his famed weapon, the *gae bolga*.

Appendix Two

Summary of Principal Tales of the Ulster Cycle

Translations of the following tales were consulted during the writing of this thesis. Several of the more used tales are summarised here by the author, although brief summaries are also included in the body of the text. The items in bold are summarised below.

List of Tales Used in the Thesis

Aided Áenfir Aífe [The Death of Connla; The Death of Aífe's One Son; The Death of Aífe's Only Son]

Aided Chonchobuir [The Death of Conchobar]

Brislech Mór Maigfe Muirtheimne (Aided ChonChulainn) [Cú Chulainn's Death; The Great Defeat on the Plain of Muirthemne before Cú Chulainn's Death]

Ces Noínden [The Pangs of Ulster; The Labour Pains of the Uliad and the Twins of Macha; The Debility of the Uliad]

Compert ConCulainn [The Birth of Cú Chulainn; How Cú Chulainn was Begotten]

Fled Bricrenn [Bricriu's Feast]

Foglaim ConCulainn [The Training of Cú Chulainn]

Longes mac n-Uislenn [The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu; The Exile of the Sons of Usnech]

Macgnímrada [The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn]

Mesca Ulad [The Intoxication of the Uliad]

Scéla Mucce Maic Dathó [The Story of Mac Dathó's Pig; The Tale of Macc Da Thó's Pig]

Serglige Con Culainn [The Sick-bed of Cú Chulainn and the Only Jealousy of Emer; The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn and the Only Jealousy of Emer]

Táin Bo Cúailnge [The Cattle Raid of Cooley]

Táin Bó Fraích [The Cattle Raid of Fróech]

Tochmarc Emire [The Wooing of Emer]

Summary of Principal Tales of the Ulster Cycle

Aided Áenfir Aífe [The Death of Connla; The Death of Aífe's One Son; The Death of Aífe's Only Son]

Cú Chulainn, having impregnated Aífe, departs to Ireland but he instructs her that the child be sent to him when a ring he leaves for the child fits his finger. Before he goes, Cú Chulainn names three taboos on the child: he should give way to no one man; give his name to no one man; and he should not refuse single combat. When the boy, Connla, arrives on the Irish shore, several Ulster warriors go down one at a time to meet him but, in accordance with his taboo, he refuses to give his name to any of them. He fights with and defeats three Ulster warriors and then it is Cú Chulainn's turn to face the boy. Emer tells her husband that the boy is his own son, and that he should not fight against him. Her words go unheeded and Cú Chulainn does fight. Connla almost manages to overcome his father, but Cú Chulainn resorts to the *gabe bolga*, the weapon given to him by Scáthach, and kills his son.

Brislech Mór Maigfe Muirtheimne (Aided ChonChulainn) [Cú Chulainn's Death; The Great Defeat on the Plain of Muirthemne before Cú Chulainn's Death]

The day of Cú Chulainn's death is full of inauspicious omens. Cú Chulainn is forced into the situation where he must break one of his taboos when three old crones greet him on the road and offer to share with him a dog they are cooking. This offer requires that he either break his taboo that he not refuse hospitality or his taboo that he not eat dog meat. Later, on the battlefield, satirists ask Cú Chulainn for his spear which he throws to them. The satirists say that the spear will kill a king and the spear is thrown back to him. Three times the spear is recast: the first time the spear kills Laeg, the king of charioteers; the second cast kills the Grey of Macha, king of horses, and the final throw kills Cú Chulainn himself. Mortally wounded, Cú Chulainn asks permission to go and wash himself. He returns and ties himself to a pillar so he will die standing up.

Ces Noínden [The Pangs of Ulster; The Labour Pains of the Uliad and the Twins of Macha; The Debility of the Uliad]

Crunnchu was a wealthy land and cattle owner who lived as a widower with his four sons in the Ulster highlands. One night a strange woman appeared and came into the house, treating it as her own and Crunnchu and the boys as if they were her family. Her name was Macha and she was an Otherworldly figure. After a time there was an assembly held for all Ulsterman and Crunnchu decided he would go. Against his heavily pregnant wife's wishes, Crunnchu attended. Despite being warned to keep quiet about her, brags that his wife can outrun the king's horses. Conchobar, demands that she be brought to the assembly to prove her husband right. Although she pleads that is her time to deliver, Conchobar is adamant; she must race or he will kill her husband. She crosses the finish line just ahead of Conchobar's horses, delivers twins and with her dying breath she curses the men of Ulster. In their time of greatest need

(when being attacked) they will be as weak as women in childbirth and share the same pains. This curse will be fulfilled for nine generations.

Fled Bricrenn [Bricriu's Feast]

Bricriu, a notorious troublemaker, invites the people of Ulster to a feast. Bricriu sets the women of Ulster against one another by saying that each of them should have precedence over the others, then he sets three warriors in contention for the Champion's Portion. Conchobar is unable to resolve the dispute so the warriors go to Ailill who is also unable to decide. Medb tests the warriors and relies on her knowledge of them to make a judgement. Later, the three warriors go to Cu Roi who challenges each to a beheading contest. Each warrior is allowed to strike at Cu Roi once with his axe, but then is required to return for a similar stroke from Cu Roi. Only Cú Chulainn has the courage to place his neck on the block.

Foglaim ConCulainn [The Training of Cú Chulainn]

The tale begins with Cú Chulainn embarking on a journey 'to get his training' with Leogaire the Victorious and Conall the Triumphant. At the first stop, the expert teacher, Dordmir, only allows Cú Chulainn to train with her so his companions return to Ireland. Cú Chulainn stays at the Dordmir's camp for a year. He is then informed of an even better teacher, Scáthach. He leaves the first camp and travels to Scáthach's camp. After proving his worth Cú Chulainn is permitted to stay at the camp. After surviving an attack from the Scáthach's warriors, killing one of her sons in single combat and sharing a night with her daughter, Cú Chulainn then uses knowledge gained from the daughter to force Scáthach into training him. He stays with Scáthach for a year then travels to visit the warrior woman Aífe, who suggests that Cú Chulainn needs to stay and complete the final aspects of his training with her. Again, Cú Chulainn stays a year. By the time Cú Chulainn is ready to leave, Aífe informs him that she is pregnant to him. Cú Chulainn leaves Aífe's stronghold and on the way back to Scáthach's camp he meets a hag. She asks him to move out of the way on the narrow pass but when he did she attacks him and Cú Chulainn kills her.

After returning to Scáthach's camp Cú Chulainn finds several Irish warriors including Ferdiad, so Cú Chulainn stays for another year at Scáthach's camp, learning along side them. At the end of a year they all leave but not before Scáthach binds them all in honour and friendship. They pay their fees and leave. The warriors reach a kingdom run by Aed the Red. They decide to ask for lodgings and Cú Chulainn goes off alone to secure some live birds while the others go to find Aed. While on his own, Cú Chulainn comes across 200 men and women weeping over the imminent departure of the king's first born child (a beautiful damsel) as a part of a tribute to the tribe of the Fomorians. Three men arrive to take their 'tribute' and on seeing Cú Chulainn they think he is part of the tribute. Cú Chulainn defeats the Fomorians and frees the damsel.

Macgnímrada [The Boyhood Deeds of Cú Chulainn]

Cú Chulainn, at the age of five, hears of the boy-corps and decides to visit Emain Macha to join. Despite his mother's protestations, the lad asked for directions and set out alone for Emain Macha. Upon reaching Emain Macha Cú Chulainn encounters the 150 boys of the boy-corps hurling and practicing martial exercises. Cú Chulainn joins the boys and but set upon as an outsider. Cú Chulainn runs to where the king is playing fidchell. The king stops Cú Chulainn and informs him that he needs to secure protection from the corps. Cú Chulainn does and he then joins the boy-corps.

The next five episodes are unique to Recension I and they see Cú Chulainn, firstly, unable to sleep for want of a pillar stone at head and feet. The bedding arrangement is altered at his request. Secondly, a man attempts to waken Cú Chulainn but Cú Chulainn dashes his brains out. In the third episode, Cú Chulainn is playing with the boy-corps and he accidentally kills 50 of them. Cú Chulainn runs to the king's bedchamber and Fergus makes peace between him and the corps. The fourth LU episode sees Cú Chulainn go out after a fight between the Ulstermen and Egon Mac Durthacht because he hears King Conchobar's groans. Cú Chulainn encounters Fergus, then an otherwordly being whom he wrestles, and finally comes across Conchobar. He retrieves some pig meat for Conchobar which helps him recover and Cú Chulainn carries him back to Emain Macha. The final LU episode not found in the LL version is where the Ulstermen are in the grips of their pangs and 27 marauders attack Emain Macha. The boy-corps comes to help but all are scared away except Cú Chulainn who kills nine of the men and scares away the rest.

The next and subsequent episodes of the tale are the same for LU and LL. Cú Chulainn is invited to attend a feast with the Ulster nobility at Culann, the Smith's residence. Cú Chulainn is busy on the playing fields and decides to follow along afterwards. Forgetting that Cú Chulainn is to follow, the king tells Culann to go ahead and release his guard dog. The boy arrives and is confronted by the vicious dog. The king remembers that Cú Chulainn is due to arrive and they are all sure that the boy has been killed by the dog but they underestimate Cú Chulainn. The boy kills the dog using a hurley ball (or using his bare hands in another version of the tale). The episode ends with an explanation of the relevance of Cú Chulainn's name 'Hound of Culann' as Cú Chulainn takes up the role of guard dog for Culann until a worthy pup can be appropriately trained.

The final episode is Cú Chulainn's taking up of arms. Cú Chulainn overhears the druid Cathbad telling some boys that it was an auspicious days for someone to take up arms. Cú Chulainn deceives the king by telling him that Cathbad told him specifically that he should take up arms. King Conchobar helps the boy by giving him weapons and Cú Chulainn sets out to the border to seek combat. He finds and defeats the three sons of Nechta and starts to make his way back to Emain Macha. On his approach it is noticed that Cú Chulainn is overcome with 'battle rage' and a strategy is quickly devised where, as a diversion, a number of women bare their breasts at him. This gesture embarrasses Cú Chulainn so much that he turns his head away long enough for him to be seized and dunked into vats of water until his battle rage subsides. Cú Chulainn then takes up his place in the court at the king's feet.

***Serglige Con Culainn* [The Sick-bed of Cú Chulainn and the Only Jealousy of Emer; The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn and the Only Jealousy of Emer]**

At the beginning of the tale Cú Chulainn has an encounter with two women from the Otherworld who beat him with a horsewhip. After this beating he lies in an enchanted trance for a year. When Cú Chulainn finally recovers enough to return to the scene of the fateful visitation, he encounters a woman named Lí Ban, who tells him that her sister Fann has fallen in love with him. Fann will sleep with him if he travels to the Otherworld to help Lí Ban's husband fight against his enemies. Eventually Cú Chulainn does travel to the Otherworld, where he apparently defeats the enemy and then spends a month with Fann. He returns having arranged a tryst with Fann. Learning of the tryst, his wife Emer arrives at the trysting place with 50 well-armed female companions to challenge Fann. Emer confronts first her husband and then her rival. She and Fann debate which of them should be with man they both love. Fann finally decides to leave Cú Chulainn to Emer and she departs. Cú Chulainn goes mad with grief at Fann's departure. Emer enlists the support of a druid who supplies a potion of forgetfulness which they both take.

The Táin Bo Cúailnge (The Cattle Raid of Cooley)

Traditionally, there have been identified three recensions of the Táin Bo Cúailnge. According to Cecile O'Rahilly's introduction to her Recension II translation, these are:

Recension I is commonly known as the LU Version, as the *Lebor na hUidre* (LU) contains the oldest manuscript that contains part of it. Recension I is also contained in two other manuscripts, Egerton 1782 (W) and the Yellow Book of Lecan (YBL). None of these three manuscripts offers a complete text nor are any copied from another. The inconsistencies of these and the contradictions therein, are attributed to the conflation of two or more earlier versions.

Recension II is the version contained in the Book of Leinster (LL). This text is complete except for the loss of one page. According to O'Rahilly, it is a carefully unified narrative with no references made to other versions, no contradictions and in this recension alone there is the 'pre-tale' giving the reason for Medb's 'foray' in Ulster.

Recension III is contained in fragment form in two late manuscripts, Egerton 93 and H2.17. This recension agrees in many places with Recension II especially in those areas where Recension I and II differ. Recension III also contains passages which agree with Recension I. Additionally, it offers some material which is not contained in any other recension.

Synopsis of the Tale Táin Bo Cúailnge

Queen Medb of Connacht decides to raid Ulster to capture the Donn Cúalnge, the great bull of Ulster. The story begins with Medb and Ailill in bed together arguing about who has greater wealth and status in their marriage. They find that their

possessions are equal except that Ailill has a bull for which Medb has no equal. Medb tries first to borrow the Donn Cúalnge, but when she does not succeed she decides to take him by force. She and Ailill ready their armies and, joined by Fergus, an exile of Ulster, begin a great cattle raid. When Medb invades, the curse of Macha is activated and the men of Ulster are unable to fight. Cú Chulainn, whose unusual parentage renders him immune to the curse, must defend Ulster. Cú Chulainn holds off Medb's armies, killing many warriors in single combat and in groups, until the Ulstermen are finally able to rally. After the final battle, Medb and Ailill retreat, sending the bull that she has captured on ahead of her. Once the Donn Cúalnge arrives in Connacht, his bellows attract Ailill's bull, Finnebennach. The two bulls fight, ultimately killing each other.

For an extremely thorough account of the different recensions, versions, interpolators, and the connections between these, see the introduction to Cecile O'Rahilly's 1967 translation of the Book of Leinster version of *Táin Bo Cúailnge*.

Tochmarc Emire [The Wooing of Emer]

In this tale Cú Chulainn, although still a youth, finds himself 'wooing' Emer, who eventually becomes his wife. The men of Ulster have realised he is so beautiful that there is a chance that the wives and daughters of the Ulstermen will be seduced by him. Cú Chulainn goes to Emer but before she will have him as her husband she sets him several physical challenges, including slaying hundreds of men and staying awake for a year. In the meantime, Forgall, Emer's father, who is against the marriage, visits Cú Chulainn disguised as a foreign dignitary. Forgall convinces Cú Chulainn to travel abroad to better his warrior skills hoping that Cú Chulainn will be killed while he's away. So Cú Chulainn journeys abroad to visit the best warrior camps in the world. He says at two such camps. At both camps Cú Chulainn honed his warrior skills under the tutelage of expert teachers. At one camp Cú Chulainn even fathers a son to a neighbouring warrior woman. The child, Connla, features in another tale, 'The tragic death of Connla'. Cú Chulainn, after returning to Ireland, sets about achieving the challenges set by Emer. They are married and according to this story they were not separated until they die.