

## Whose Cú Chulainn?



This is a mural from a Nationalist area of Belfast, linking Cú Chulainn (on the right) with the present-day IRA and the 1916 Easter Rising.

The Celtic cross in the centre has the caption 'A tribute to the heroes of 1916'.

The 1916 Rising was a rebellion in Dublin by Republicans who wanted Ireland to be independent from the British Empire.



This is a mural from a Unionist area of Belfast linking Cú Chulainn (in the centre) with the loyalist (extreme Unionist) paramilitary organisation the Ulster Defence Association (UDA).

To the left there is a Bible. The shield has the Red Hand of Ulster on it.

To the right is the badge of the UDA. Cú Chulainn is shown in this mural sheltering the paramilitary.

# How can both sides use Cú Chulainn to bolster their claims to legitimacy?

See next page for a fuller note on Cú Chulainn

## Loyalists

Cú Chulainn becomes admired and a symbol because of his self-sacrifice. He died on his feet defending Ulster against overwhelming numbers.

The Ulster connection explains why Cú Chulainn should become a patron of Ulster Protestant paramilitaries. They see themselves as defending Ulster (or rather Northern Ireland) against the claims of the rest of Ireland (including Connaught).

## Republicans

It is, however, the idea of heroic self-sacrifice that explains why Cú Chulainn has become a symbol for Irish nationalists.

A famous sculpture was commissioned to commemorate the 1916 Easter Rising - the symbol of sacrifice. The statue depicts the legendary hero of ancient Ireland bravely meeting his death, having tied himself to a stone pillar to fight his foes to the last. It stands in the GPO in Dublin, symbolising the sacrifices made during the Easter rising, when the GPO served as the rebel headquarters. In this best known and most artistic of all 1916 monuments, Christian ideas, legend and revolutionary nationalism come together.



'The Death of Cú Chulainn'  
Bronze by Oliver Sheppard

The statue was chosen as the centre-piece of elaborate military ceremonies marking the twentieth anniversary of the Rising in 1936. Its image was to be endlessly reproduced in small versions of the work, and transferred to coin and stamp designs.

## Suitability of Cú Chulainn to commemorate the 1916 Rising

There was some criticism of the suitability of the subject by veterans of 1916. The republican journal *United Ireland* pointed out that there was a certain ambiguity in choosing the legendary defender of Ulster as a symbol of nationalist ideology.

However, it was deemed to be the most suitable symbol of the event, partly because Patrick Pearse perceived the Cú Chulainn legend as embodying 'a true type of Gaelic nationality, full as it is of youthful life and vigour and hope'. The religious feeling invoked by its similarity to the *Pieta* theme in the pose of the figure also coincided with Pearse's own ideology which fused Christian ideals with revolutionary nationalism.

# Who was Cú Chulainn?

Cú Chulainn is the supreme youthful hero of a series of stories that make up the Ulster Cycle of Irish myths. This cycle recounts the wars between Ulster and Connaught.

The best known stories in the Ulster Cycle belong to a group known as the 'Cattle Raid of Cooley'. The title may be humdrum but it is very important. It reflects the value put on cattle as spoils of war by the Celtic warrior-aristocracy. Moreover, the bulls in this story are no ordinary bulls.

Cú Chulainn becomes a hero because he is the only warrior in Ulster capable of resisting the ambitions of Queen Maeve of Connaught. He died nobly defending Ulster against overwhelming odds.

## Queen Maeve

It begins one night with Queen Maeve of Connaught lying in bed with her husband Ailill. Comparing their possessions, they find they are well-matched - except that Ailill has a huge white bull, the Findbennach. Maeve, a woman of enormous ambition and sexual appetite, cannot bear to be Ailill's inferior in any respect, and arranges to acquire the only comparable animal, the Donn or Brown Bull of Ulster, offering the owner a large reward which includes her own favours. But when Maeve's men arrive to collect the bull, they are overheard boasting noisily that they would have carried off the bull whether or not the owner agreed. Furious, he hides the Donn away instead of handing it over.

## Invasion of Ulster

Maeve's response is to invade Ulster. Its warriors cannot resist the Connaught men, since they have been smitten with weakness as the result of a curse (another story in which boasting - the warrior's vice - has fatal results). Only one man is exempt, but he is Cú Chulainn, a mighty warrior capable of taking on Maeve's entire army.

## Cú Chulainn & his name ('Hound of Culann')

Cú Chulainn's past has fitted him for this supreme test. Even as a child he was a prodigy of strength. Originally named Setanta, he set out for the court of King Conchobar, who is variously said to have been his uncle and his foster-father. On his way Setanta fought off a force of 150 young warriors who served Conchobar. At the court, as an intruder, he was attacked by a ferocious guard-dog belonging to the smith Culann, which he killed by flinging his hurling ball down the creature's throat. When Culann asked woefully who would guard him from then onwards, Setanta promised that he would do it; and so he became Cú Chulainn, 'the Hound of Culann'.

## His destiny

Later, still a child, he chose his own destiny. Hearing a prophecy that a boy who took up arms on a certain day would become famous but would not live long, Cú Chulainn asked Conchobar for weapons. After breaking fifteen sets of arms, he took up specially made arms that had been intended for the king himself, and then went out and slew a band of Conchobar's most dangerous enemies.

Many tales are told of Cú Chulainn. Like Odysseus and Aeneas, he even ventures into the Otherworld. But unlike the classical heroes, he is more than human:

- seven fingered, and with seven pupils in each eye and a brow from which shines forth a 'hero fight';
- able to turn round inside his own skin; and
- hideously transformed and blood-crazed in battle; and, for good measure, armed with a variety of magic weapons.

## A doomed hero

Evidently Cú Chulainn is invincible; but, as a hero, he is also doomed.

In the war between Connaught and Ulster, Cú Chulainn slays huge numbers of Maeve's followers, and the queen is only able to destroy him by a resort to magic. She does this by arranging encounters in which he cannot avoid violating certain binding personal taboos; like many other mythical heroes, he is innocently selfdoomed. A series of evil portents occur as he prepares for battle, and finally he meets the Washer at the Ford, a death-goddess in the form of a long-lamenting maiden. Her cleansing of a hero's arms and armour in a stream presages his death in battle.

## His death

Nevertheless, Cú Chulainn again defends the kingdom of Ulster against the hosts of Connaught. Wounded, he ties himself to a stone pillar so that he may die on his feet. Only when his hero-light fades and the death-crow descends

and perches on his shoulder are the men of Connaught confident enough to advance and cut off his head.

### **Ending the conflict between Ulster & Connaught**

The story of the great bulls takes a curious turn which ends the conflict between the Irish kingdoms. Having seized the Brown Bull of Ulster, Maeve sends it into Connaught, and on entering its new territory it lets out a great roar. Believing itself challenged, the white bull begins an epic fight that rages all round Ireland. Finally the Donn is victorious, scattering pieces of his mangled rival in every direction but the effort has been too much for him, and he dies of exhaustion.

### **Cú Chulainn a hero for Nationalists & Unionists**

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