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Introduction

The *Tàin Bo Cuailgne* (in English *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*) is the principle narrative of roughly 80 tales that make up the Ulster or Red Branch Cycle of Stories of Old Irish Literature. These tales were originally performed orally and feature the combination of prose, narrative, and song that is typical of bardic cultures. They recount life in Ulaid—present-day Eastern Ulster, Northern Ireland—during the rein of King Conchobar Mac Nessa. *Tàin Bo Cuailgne*, by virtue of its status as the national epic of Ireland, retains its prestige as one of the few pagan, orally transmitted stories to be fully integrated in a European literary and cultural canon. The initial translation of the story occurred around the 5th century with the arrival of Saint Patrick onto Irish shores, when St Patrick’s monks set the original Gaelic performance-narrative in writing for the first time. The reasoning behind the *Tàin*’s initial translation was simple: the Monks considered it a form of simple, harmless entertainment. However, in the late 1880s, the story took on political undertones.

Ultimately, all translations of *Tàin Bo Cuailgne* are based on two texts that appeared fifty years apart and remain the earliest manifestations of the story in manuscript form: the *Lebor na hUidre* and the *Book of Leinster* (Tymockzko, 1999). Translations of the *Tàin* can no longer be based on these sources because both are written in Early Gaelic, a mixture of Old and Middle Gaelic that is largely inaccessible, even to modern Gaelic speakers, because it was not actively taught or promoted during the time of the Celtic Revival, when the majority of *Tàin* translations were taking place. The British Crown wanted to quash Ireland’s desire to articulate and assert a distinct cultural identity, not reinforce it. Moreover, prior to the era of the Celtic Revival, Ireland’s Great Famine and its resulting mass migrations and extreme rate of mortality decimated the number of native Gaelic speakers in Ireland. As a result, the only available “source texts” of the *Tàin*, since the nineteenth century, have been translations. Among the various translations of the *Tàin* in the modern era, roughly ten, dating from roughly the 1870s up to the 1970s, are noteworthy.

There is a political neutrality in the original *Tàin* texts. Due to its indigenous origins, this body of literature already belongs to ‘all of the Irish’ without mediation or specification as to what ‘kind’ of

Irish: Southern, Northern, Unionist, or Nationalist. The Irish Story Cycles and their characters are accepted as an integral part of Ireland's national culture and its literary canon. However, if the Celtic Revivalists are to credit for the propagation and popularization of these tales in Ireland and, to a large extent, in "foreign" literary and cultural contexts, it must also be acknowledged that they had a very specific agenda, in light of which the *Tàin* texts become difficult to separate from other works used as tools for Irish emancipation.

Summary of *Tàin Bo Cuailgne*

The *Tàin Bo Cuailgne* is typical of literature of its time. It features charioted sword fights complete with decapitated heads as trophies, boasting and debauchery at feasts, witty riddles to gain passage, wealth delineated by cattle and gold, and advisement from druids, sorcerers, or other mystical folk. Considered the oldest vernacular tale in Western Europe, the *Tàin Bo Cuailgne* recounts Gaelic Hero Cuchulàin and his fellow Ulstermen's fight against Queen Maeve of Connacht, who persuades her husband Ailill to help her steal Ulster's sacred, prized brown bull Don Cuailgne so that she may claim to have the finest herd of cattle in all of Ireland. Aillil complies with his wife's wishes, and they ready their army for the attack, enlisting on the way the aid of the War Goddess Macha. Whilst Cuchulàin is out paying overnight visits to the fairer sex, Macha casts a spell on the Ulstermen, rendering them unable to defend themselves or Don Cuailgne. Cuchulàin alone is impervious to the spell and returns to defend his land and people, delaying Aillil and Maeve's attack with gruesome feats of heroism. However, in the end, the Bull is taken from Ulster because Cuchulàin is unable to defeat the entire army single-handedly. Ulster and its Bull are ultimately saved through the sacrifice of Sualtam MacRoith, Cuchulàin's mortal father who, in seeing the unjust battle, rouses from Macha's spell, mounts his horse and passionately screams a battle cry. When his horse rears violently, the edge of his shield accidentally decapitates him. His head continues to scream, waking the other warriors who then attack the Armies of Connacht, win the battle and take back Don Cuailgne.

The *Tàin* in Translation

Rife as it is with blatant bawdiness, sexuality, witchcraft, gruesome violence, and incomprehensible episodes of insanity, the *Tàin* suffers from a lack of cultural equivalencies when envisioned in a modern optic and with translation in mind. Some of these difficulties of translation may well stem from pre-

Christian literary styles, as well as from the description of Celtic socio-cultural traditions, social hierarchies, and geography. By the time the *Tàin* was translated for popular consumption by the Revivalists, the pagan culture that it so aptly typified had long been abandoned, dismissed as inferior, worthless, and hedonistic. More importantly, any association with this libertine past would be in direct opposition to the idyllic vision of Ireland and Irish culture that Celtic Revivalists sought to cultivate in order to further the emancipation of the island from British rule. Imperial stereotypes of Ireland and the Irish tended to focus on the island's lack of sophistication, tendency towards fighting and the drink, and childlike naivety. Given this unstable cultural anchoring, the *Tàin* became a literary antiquity, malleable to the ends of any political force that might decide to exploit it.

As a result, modern translations of the *Tàin Bo Cuailgne* have assumed either academic or literary orientations. Academic translations highlight the singularity of its style as an oral and historical tale while literary translations highlight elements in the text that make it suitable for categorization in literary canons. Translators have continually retold and reshaped the story for their own purposes and with varying results. Lady Augusta Gregory, for example, created *Cuchulàin of Muirthemne* the literary epic, whilst Joseph Dunn chose an academic orientation for his *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*—a more sober, erudite offering. In both cases, translation strategies depended on the particular political era and, more specifically, on the progress of each author's political goals within that era.

Brief Historical Context of Gregory's and Dunn's Translations¹

Long before the Celtic Revival wrote Irish independence, others had attempted to take it by force. In 1798, the radical political group The United Irishmen organized an ill-fated rebellion with the goal of severing Ireland from Britain. The arrest of its ringleaders before the prospective attack and the unexpected absence of much needed foreign reinforcements stalled the effort before it began and caused the so-called Irish Rebellion of 1798 to fail. After 1798, Irish efforts for emancipation continued through decades of almost continuous rebellions, insurgencies, and two failed parliamentary bills for Irish Home Rule. Roughly one hundred years later came the height of the Celtic Revival, a literary and cultural movement that sought to inflame the Irish Nationalist movement (and thus eventually separate Ireland from Britain) through the establishment of a distinct Irish literary tradition, canon, and culture.

¹ Both translations occur near to or during key events in Ireland's emancipation. For a brief delineation of the key historical events pertinent to the timing of Gregory's and Dunn's translations, please refer to Annex I.

It was in the context of the Celtic Revival that Lady Augusta Gregory published *Cuchulàin of Muirthemne* (1902), her translation of the *Tain*. Gregory's *Cuchulàin of Muirthemne* was published in the same era as such seminal works in the Irish literary canon as William Butler Yeats' play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, as well as John Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*. In 1912, a third Irish Home Rule bill finally passed but would be thwarted by WWI; this bill would later evolve into the 1914 Government of Ireland Act. In 1914, Joseph Dunn published *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*.

The infamous Easter Rising, a major transitional event in the progress of Ireland's emancipation, occurred after both Gregory's and Dunn's translations and can rightfully be considered, at least in part, the cumulative effect of the Celtic Revival's politically oriented literature. In April of 1916, Padriac Pearse and his sympathizers took over the Dublin Post Office while attempting to overthrow the British Government. The extreme violence of the British Army's retaliation on Pearse and his small number of ill-equipped rebels carried popular favour for the Irish Republican Army. In the December 1918 Southern Irish elections, the Sinn Fein (the IRA's political branch) won three quarters of the seats. In January 1919, the Dail Eireann formed the first "official" Irish Parliament and asserted sovereignty over the whole island, whilst its sister military organization, the IRA, waged the Irish War of Independence from 1919 to roughly 1921. As a result of these cumulative pressures, the British government had no choice but to pass a fourth and final Government of Ireland Act in 1920. The Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921 established an Irish Free State to the South. In the North, the Protestant majority silenced the Catholic minority's desire for unification with the South. Northern Irish Protestants opted *out* of joining with the Southern Irish Free State and kept six Northern counties under the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom. Despite Home Rule, political violence continued in the South during 1922 and 1923 as opponents to the Anglo-Irish Treaty fought the Irish Civil War, angry at the portioning up of Ireland and the imposition of a British manufactured Irish State. When Southern Ireland proclaimed a Constitution of Ireland in 1937, peace finally settled in the South. However, in roughly thirty years time, it would be Northern Ireland's turn to explode into violence. From 1969 to 1999 was the era of *The Troubles*—a bloody sectarian war that lasted for roughly thirty years.

Lady Gregory

Lady Gregory, the daughter of a Protestant merchant, was part of Southern Ireland's minority yet privileged Anglo-Irish elite. During the Anglo-Irish Revival of 1896, and in concert with authors like

William Butler Yeats, Edward Martyn, and John Synge, she contributed via literature to the Irish emancipation movement. Though she herself was in a position of privilege due to her Protestant heritage and its links with the British Government, she aligned herself with Ireland's Nationalists in the search for Irish Home Rule. Seeking to articulate Ireland's distinctness as a nation from its Imperial oppressors—The British Crown—Gregory and the Celtic Revivalists used Irish folktales, rhymes, and songs as a base for the fledgling Irish National and Nationalist literary cannon, 're-writing/re-translating' the texts to promote Ireland's independence from Britain. Gregory mined Ireland's wealth of oral folk tales, cataloguing and combing myths, icons, and legends for suitable figures upon which to hang the mantle of a glorious Irish past. In the effort to engender Irish historicity, she produced several "modernized and translated" volumes of myth, legend, and folk culture.

By 1902, Gregory was fully implicated in the fight for Irish Home Rule and tackled her translation of the *Tàin Bo Cuailgne*. Using a smoothing translation strategy, she obscured or erased the archaic markers of *Tàin Bo Cuailgne's* heritage as an oral tale, creating instead a Romantic epic recalling the style, tone, and structure of stories in other established National literary canons. The most salient change in Gregory's *Tàin* is its almost summary transformation into prose. Gone are any structural markers that would indicate a bard's performance of the piece. A key element of this is evident in the translation of dialogue. Instead of re-creating the roscadas and riddles of bardic culture, Gregory reformulates the *Tàin's* speeches in a contemporary, folksy dialect:

Gregory... one of the principal translators to represent TBC (*Tàin Bo Cuailgne*) completely as prose narrative, uses an Irish folk dialect of English – the Kiltartan speech – for her translation and divides the text into relatively short chapters which suggest a collection of folktales. (Tymoczko, 1999)

Gregory also edited the story's events. Some of the more comic but grotesque episodes—such as Cuchulàin's allowing himself to be run over repeatedly by a foe's chariot—were omitted, as were the vast majority of incidents that were bawdy, ignoble, or simply bizarre.

The loss of the *Tàin's* unique structural and historicizing elements diminish the *Tàin's* relevance as a cultural artifact representing—as do the academic translations—Ireland's longevity as a unified and developed culture. Instead, Gregory transformed the *Tàin* into a representation of Romantic

Nationalism, a symbol of ‘authentic Gaeldom.’ This “smoothing” appears throughout Gregory’s versions of Irish folk tales and supports the theory that she was using Ireland’s ancient stories to engender nationalist pride. Her translations amount to a body of work that catalogues Irish pre-Christian folk stories, re-writes them in a form both accessible and entertaining to the general public, and popularizes Irish heroes, legends, and story cycles. Even her change of the story’s title—and consequently of its overall focus—from *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* to *Cuchulàin of Muirthemne* reflects her desire to harness its capacities as a Nationalist tool. Ireland’s various insurgencies and revolutions had had a variety of leaders, but no one person had succeeded in unifying all Nationalists, be they Catholic or Protestant. Cuchulàin, however, could be that leader. Gregory’s translation played down his less appealing qualities (such as his seizure-esque battle fury, general lustiness and drunkenness) while exaggerating his heroic qualities as a skilled and wise warrior, clever riddler, and defender of the Gael.

Cuchulàin is a mantle of resistance against invaders, depending on who you class as invaders. To sum, he has been the “ancient defender of Ireland” for many years. For others he is now the symbolic “protector of the province.” For most, he is a dramatic and heroic character who lived and died in a passionate manner. Thousands of years of history can easily be reduced to symbolism. An armalite or political slogan in place of a warrior’s sword has often been the image portrayed of Cuchulàin. (retrieved from: http://bbc.co.uk/legacies/myths_legends/nothern_ireland/ni7/article?1.shtml 8 January 2007)

During the Red Branch Cycle, Cuchulàin’s fame spreads throughout Ireland. As a boy, he already achieves the victories of an experienced warrior, and by the tender age of seventeen, he is peerless among the many champions of the Emerald Isle. The *Tàin* focuses especially on Cuchulàin’s acts of awe-inspiring recklessness and patriotism, his ample ego, his favour among his countrymen and especially his countrywomen. The *Tàin*’s plotline is perhaps based on a cattle raid, but its purpose is to venerate Cuchulàin, Hero of Ulster and Ireland.

However, it is Cuchulàin’s human qualities, both positive and negative, that make him such a worthy representative of Ireland’s pagan past. His feats of strength, bouts of insanity, and occasional acts of lechery are, in a strange way, part of his charm. Reading Gregory’s sanitized version of the *Tàin* is not the same experience as reading a translation that remains faithful to the *Book of Leinster* or *Lebor na hUidre*. *Cuchulàin of Muirthemne* is rather like *Playboy* with the nude women cut out and questionable stories censored. Some scandalous bits remain, but there is always the sense that the

“juicier bits” are missing.

By smoothing out the “rogue” qualities of the *Tàin* and of Cuchulàin himself, Gregory crafted a national epic suitable for the canon, complete with a sleek national hero who had the capacity to unify people of all backgrounds and to lead them—at least metaphorically—into battle. At the time, Ireland needed this sort of solidarity as Britain showed no signs of wanting to negotiate with the Irish for Home Rule. Gregory’s translation turned both the *Tàin Bo Cuailgne* and Cuchulàin into symbols of a pre-republic Irish Nationalism, of the nobility inherent in the struggle against the invaders, be they from Connacht or from the British Empire.

Joseph Dunn

In 1912, Joseph Dunn offered his own translation of the *Tàin Bo Cuailgne*. Biographical information on the author is scant due to his relative lack of prominence. Nonetheless, it is known that he was a scholar of Celtic and Irish Studies, then later became a professor at Washington’s Catholic University of America. In 1901, he was awarded a fellowship in Celtic Studies, which enabled him to spend his summers in Ireland. It is unclear exactly what position and/or participation Dunn had or could have in terms of the Celtic Revival’s goal of Irish emancipation, given his physical absence from the country for the majority of the year and possibly during the most heated moments in modern Irish history, but hints lie in the sober, academic nature of his *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*, as well as in his *The Glories of Ireland*. Dunn edited the massive *The Glories of Ireland* in collaboration with fellow professor P.J. Lennox. The book is essentially a multi-author compendium of Irish history spanning two millennia. The orientation of the work is decidedly political and nationalist in nature. In the preface, Dunn and Lennox state that the book was created to:

...give to people of Irish birth or descent substantial reason for that pride of race which we know is in them, by placing in their hands an authoritative and unassailable array of facts as telling as any nation in the world can show. Our second motive was that henceforward he who seeks to ignore or belittle the part taken by men and women of Irish birth or blood in promoting the spread of religion, civilization, education, culture, and freedom should sin... (Dunn & Lennox, 1914)

The Glories of Ireland was published in 1914, the year of the Government of Ireland Act, which lends support to the idea the Dunn, like Gregory, had pro-Ireland sentiments, although he clearly expressed them in different ways.

Dunn's strategy for translating the centuries-old oral tale was academic, in contrast to Gregory's "proseification." His position in academe and his political environment, both vastly different from Lady Gregory's, were doubtless the reason for this strategy. In 1912—the year of Dunn's translation—the third Home Rule bill essentially *sanctioned* Irish Home Rule. Shortly after came the Easter Rising of 1916, the achievement of Irish Home Rule in 1920, and the establishment of the Republic of Ireland as it is now known. Joseph Dunn's *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* reflects these turbulent political shifts by depicting an Irish culture that is neither quaint nor dreamy but rather historical and legitimized. Dunn's era was one of seriousness. Ireland was to step up and take its position as an independent, fully realized nation meriting respect and equal standing with older, established nations. As a result, Dunn's translation retained all the archaic elements of the *Tàin* and created a text whose style varies virtually from page to page. The downside to this strategy is that *The Cattle Raid of Cooley* is less accessible to non-academic readers. The archaic language can prove difficult, and certain dialogue shifts can be confusing due to the mixing of speech styles. As far as plot is concerned, there are some gruesome episodes of graphic violence that are definitely not for the faint of heart, not to mention the wanton warring, bloodlust, and brutally honest depictions of the body's myriad functions.

Dunn remained quite faithful to the original *Book of Leinster* for his translation of the *Tàin*, retaining the *Tàin*'s original style as well as many of its grotesque and outright bizarre elements. By employing an academic translation strategy, he also supported his nationalist goals. In Dunn's era, the emancipation of Ireland was imminent and in order to compete with other nations' long established and respected histories, Ireland needed to offer proof of its ancient historical past.

Conclusion

There is an inherent universality in Cuchulàin's unequivocal love and defense of his "country and people" that belies Irish sentiments of resistance towards the British Empire in pre-Home Rule Ireland. Each translation that makes up our modern knowledge of *Tàin Bo Cuailgne* contributes to the work's status as Irish National Epic and to the discourse of Cuchulàin as a Gaelic hero and icon.

It is impossible to determine which translational orientation of the *Tàin Bo Cuailgne* best served the purposes of imminent Irish nationalism. Gregory's literary translation *Cuchulàin of Muirthemne* is an accessible, romantic version of the centuries-old tale and remains a popular choice for those desiring to regale themselves in Gaeldom's ancient glorious past. Dunn's *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*, though decidedly more difficult to read, more accurately reflects the richness, diversity, and historicity of Irish oral works. What is certain is that the discrepancy between the two time periods during which Gregory and Dunn lived affected the orientation of their translations.

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Website – Amazon.com Glories of Ireland

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Abstract

This paper addresses the political use of two translations of Ireland's national epic, the *Tàin Bo Cuailgne*. The Red Branch Story Cycle features the *Tàin Bo Cuailgne* as its crown jewel, a tale considered the oldest vernacular story in Western Europe. The *Tàin*'s main character Cuchulàin has long been considered a Gaelic icon voicing the discontentedness in Ireland's Nationalist discourses, just as the *Tàin* itself is thought to narrate Ireland's earliest quests for independence.

Irish cultural pride was awakened during the Celtic Revival of the 1880's. More than forty years later in 1922, a part of Ireland won its freedom from British Imperialism. The Republic of Ireland formed to the South whilst Northern Ireland remained under British rule, dividing the island both ideologically and politically. During the process of emancipation of Southern Ireland, the Celtic Revival championed all things Gaelic – a trend evident in the cultural products of the era, including translations. In examining the style in which Lady Augusta Gregory and Joseph Dunn wrote their English translations of *Tàin Bo Cuailgne*, the political ideologies of each translator and the influence of

the era in which they lived become manifest. Gregory's texts - written in pre-emancipation Ireland - reinforce an heroic Gaeldom whose cultural past is distinct from that of England, yet able to stand as an equal to it in terms of literary merit and worth. Dunn's text - written during the series of Irish Home Rule bills - focuses on Ireland's legitimacy as an erudite nation with a complex cultural past, capable of standing as an equal to England. Comparing Gregory's and Dunn's translations within their respective political eras and contexts provides valuable insight into the translative orientation that each author took in order to mould their versions of The *Tàin* to further their particular nationalist political agendas.

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Key Words:

Tàin Bo Cuailgne, Cuchulàin, Lady Augusta Gregory, Joseph Dunn, pre-Republic of Ireland, Irish Nationalism, Celtic Revival.

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ANNEX I

Selected Key Dates in Irish History During the Time of Gregory and Dunn's Translations

1798: Irish Rebellion of 1798

1886: [First Irish Home Rule Bill](#) fails in the [British House of Commons](#).

1893: [Second Irish Home Rule Bill](#) defeated in the [British House of Lords](#)

1896: Celtic Revival begins

1898: Centenary Anniversary of the Irish Rebellion

1902: Lady August Gregory publishes *Cuchulàin of Muirmeuntre*

1912: [Third Irish Home Rule Act](#) passed

1914: Government of Ireland Act - legislative partitioning of Northern and Southern Ireland
(never come into effect due to [WWI \(1914–18\)](#))

1914: Joseph Dunn publishes *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*

1916: [Easter Rising](#), Dublin

1918 election of the Sinn Fein in the South or Ireland, winning $\frac{3}{4}$ of all seats in the newly
established parliament

1919: Dail Eireann forms first “official” Irish Parliament

1919–21: Irish Republican Army wage the Irish War of Independence

1920: [Fourth Irish Home Rule Act](#), aka the Government of Ireland Act 1920

1921: Anglo-Irish Treaty

1922-23: Irish Civil War

1937: Constitution of Ireland Act

1969-99: The Troubles in Northern Ireland

