

An Táin - English Translation

A graphic novel by Colmán Ó Raghallaigh

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Cover note

Queen Méabh is consumed by jealousy when she finds that her husband, Ailill, has bested her for riches and wealth. To him belongs the Fionnbheannach, a white-horned bull believed to have no equal in Ireland. Or so it seems...

This is a new and exciting retelling of the greatest tale in the Irish language, the Táin or Tain Bó Cuailgne as it is better known. Ranked among the great epics of the world it was written down in the Book of Leinster, the earliest manuscript in Irish, sometime before 1106 A.D. The nobility, courage and tragedy of the original are subtly blended together in this superb graphic novel.

P1

Cruachaun Aoi in the province of Connaught...

...the royal fortress of Ailill and his haughty queen, Méabh.

P2

One night their conversation takes a fateful turn...

"What a beautiful bracelet, my dear..."

"Ah, yes. Now wasn't it a lucky day for you my dear, when you married such a generous man as me?"

"???!!!"

"Listen here, Ailill. Don't forget that it was the daughter of the High King of Ireland you married. I was a woman of wealth and means from the day I was born, and even to this day, I have more than you."

"And I'll prove as much tomorrow."

P3

And so it was that nothing would suffice but to compare their possessions...

The following day, as they wait impatiently, the reckoning begins...

Everything in Cruachain is included...

Clothes, ornaments and valuable jewellery.

P4

...rams

sheep...

horses...

and cattle.

P5

At last... the verdict.

"It would appear that both are equal."

"Quite clearly."

With that, however, Ailill whispers into his servant's ear.

And before them appears...

"THE FIONNBHEANNACH!!!"

Which leaves the queen in a quandary...

...and in a rage.

"Damn you, Ailill. I had forgotten that bull."

P6

That same evening...

"You sent for me, your majesty?"

"This Fionnbheannach. Is there any other bull like him in Ireland?"

"Mmm. A very good question, excellency."

"I'm afraid there's no such animal."

"But wait a minute... There's the Donn Cuailgne in Ulster. He belongs to Dáire Mac Fhiachna and there is no match for him in Ireland."

"Excellent! Go there immediately, Mac Roth, and ask Dáire for the loan of the Donn for one year. And tell him I shall reward him well."

"I'll take nine men and set out right away, excellency."

P7

Later that day in the house of Dáire, Mac Roth makes his case

"A year's loan, you say?"

"Exactly, and in exchange she'll give you lands in Connaught, horses and chariots, her undying respect and her friendship to the death."

"Remarkable! Your queen is certainly a most generous woman!"

"It's a deal."

"And now, let us celebrate our new alliance with a feast."

"This has been just a little too easy."

P8

Later that night with everyone sinking into a drunken stupor...

"Just as well for Dáire that he gave up the bull or Meabh would have taken it, one way or another."

"???"

"Master, a word..."

Dáire's servant overhears and...

He flies into a violent temper.

Then...

"You are greatly mistaken, Mac Roth, if you think you can pull the wool over my eyes and insult me in my own house."

"You will leave here tomorrow morning and tell your mistress that she will never see that bull, now or ever!"

P9

The following morning Mac Roth makes one final desperate attempt to placate Dáire...

"Listen Dáire, please. Don't you see it was only a misunderstanding. Just a servant who'd had too much to drink."

But it is futile...

"By my cloak! Every one of you can consider yourselves lucky to be getting out of here with your miserable lives!"

"And as for the bull, he will never leave this spot unless by force of arms."

"That's it. The fat's in the fire, now!"

P10

At Cruachain Aoi Méabh waits impatiently with Fearghus Mac Róigh at her side.

"And Mac Roth?"

"Still no news of him."

"Wait a minute. Here comes a horseman. Yes, it's him. Quickly, my horse!"

At breakneck speed...

"Greetings, Mac Roth. What news do you bring?"

Mac Roth tells his tale...

"My profound apologies, noble queen, but I'm afraid our journey was fruitless. Unfortunately, one of the servants insulted Dáire Mac Fhiachna and now he says he won't give the bull for any price."

"My curse on him! Nobody refuses the Queen of Cruachain. But mark my words, he'll live to regret this, because I intend to take that bull from him whether he likes it or not!"

"This is a bad day for Ulster and for Connaught. Many will fall because of this Donn Cuailgne."

P11

ÁÁÁÁÁC!

So it was that despatched her messengers to the four winds to gather a mighty army at Cruachain, to march on Ulster and bring her back the Donn.

"Now the time for talking has past. Go to every corner of the land and do not return until you have the armies of Ireland with you..."

P12

Seven days later at dawn...

"Your majesty, the forces are assembled."

"Excellent!"

(Now, my friend Dáire, you shall see the power of the Queen of Cruachain!)

But at that moment the enormity of what is about to happen begins to sink in, even to that haughty heart...

"There are many who gather here today, who bid farewell to their friends and companions, their lands and villages, fathers and mothers, and should they not return it is on my head that their sighs and curses will fall."

P13

"Well, Mac Roth, what do you think? Should we begin?"

"Listen, your majesty. At this moment, the heroes and warriors of Ulster are in the throes of a sleeping sickness as if they were giving birth."

"Sleeping sickness? What do you mean?"

"A curse put on the men of Ulster by Macha many years ago."

"Her husband had boasted that she could race the king's horse."

"The Ulstermen forced her to run and she proved victorious..."

-But then the King spoke up.

"Let her be. A dishonourable deed has been done today."

-Then Macha felt the pangs of childbirth upon her.

-Giving birth to twins she cursed her tormentors...

"Ulster shall pay dearly for this shameful act. From this day forth, these same pains will fall on the men of Ulster in their hour of greatest need!"

"Surely an ominous portent for the warriors of Ulster, but richly deserved."

P14

"And what of this 'Cú'?"

"He is but a beardless youth of sixteen years, but for battle-skills and trickery he has no match in the five provinces of Ireland."

"He will destroy without mercy all who are sent against him."

"If every warrior were like him, there would be no need of fence or ditch, or wall or moat..."

"Such nonsense! Let me hear no more of this brat, but order the armies to march immediately!"

"And don't fail me again, I warn you!"

"As you wish, your majesty."

P15

Fearghus goes before the army as their guide but he is very reluctant to be marching against his native province.

He decides to delay the army a little by marching them...

From dawn to dusk...

...and from East to West.

And in the meantime he sends his messenger to Cú Chulainn to warn him of the approaching danger...

...which he does.

"Tell your master not to worry, my friend. I care little who Méabh sends against me."

P16

Arming himself Cú Chulainn leaps into his chariot which has been readied by his servant, Laogh.

"Let's go!"

"HÚÁÁÁ!"

They proceed to the ford of Gabhla from where they can observe the advancing enemy.

P17

From a lofty perch...

...he spots the enemy on a hillside half a mile away.

Then...

TUNC!

Using only his toes he deftly strips the bark and leaves from the tree.

And with one enormous effort he sinks it deep into the river bed.

Ssssss!

(Not too many horses or chariots will cross here now, I think.)

P18

Unknown to Cu Chulainn however...

Méabh has sent two warriors and their servants to stalk him...

"If we keep quiet, we might be able to sneak up on him."

But...

CRACK!

"Who's this?"

They flee for their lives but Cú Chulainn hunts them down remorselessly...

AAAARGH!

NNNG!

...and decapitates them.

P19

Shortly afterwards...

"Here come the warriors."

"But I can't see anyone in those chariots."

NI!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

"Easy, there."

"???"

"Are those the scouts we sent out a while ago?"

"I'm afraid so."

"It seems then that there must be a mighty army up ahead waiting to attack us."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that."

P20

"Incredible!"

"Who could do such a thing?"

"Tell me!"

"It was Cú Chulainn. He left us this message in oghaim."

"...Seadanta, son of Sualdamh, who is called Cú Chulainn, performed this feat one-handed."

P21

Encamped on the southern side of the river Méabh's army spends a restless night, not knowing if it is from above or below or behind them that Cu Chulainn will strike next...

With missiles raining down...

"Aaaaargh!"

...and sudden death for anyone daring to put a foot outside the camp.

P22

Fearghas comes to hear Cú Chulainn's termsAt daybreak Méabh orders the Connaught men to drag the tree out of the ford.

"Hurry up! We can't afford to waste any more time here."

But despite smashing fourteen chariots in the attempt they make no headway.

CRASH!

"Indeed!"

At last...

"NNNNNGH!"

"UISH!"

Fearghus manages to pull it clear.

"Look, your majesty. Cú Chulainn was right. It was one stroke of his sword that felled this tree."

P23

"Tell me, Fearghas. Who is this Cú or what manner of warrior is he?"

"He was born Seadanta, son of Sualdamh, but now he is known as Cú, the hound of Culann."

"One day, while still a young boy, he was hurling with his companions..."

"Close to the fort of Culann the blacksmith, he parted from them..."

"On reaching the door..."

"A huge hound came charging towards him..."

"And leapt through the air to tear him to pieces..."

But...

"With one stroke of his hurling stick he drove the ball down his throat!"

"My hound!"

"And left him in a lifeless heap at his master's feet."

"From this day forward I shall be your hound."

"Hound of Culann! I like that!"

P24

"Is it any wonder that one who performed such feats as a mere child should now be capable of great feats as a young man?"

"I see that, but is there any way to stop him?"

"My queen, should you wish me to, I myself will go to Cú Chulainn and speak with him."

"Do that, Fearghas, for we are sorely persecuted since we came to this cursed place."

So it was that later that day Fearghas came to hear Cú Chulainn's terms.

"My friend, tell this to your Queen. If she is satisfied to send one warrior a day against me, I shall fight that man in single combat. For as long as we fight she and her army may advance. But when I strike him down they must halt until the following day. What do you think?"

"She will accept these terms, I promise you."

P25

It was then that the warriors came, one by one and day by day, against Cu Chulainn. Suddenly, without warning, the war goddess, the Mór-Ríon appeared.

"Nnnnnngh!"

CLAING!

"Young man, let me help you in this conflict, for I am wise in the ways of war."

"Out of my way, hag! I don't need the help of any woman."

"As you wish, but you shall pay dearly for that insult."

"Uh!"

"AAAARGH!"

P26

The following day with Cú Chulainn locked in battle against the giant Lóch...

The Mór-Ríon attacked him in the form of an eel...

...but he smashed her ribs with one blow.

"ÁÁÁÁ!"

In the guise of a wolf she attacked him a second time, but a well-aimed sling-shot quickly took an eye from her head.

A third time she attacked, in the shape of a young bullock...

But another shot smashed her leg.

Then charging wildly back...

...to Lóch.

He took his head off!

P27

Now the hero lies exhausted...

"Who's this?"

An old grey woman approaches leading an old cow with three teats...

"Would you take a drink?"

He does so...

"Have a second."

"My blessing on you."

"And a third."

"Isn't that sweet and tasty milk?"

Then...

"It is I, courageous youth!"

"You have healed me and now I shall keep your enemies from sleep.

Ááááíííí!

Which she does...

P28

An dara lá - the second day Finally Méabh runs out of patience.

"Listen! I am sick and tired of this foolishness. Let us put an end to this Cú, once and for all!"

So a large band of the men of Ireland launch a surprise attack on Cú Chulainn...

"Kill him!"

"Not so easy!"

Then, with Cú Chulainn sorely stretched...

...they seize their chance.

"Come on. To Sliabh gCuillin quickly!"

With lightning speed they move in...

NNNGH!

Húááá!

...and make off with the brown bull.

P29

(Is it possible that this man is unbeatable?)

(There's only one warrior who could stand against him...)

Ááá!

"Fear Dia, come here a moment. I wish to speak to you."

Méabh promises Fear Dia wealth beyond his wildest dreams and her own daughter, Fionnúir as his wife, but...

"I'm sorry, your majesty..."

"This is one thing I could never do."

"It seems he was right then, when he said you were a coward."

"If I thought he had said such a thing..."

"I would have to defend my honour."

"Then it seems you have no choice."

One poisonous lie is enough to do the damage...

P30

It is dawn as Fear Dia approaches the ford...

(There's no turning back, now.)

(He's still asleep. I'll wait a little longer.)

Then as the sun blazes down...

"Well? Is he awake?"

"He's waiting for you, master."

"Greetings, old friend."

"Fear Dia, it is you."

"But I'm truly sorry to see you here."

"Fear Dia, my friend, surely you know I don't want to lift as much as a finger against you?"

"I heard different, not so long ago."

"I'm afraid, Fear Dia, that you have allowed Méabh to pull the wool over your eyes with her lies.

And it's a sad and foolish thing to come against your friend at the whim of any woman."

"Be that as it may. It seems neither one of us is destined to leave here unscathed. Take your sword now and we shall see."

P35

As he carries Fear Dia's body from the ford...

...he sees his father approaching.

"I am sorry for your trouble, my son."

"But how can I help you?"

"Sualdamh, my father. Go now to Eamhain Macha and tell Conchubhar Mac Neasa that I shall not be able to defend Ulster against all of Ireland for much longer..."

"Take the Grey Steed and hurry."

Sualdamh makes no delay...

But the heroes of Ulster are still in the sleeping sickness...

...and he cannot awaken them.

"ARISE!"

He unleashes a terrible roar...

...and his horse rears up.

P36

"Arrgh!"

His own shield takes off his head...

Yet still...

"ARISE!"

Finally Conchubhar and the Ulstermen arise...

"Hurry! There isn't a moment to lose."

Hastening to the plain of Muirtheimhne...

...they find the army of Méabh attempting to retreat across the Shannon.

"Who are all these warriors approaching?"

"The Ulstermen, if I'm not mistaken."

(Alas! But surely what is about to happen thanks to a woman's ill-judgement can only be right and fitting.)

Now the Ulstermen launch a devastating attack on Méabh's army...

With Cú Chulainn to the fore...

(Death and suffering and carnage is my wish for you today, men of Ireland!)

P37

By now Méabh had driven the Donn Cuailgne into Connaught, where he let out three loud roars.

Hearing these, the enraged Fionnbheannach charged out and immediately they locked horns...

ÚÚÚÚÚÚÚÚÚÚÚÚÚÚ!

All that day and all that night they tore and gored one another... until the Fionnbheannach fell dead with a loud cry. And the echo of that roar was worse than the cry itself.

Now the Donn made straight for home...

But as soon as he reached his native place his proud heart burst inside him and he died instantly.

And so ended the Cattle-raid of Cooley.

P38

the Donn Cuailgne fights the Fionnbheannach Seven years passed but Méabh still remained bitter about all that had transpired during the Táin. And so she resolved to seek revenge.

Realising that she was bent on treachery Conchubhar Mac Neasa warned Cú Chulainn...

"Listen, Cú. You must stay out of sight in the Valley of the Deaf. Niamh, the daughter of Cealtchar and the women of Ulster will look after you."

"Have I any choice?"

But the clan of Cailitín heard of his whereabouts.

They hated Cu Chulainn...

...for he had killed their father long ago.

"This is our chance!"

So...

...one of them disguised herself as Niamh.

A magical fog then enveloped the women of Ulster and she managed to slip in to Cú Chulainn with her deception.

"Méabh's army is laying waste the whole country. You have my permission to go against them."

Then...

"Quickly now, Laogh, my friend..."

"...hitch up the chariot!"

(You're finished now, Cú!!!)

With that Cú Chulainn summoned up his courage and, wielding his sword with both hands, drove a gap a hundred men wide through Méabh's forces.

P39

But the clan of Cailitín had three magic spears.

They first they aimed at Cú Chulainn...

...but it was through the breast of Laogh, his faithful servant, that it flew.

"Ugh!"

"Master, I'm finished. Save yourself!"

"The men of Ireland shall pay dearly for your death, Laogh!"

The second spear pierced his grey steed, Liath Mhacha.

NNNGH!

And again Cú Chulainn extracted a bloody revenge...

But then Lú drove the third lance...

Straight through the breast of Cú Chulainn!

"Uggh!"

Fatally wounded he calls out to the enemy...

"I need a drink from that lake over there."

"Get it, then."

So it was that on the edge of the lake Cú Chulainn washed his wounds...

...and the water became as blood.

P40

Now the hero returned, tying himself to the stump of a nearby rock so that he should not die sitting or lying down, but rather on his feet.

Yet still his enemies covered before him...

"Keep well back from him!"

(Darkness approaches me now. My time on this earth is over...)

And turning his gaze to the men of Ireland, and placing his shield on its side and his spear by his shoulder, and taking his bare sword in his hand, he gave up his spirit...

END