

Lugh at the Gates of Tara

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Part I. Introduction: Birth and Training

Dia duit! So many druids around today. I had to see what was happening. Nice spear. Smells like bread baking. Reminds me of something... oh yes, it's Lughnassadh, the Festival of Lugh. Of course. Well, then, I have just the tale for you.

You may know Lugh in many ways: god, king, warrior, smith, poet, son of Cian, grandson of Diancecht, father of Cuchulainn... and you may have heard him named in many ways: Lugh the Bright, Lamhfada (Long-Handed or Long-Arm), Lonnbeimnech (Fierce Striker), Macniu (boy hero), Samildanach (the Many-Skilled) ... But how did he earn that last title? Why do so many know him by so many different aspects?

People these days have a term, 'Renaissance Man.' They mean someone talented at many skills - art, science, engineering, writing - like your Benjamin Franklin, or Hedy Lamarr, or the prototype, Leonardo da Vinci. But such multifaceted talent existed long before the 'Renaissance'. Compared to Lugh the Many-Skilled, your modern examples are mere amateurs. Dilettantes! Pretenders!

Lugh had many teachers. His father was the hero Cian of the Tuatha de Danann, his mother Ethniu, daughter of the Fomorian king, Balor One-Eye. But Lugh had to be stolen away to foster, because Balor ordered him killed after his birth was discovered. A druid had foretold that the dread king would be overthrown and slain by a son of his daughter.

The boy was thrown into the sea, but rescued by Manannan mac Lir and brought away to foster. For a time, his foster mother was Tailtiu, a queen among the Fir Bolg, who had the greatest influence on the growing boy. She and her husband, Echaid the Rough, taught the boy what they knew. And for what they could not teach the boy, they found tutors.

When he was old enough, Lugh returned to the house of Manannan, and there gained skill at arms and his first weapons. He ran and played and sparred with the sons of Manannan, until they were all men and warriors.

From these teachers, he gained sorcery and healing, music and history, diplomacy and warfare. From hard study and observation, he learned the arts of the smith and the carpenter, the boatwright and the tailor, the hunter and the cook. By the time he had his full growth, he was master of all skills within his reach.

Hearing of the abuse of the people of Eireann by the Fomor, he traveled to Teamhair, the fortress at Tara, to offer his services at the court of the king, Nuada Argetlamh, Nuada of the Silver Hand. But there he found the gate closed, and the gatekeeper, Gamel, unsympathetic.

Part II: Lugh at the Gates

Lugh came to the gates at Tara and rapped upon them, asking entry.

Gamel the gatekeeper answered, saying, “What use are you, that you should join us here?”

Lugh declared, “I am a skilled warrior, come to aid the king. I am a master of strategy and unmatched at single combat.”

Gamel replied, “We have plenty of warriors. For strategy, we have King Nuada himself, and he already has a champion, his brother Ogma.”

Lugh challenged the door-keeper again: “Well, I am also a smith, a worker in bronze and steel and all other metals, not to mention a carpenter and Boatwright.”

Gamel laughed. “For smithing, we have Goibniu, greatest in all Eireann. Credne Cerd works any metals you care to name. The king’s carpenter is Luchtaine. For that matter, his sailing master is Manannan mac Lir, who is unmatched at sea.”

Lugh was not daunted, and continued: “Know that I am a master bard, skilled with the harp, learned in history and lore, a storyteller and poet.”

Gamel scoffed. “The king is well satisfied with his master harper, Cas Corach, and many of his court are skilled musicians. Ogma is our lore keeper, knowledgeable about all things in history, language, and music besides. And we have any number of poets of excellent quality.”

Lugh tried again: “I am also learned in the magic arts, a magician and sorcerer.”

Gamel waved him away. “Besides the great sorcerer Mathgen, the king is attended by the queen of druids, Druantia, not to mention the three sisters of the Badb. He is well supplied with magical might.”

Lugh still would not leave. “Ah, but beyond that, do you have a healer who can ease any ill?”

Gamel nodded. “We do. Diancecht is the greatest physician who ever lived, and he has children nearly his equal in skill.”

Lugh was nearly spent, but tried again: “I could be the king’s cup-bearer.”

“We have nine, one for each river of Eireann.”

Lugh’s list was not exhausted, but he realized that nothing he offered could not be challenged. Then, he tried another strategy. He asked, “You have separate masters of all these skills... but do you have anyone who is master of them all at once?”

To this Gamel had no counter. Instead, he agreed to take word to Nuada. The king agreed that, if Lugh was truly as talented as he claimed, he should be admitted to the court of Tara.

Part III: Challenges and Feats



Though he gained entry to Tara, Lugh was not immediately accepted there. He was first challenged by the king to prove his wit and strategic skill. He was ordered to play Fidcheall - a board game somewhat like chess - against the king's best player. Of course, Lugh won. He even showed the former master a new technique. Then Lugh played against and defeated the king. After this, Lugh entered the high hall and seated himself in the sage's seat, declaring himself the wisest man present.

Next, Lugh was challenged by the king's champion, Ogma. Tearing a great flagstone from the floor, Ogma hurled it out of the hall, through the gates, and out of Teamhair entirely. Irritated, Lugh went out again and hurled the stone back, into the hall and further back than where Ogma had removed it. In fact, some say he threw that stone back into the greater rock from which it was cut, then hurled *that* boulder away again. Defeated, Ogma was forced to surrender his badge as the king's champion.

Last, Lugh was asked to demonstrate his skill with the harp. First, he played a lullaby so sweet that every courtier in Tara fell asleep. Then, he played a dirge that made them all weep in grief. Finally, he played a lively tune that had the court rolling with laughter and joy.

Finally, the king was satisfied. He declared Lugh the Ollamh Eireann, chief bard of literature and history and second only to himself in authority. Seeing Lugh's skill in strategy and his determination to fight the Fomor, Nuada turned over command of the army to him as well.

Lugh trained the warriors of the Tuatha de Danann for several years, then led them against the cruelties of the occupying Fomor. He rode Manannan's own horse, Aonbharr, into battle.

In time, he fulfilled the prophecy of his birth, facing Balor in single combat, after the one-eyed Fomor slew King Nuada. Lugh avoided Balor's killing glance and put a sling stone through his grandfather's remaining eye, killing him instantly. At the end of that war, Lugh was named Ard Ri Eireann, High King of Ireland.

And so, in these many ways, Lugh proved the truth of his words, the many skills he had mastered. One of his acts as king, in fact, was to hold a harvest festival in honor of his foster mother, Tailtiu, which he called Talti. There, the people of Eireann would meet, participate in games, and challenge one another to feats of skill.

Now, this festival is named Lughnassadh in honor of Lugh himself. We can't be Samildanach - equally skilled in all arts - but it's worth knowing something about history. It's always worth showing off what we *can* do and learning something new besides. Every skill is valuable, as many as you or I can manage.