

The Origin of the Healing Herbs

As told by Nuada's porter

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by Nathan Large



You're wondering about the eye, aren't you? For your information, it's only asleep. A nuisance. But I'll satisfy your curiosity later. My eye is only a small part of my story. And wasn't the fellow here last year completely blind? One eye is an improvement.

What I can tell is nothing less than the story of medicine itself, of the herbs that heal. I know the true story of how these gifts came to exist... and why mortal-kind is so muddled about which cure is which.

It wasn't always so. Healing was once a different kind of art. The power to mend a body was found in all sorts of places, like the notes of a song or the waters of a deep well. Once, physicians worthy of the name drew out the healing virtues in everything. Even if you weren't a healer, you might still draw on those powers, though not to the same degree. There was no medicine you could buy from a merchant! No, healing in my time was quite a different thing from today's pills and pastes and punctures.

The greatest of all healers was the physician of the Tuatha de Danann, Dian Cécht. Dian Cécht could cure any wound, purge any disease, and grant his patients near-immortality. When battle raged, he served by binding up wounded soldiers and returning them fresh to the battlefield the next day. During the Second Battle of Moytura, he blessed a well at the hill of Slane, such that it could restore *every* soldier retrieved from the battlefield each day, even if mortally wounded, so long as head remained joined to body. That well was destroyed, mind you, by the Fomorian enemy.

Another feat of the great Dian Cécht sets the stage for my real story. Back in the First Battle of Moytura, King Nuada gained the victory but lost his arm. The harsh law of the time stated that no man blemished in body could stand as king, so Nuada not only lost his arm, he also lost his crown. The severed limb was buried, and Nuada ceded the throne to the half-Fomorian Bres... a worse wound than merely losing a limb.

If you're interested, it was in that same war I lost my eye. I left off soldiering and became Nuada's porter, his door-guard.

Dian Cécht came calling and served the former king well. With the smith Creidne, Dian Cécht crafted Nuada an arm of pure silver, as strong and nimble as the original. So Nuada of the Silver Arm got that name. Yet for its beauty and function, the arm still counted as a blemish. Nuada was whole in skill, but not whole enough to rule.

Matters worsened. The Fomorians pressed close and tormented Eireann, undeterred by King Bres. We came to understand what a poor leader we had chosen. We sought a replacement. Our best hope was to return Nuada to the throne... but how? His old arm was gone and buried, and even Dian Cécht could not restore a completely missing limb.

One day, I sat at duty, guarding Nuada's door. My dear cat dozed on my lap. Walking up came Dian Cécht's son, Miach. He asked to see Nuada, saying that he could heal the King's arm.

I laughed in his face. If his father, the great Dian Cécht, could not accomplish the feat, what hope did Miach have? Even as an adult, he was practically a child in comparison to his teacher.

But Miach persisted. Finally, I set him a challenge. I demanded that he prove himself, before I would let him trouble Nuada. I asked him to restore my missing eye. Miach offered to take the eye from my cat and graft it into my own empty socket.

Doubting, I agreed... and he did it! He drew the eye from my cat's head and placed it in my socket! I could see again... and better, I could fight again!

Overjoyed, I kept to my word and escorted Miach into Nuada's presence. The great lord heard him out, looked at my eye, and gave his consent to be healed.

At first, Miach suggested a similar procedure: to take a limb from a donor and graft it to Nuada's stump. We sought throughout Eireann for a suitable donor, but only one man had an arm of the proper dimensions: a swineherd, Modan. That was no good: a king cannot rule with an arm coated in pig-shit!

Miach offered another solution: using the remains of Nuada's own arm, he would grow it anew, using herbs and magics. Nuada gave him leave to try, indicating the spot where his arm was buried. The limb was rotted down to bones, but still Miach made the attempt.

The young doctor wrapped the bones in herbs and cloth. He slept with it pressed tight to his own flesh, sharing his warmth and energy. He sang and chanted strange words, until the arm regrew to its former strength.

Then, Miach reattached the regrown arm to Nuada's stump. This last step was simple, compared to the efforts before. The arm fit perfectly. It worked as wonderfully as before. Nuada was whole.

Once word of his restoration spread, the Tuatha De took little time ousting Bres and returning our beloved Nuada to the throne. What happened after, with Nuada and with Eireann, is beyond my tale today. Though there were joyous victories to come, my story must end with a tragedy.

When Dian Cécht learned what had happened, he did *not* rejoice. His son had accomplished what he could not. He was consumed with jealousy.

In this state, he confronted Miach, asking why his son shamed his father so publicly. Miach grew angry as well, and the two quarreled. The argument turned to blows.

Dian Cécht drew blood first, splitting the skin of Miach's face. His son, able healer, easily erased the wound. This ease only enraged Dian Cécht further and he struck again and harder. His second blow split his son's flesh, but this too, was a minor injury for a skilled healer. Miach sealed the wound, again unharmed. Dian Cécht struck a third time, now cleaving through skin and flesh and even cracking the bone of Miach's skull. Miach again knitted his bone and sealed his flesh and wiped away the cut. The outrage was too much for Dian Cécht... and with his fourth blow, he cut skin and flesh and skull and split Miach's brain in two.

Such an injury cannot be healed. It is instantly fatal, for any creature. Miach fell dead, to the weeping of his sister, Airmed, and the horror of his father. In penitence, Dian Cécht gathered up his son's body and took it to a high hill, burying it with suitable honors. Then he fled, leaving Airmed to grieve over her brother's grave.

The Earth knows when it holds a true healer. Consuming Miach's flesh, the soil sprang forth with the powers of his craft, sprouting three hundred and sixty-five different herbs, each with great healing power, each unique. One herb grew for every different part of Miach's body, for every part of the human form. They grew in neat order, aligned with the parts they were meant to heal.

To preserve this knowledge, the fruit of Miach's craft and the Earth's gift, Airmed laid out her mantle and began to collect the herbs. She laid them out carefully, in the pattern in which they had grown. In this way, she not only preserved the herbs themselves, she maintained the knowledge of their best use.

As Airmed finished and was about to bear the herbs away to be catalogued and spread throughout the world, her father, Dian Cécht, returned. He saw the grave, all overgrown and harvested, and knew what the Earth had done. He saw what Airmed had done.

Dian Cécht knew that all the craft of Miach, all his own teaching plus the genius of his son, was laid out on that mantle, in those herbs. With that gift, all humanity would be their own physicians. They would not need doctors. They would not need Dian Cécht.

His rage swelled again, and Dian Cécht pushed Airmed aside. Grasping the edge of her mantle, he threw it into the air... scattering the herbs in every direction. Their pattern was lost forever, and with it, the knowledge of their uses.

The herbs flew about, and rooted, and were not lost. Even Dian Cécht knew not to spurn or destroy a gift of the Earth. But he had confused the knowledge they held. He once again acted to spite his children's genius. And because of his jealousy, we lost much.

Since that time, humans have regained some of the missing wisdom of Miach and reclaimed some of his healing art. But this study is hard work. It has taken you millennia to recover a fraction of what Miach and Dian Cécht knew. Those healers of old are far away, under hills and through doors. Some mortals speak with the ancients and learn a few secrets. But all of you benefit from the Earth's gift, the healing herbs you've managed to regather.

It is noble work and worth the struggle. I honor those who maintain what is known and seek to know more. I honor the memory of Miach and Airmed... and even Dian Cécht, who taught them.

Say what you might of Dian Cécht, but he was wise enough to know not to destroy or corrupt the Earth's gift. Some humans have missed *that* lesson. Do your best to teach them... or at least, preserve what you've already gained.

Ah, it's getting late. My eye is waking. It's time to go. You see, having my eye replaced with a cat's wasn't such a wise request. It sleeps most of the day... and if I don't take it out for a bit at night, to watch the birds and mice, it won't let me get a bit of sleep.

Wisdom does come in odd ways.