

The Cattle Raid of Cooley

A short retelling of *Tain Bo Cuailnge*

Presented to Whispering Lake Grove for Beltaine, May 6, 2018

by Nathan Large



When I say, “Queen Medb”, most people think, “the Queen of the Fairies.” That’s not who *I* mean. I grant, she’s certainly under the hills and in the Other World. And wherever she is, she’s sure to be a Queen. She always was and always will be.

But *my* story is about a time - the best-known time, about two thousand years ago, in old Eireann - when Queen Medb asserted her royal prerogative: how she fought a war now called “The Cattle Raid of Cooley”.

It all started when Medb and her husband... at the time... King Ailill of Connacht, were comparing their riches one night. You see, their pre-marital agreement specified that they had to be equally wealthy. Fifty-fifty. Whatever Ailill got - gold, jewels, land, cookies - Medb had to have the same. That night, everything balanced out... except for one detail.

Finnbennach, the White-horned, the greatest bull in all of Connacht - the strongest, fastest, smartest, most fertile - had decided to settle into *Ailill’s* pastures. And there was only one of him. No matter what, King Ailill was richer by that much.

This was a problem. Queen Medb asked her well-traveled messenger, MacRoth, where she could get a bull to match Ailill’s. He knew just the one: Donn Cuailnge, the Brown Bull of Cooley, in the neighboring province of Ulster. If Medb could own that bull, she’d have Ailill matched again.

She sent MacRoth and his companions to speak with the Brown Bull’s owner, Daire, son of Fiachna, a vassal of King Conchobar of Ulster. MacRoth brought Daire an offer, and a queenly bargain it was. In exchange for the temporary *loan* of Donn Cuailnge, Medb would trade him fifty cattle from her herds, gold, land in Connacht... and if necessary, he could come visit Medb himself, wink, wink, nudge, nudge? Eh? Eh?

Of course, Daire said yes. To celebrate, he threw a feast for his guests. MacRoth’s boys got a little drunk and said something like: “It’s a good thing Daire agreed to the deal, because Queen Medb could have just come over here and *taken* that bull, if she wanted to.”

Oops. That’s it. The deal’s off. “Get out of here before I send you home in pieces!” When MacRoth gets home, of course, his Queen is angry at him, but she’s even angrier not to get the bull. And of course, you know, this means war.

To be fair, the messenger wasn’t wrong. Ulster was an easy mark right then, as its fighting men were in no shape for war. They were laboring - quite literally - under a curse. They’d done something stupid, like make a pregnant sorceress queen run a race against a horse. So, she cursed all the men of Ulster to suffer the same birth pangs she felt for, oh... several months.

All Ulster had left for its defense was a bunch of underage warriors called the Red Branch... and the greatest hero of his age, Cuchulainn. You might have heard of him? The strongest, the fastest, the most skilled, the most fertile... all right, maybe not that. But he *was* amazing. The son of a God, some said. And they needed a hero in Ulster, because Queen Medb was amassing one massive army.

Besides all her loyal soldiers in Connacht, she recruited from Munster, and from Leinster, and even a troop of exiled ex-Ulstermen. Just to get ready, this army ran raids into Ulster, stealing cattle, occupying land, and generally being a nuisance. *Then* they began to march for Cuailnge, aiming for the Brown Bull.

It was a long and complicated war, full of bloodshed, conspiracy, betrayal, and animal cruelty. So, settle yourselves down and get comfortable... no, I'm joking. We don't have time for that. I'll summarize.

Along the way to Cooley, the army met Cuchulainn. They didn't stand a chance. He'd kill a hundred men and the army would have to retreat. Then, he did it again the next day. Eventually, he suggested that Queen Medb just send out one champion to fight him each day, instead. It seemed like a good deal, even if they lost just one champion instead of a hundred soldiers. I'm quoting Ailill, there.

But the boy hero kept winning. The river ford where he met Medb's champions started to pile up with bodies.

Eventually, though, so much fighting wore Cuchulainn down. He had to get some rest, or he'd die of fatigue and injuries. But, he fought sleep, too. It got so bad, his father, Lugh - that god I mentioned? - had to come and sing him to sleep so that he could heal.

While Cuchulainn slept, Queen Medb's army rolled on unchecked. They cut down most of the Red Branch and arrived in Cooley. About that time, the curse on the Ulstermen wore off. Cuchulainn woke up soon after. Queen Medb grabbed the Brown Bull and as many of Daire's cattle as she could round up - because why not? - and hurried home.

That ended the cattle raid and the war. Queen Medb had her new bull, the marital scales were balanced, and that was that... until they put Donn Cuailnge into the same field with Finnbennach. You can see where this is going?

Of course, two bulls don't want to share, and these were the two greatest bulls in the world. They went after each other immediately. The Brown Bull was the nastier fighter, and soon had Finnbennach torn to pieces, but not before the White-horned wounded the Brown in return. Eventually, Donn Cuailnge died of his wounds.

So, it was all for nothing? All that war and death and trouble? No. As you'll note, Medb and Ailill were equals again, with *neither* of them with any great bull.

Happy ending! Yay!