

## Fiannaíocht – The Story of Setanta

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### Leaders Note

This has been adapted from the traditional Red Branch Knight tale of how the young warrior Setanta became Cúchulainn.

*This story has been rewritten for macaoimh and it can be read directly.*

### The Story of Setanta

By Ann Connell

Long, long ago in Ulster, there lived a boy named Setanta. It was said by the druids that the God Lug had blessed the boy at birth with great strength and courage. At the age of nine Setanta left his mother's home to contest his, rightful place among the Red Branch Knights. It wasn't long before Setanta ranked among the most respected of all the knights of Armagh. He was handsome, noble and true; a powerful athlete; a courageous warrior and a brave adventurer - and still a young boy. And like all boys his favourite pastime was hurling. While the other knights spent much of their free time hunting and feasting, Setanta preferred to hurl with the youths of Ulster. One lash of his camán could send a sliotar from the plains of Armagh to the glens of Antrim, and his team was proud to have him as their captain.

One day a messenger arrived inviting all the knights to attend a banquet at the castle of Culann - one of the chieftains of Ulster. The messenger added that Culann was particularly interested in meeting young Setanta. The banquet was to be held on the following Saturday at six o'clock. That posed a problem for Setanta - his hurling team had a match that afternoon and he knew how much they depended on him to win. The other knights agreed it was important that Setanta played the match and they promised to explain to Culann that their youngest warrior would be a few hours late.

Saturday came and Setanta and his friends spent the morning hurling a sliotar about with their splendidly carved ash branches in preparation for the match. Their rivals came, from the hills of Donegal. They were bigger and more muscular by far but they lacked the skill and spirit of Setanta's team. It was a tough game but eventually skilful fair play championed over brutish strength.



It was just six as a triumphant Setanta began the long trek to Culann's castle. As he raced through meadows and woodland Setanta admired the beauty all around him - the emerald green grass, the colourful wild flowers, the strong and peaceful trees, especially the ash. It always amazed him how sturdy and noble were the product of such a slender and graceful tree. The ash tree was certainly a wondrous tree. Setanta was perfectly contented traveling through the beautiful countryside. From time to time he would puck the sliotar, then having given it a head start, he would race after it and try to hit it again before it slowed to a halt. The harder he pucked the little leather ball, the more fun he got out of racing it.

On and on he ran until at last he arrived at the gates of Culann's home. He was there, as he said he would be at sunset - and what a glorious golden sunset it was too - but no one was there to open the gates for him. He could hear the joyous shouts of celebrations in the distance. Setanta realised that in all the excitement of the feasting he had been forgotten. Nobody was going to come and open the enormous iron gates for him. He would have to find his own way in. This was not a problem for our hero.



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Setanta stood at the foot of the colossal gates. He paced backwards for twenty steps, and then with sliotar in his hand and camán tucked lightly under his arm, he took a running jump that catapulted him over the gate and twenty paces beyond it. No sooner had he landed than he heard a noise, and out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed a huge wolfhound. The hound's mouth opened to show long, snarling, ferocious teeth. The hound's eyes glowed red and stared viciously at Setanta. The hound lifted his front legs and as he readied himself to pounce on Setanta, the boy hopped his sliotar off the palm of his hand and lashed it with hurricane force in the direction of his attacker. As the camán fell to the ground the sliotar reached the back of the hound's throat and all life left the hound's body with one last blood-curdling screech. His body hit the ground. Setanta sighed in relief.

Just then Culann and his guests arrived on the scene. Seeing his most prized wolfhound lying dead, he cried out in despair. "Who did this? Who killed my hound? Who slaughtered the most faithful protector of my family and my estate?"

Setanta stepped forward.

"Noble Lord, I am Setanta. I was late for your feast and I killed your hound. From this day forth, I will take the place of your hound. I will be the faithful protector of your family and your estate. I will be the hound of Culann – Cú Chulainn."

*And so it was that Setanta became Cúchulainn.*