



Fiannaíocht – The Story of Cormac Mac Airt

Leaders Note

This is based on the traditional Fiannaíocht stories about Cormac Mac Airt

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

The Story of Cormac Mac Airt

By Ann Connell

In the days when Fionn's father, Cumhail, was just a boy, there lived a kind and noble king at Cashel. His name was Art and during his reign problems at the Dún were solved peacefully rather than in battle. So, by the time our story begins the warriors of Munster were fairly rusty in the skills of battle. And of course, like all kings, Art had plenty of enemies, one in particular was an evil chieftain called Conn who was jealous of Art. He was just waiting for the right moment to attack the Rock of Cashel. In fact, by this stage, Conn had a number of spies working at Cashel who were ready to signal him whenever they thought Art and his warriors were not expecting trouble.

Now a time came for great joy and happiness at Cashel. Art was very proud and absolutely thrilled when his wife, Ada gave birth to a beautiful baby boy. He was their first child and they were both over the moon with delight. They decided to have a feast in the Great Hall to celebrate and everybody at court was invited. Art has even said there would be no need for sentry duty that night. Well, that was what the spies has been waiting for and so the signal was sent to Conn.

At last the evening of the feat came. Ada sat at the head of the table, with the baby in her arms. One by one each of the guests approached her to wish the baby well. The druid blessed him with courage, kindness and honesty and said that he would one day be High King at Cashel. He had hardly finished his sentence when a loud shout interrupted the banquet. "Never Tonight, Art shall die, and I Conn, shall become your king"

The hall fell into silence and it was noticed that Conns army had lined the walls. Arts warriors rose to their feet, but they hadn't a sword or spear between them. Then the bloody slaughter began. Art and Ada fell to

a swordsman, but with his last heartbeat the king pushed the little baby under the huge table and threw a scarf over him to hide him. Then he closed his eyes and died.

Conn looked about, the king and queen were dead and over half their warriors had fallen too. He had succeeded. He would banish the rest of Arts warriors from Munster. Yes, he had succeeded. Cashel was his and his children's forever now. He grinned and his black eyes shone with a most malicious evil. The dead were carted out of the great hall – the injured limped and hobbled away. Soon all was quiet in Cashel. There was nothing to be heard – by human ears at any rate.

But, someone did hear something. It would have been a strange sight to see – if anyone had seen it. Three wolves arrive at the door of the great feasting hall. The hall seemed empty but the wolves knew better. One of them ran in under the long table. A few seconds later she returned, carefully carrying a bundle between her teeth. Gently she laid the scarf on the ground and opened it up. The three wolves looked at the baby. The baby smiled and cooed at them. One would licked the blood from the baby's forehead. The licking tickled him and he cooed loudly. Then the she-wolf picked up her bundle again and off into the moonlight they ran.

They seemed to have traveled for hours when they last arrived at a little house. They dropped the baby at the door and began to howl the wolves and the baby cried. Eventually the awful noise broke though. A grey-haired old lady called Nora opened the door. She obviously frightened by the wolves but when she saw the baby she understood. She picked up the child, and looked at the she wolf she said "Yes I will look after him, have no worries – he will grow up with courage, kindness and truth. His name will be Cormac.

The wolves were satisfied. They turned on their heels and returned to their woodland homes. Nora kept her promise and Cormac grew into a courageous, kind and honest boy. One day a band of hunters was traveled nearby. As dusk fell they became tired and hungry. Seeing Nora's little house they decided to ask if hey could stay for the night. Of course Nora welcomed them with food, drink and a warm fire. When morning came, the men asked if they could



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repay Nora's hospitality in any way. "Yes" she replied, "Cormac is courageous, kind and honest, but I cannot teach him to hunt or fight" She began to tell them the story of how the boy came into her hands.

"And", she concluded, "it has always been believed that wolves have a special bond with those of royal blood"

"I am Cumhail", said one of the young men, "I as just a boy when the evil Conn took over at Cashel. My friends and I are in training to win the Dún back for fair and honest people. If it is your wish we will take the boy and train him with us." Nora agreed, and having said their goodbyes, Cormac left with Cumhail and his friends.

It was a great surprise to all the banished warriors when the hunting party returned with young Cormac. When Cumhail told them Nora's story and showed them the scarf, they realised that the boy was Art's son and took them as their king. The young king turned out to be a most skilled hunter and warrior. As the years passed he became wise and noble and truly fit to be High King at Cashel.

Well, at last after years of preparation, the warriors were ready to march on Cashel. Conn heard that they were coming and went out to meet them with his army behind him. When the two armies came face to face, Cormac stepped forward.

"I am Cormac, son of Art, and I have come to claim my rightful place on the throne of Cashel. You slaughtered my parents and their guests as they celebrated my birth... your mistake was letting me live. I would prefer to do this without battle or bloodshed, but as you can see, my warriors are prepared to fight"

Conn listened to the wisdom and courage of Cormac's words. He was not a stupid man. He realised that he could not win. So he turned and fled, and neither he nor his cowardly army was ever seen in Cashel again. A triumphant Cormac entered the gates of Cashel again. He put an end to the evil and cruelty that Conn has caused there and soon Cashel was as wonderful and peaceful a place it had been when Art and Ada lived. Cormac always made sure that his warriors kept in training just in case.

"Bí Ullamh" he would say to each of them, just as we still say it today.

In later years having met St. Patrick and his monks, Cormac became the first Christian High King of Ireland. The druids at Cashel didn't like that at all, but they could do nothing to stop him. When he was very old he gave instructions that he wanted to be buried at a place where he could look eastwards towards Bethlehem where Jesus was born. After his death the druids attempt to disobey his wishes. As they carried his coffin towards a pagan burial place they had to cross a bridge. Suddenly a very strange thing happened – a coffin bearer slipped and the coffin fell into the fast flowing river and was carried away. The following morning a group of shepherds fished the coffin out of the river. Not knowing whose coffin it was, they decided the best thing they could do was to bury it. And sure enough didn't they bury Cormac in a place where he could look eastwards towards the holy land where Jesus was born.

If your surname is McCarthy, then Cormac may have been your great, great, great, great, great, great ... grandfather. You see, Cormac son of Art in Irish becomes Cormac Mac Airt and over the years MacAirt became McCarthy, and eventually McCarthy.