

The Children of Lir

Bodb Derg was elected king of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, to the annoyance of Lir, who felt that he himself should have been chosen; Lir did not swear obedience to the new King, to the annoyance of those who had elected him, causing strife, though Bodb sought to appease them. After some time Lir's wife died — to appease Lir, Bodb gave one of his daughters, Aoibh, to him in marriage. Lir agreed that he would yield the lordship, and form an alliance — ending the strife.

Aoibh bore Lir four children: one girl, *Fionnghuala*, and three sons, *Aodh* and twins, *Fiachra* and *Conn*. After the birth of the twins, Aoibh died, causing great grief to Lir, though he was bolstered by his love for the four children. Bodb then sent another of his daughters, *Aoife*, to marry Lir, which he accepted happily. The children were a joy both to Lir and to Bodb.

After a short while, *Aoife* became jealous of the affection given to the four stepchildren, and she feigned illness for around a year. One day, she set out in her chariot with the four children, with design to kill them, and called her entourage to slay them, stating that because of them she had lost Lir's love, and promising them rich rewards. However, they would not help, so she drew a sword, but was not able to follow through with the act. Next she took them to *Loch Dairbhreach* and made them bathe, but once in the water, she cast a spell of metamorphosis in order to transform them into four white swans.

Fionnghuala rebuked her, stating that her magic power was not as great as that of their friends to undo the spell, and warned her of the revenge she would face — she asked her to set a limit on the time of the spell. She set a period of three hundred years as a swan on *Loch Dairbhreach*; three hundred more on *Sruth na Maoilé*; and three hundred at *Iorrus Domnann* and *Inis Gluairé*. She also foretold that by expiration of the period of the spell, Lairgenn (the great-grandson of the King of Connacht), and Deoch (the great-granddaughter of the King of Munster) would be wed. Aoife relented a little and allowed the children to retain the power of speech, stating they would sing plaintive songs without equal, and that they would not be distressed by being in the forms of birds. Aoife then returned to Bodb's court — when he asked why the children were not with her, she claimed that Lir did not trust him with them, but Bodb was suspicious and sent messengers to Lir.

On receiving the messenger, Lir became sad, realising that Aoife had done some harmful act. He then set out, and at the shores of *Loch Dairbhreach*, he encountered the swans singing with human voices. They told him of Aoife's evil act, and Lir and his people lamented, though that night they stayed and listened to the swans' song. Lir reached Bodb, and told him of Aoife's treachery. Bodb cursed her, saying her suffering would be greater than the children's, and asked what the worst form of being was that she could imagine — Aoife stated a Demon of the air was the worst, and on this Bodb struck her with a druid's wand, metamorphosing her into such a demon, so she flew off and remained that way.

Bodb and the people of the De Danann went to Loch Dairbhreach and listened to the swans' singing. Milesians came too, and the music

calmed and delighted all who heard it. After three hundred years the time came for the swans to go north to the cold Sruth na Maoilé. At this time it was proclaimed that no swan should be killed in Erin. At the Maoilé a cruel storm separated them, and though they eventually reunited their time there was wretched, with extremes of cold and weather to contend with, but they could not leave, as it was their lot to stay in the waters there.

Eventually the swans came across a company of the De Danann and of the Milesians who had been seeking them, led by Aodh and Fergus sons of Bodb - near the mouth of the Banna. The swans enquired and received good news about the De Danann, Lir, and Bodb. After the allotted time the swans then left for Iorrus Domhnann. There they encountered a young man who took an account of their adventures.

One night at Iorrus, the cold and weather became so intense that the waters froze, and the swans' feet froze to the ice. Because of their suffering they pleaded to the "King of Heaven" to ease the plight of birds, and having and professing faith in a "true God, perfect, truly intelligent" their pleading was heard, and from then they were protected from storms and bad weather. Eventually the time allotted to Iorrus Domhnann passed and they decided to go to *Sioth Fionnachaidh*, where Lir lived.

However once there, they found it deserted, derelict, and overgrown. The next day they set off for *Inis Gluairé* — there many birds congregated around them at the lake. Eventually Saint Patrick and Christianity came to Ireland, and one day the holy man *Mochaomhóg* arrived at *Inis Gluairé* — the swans heard him ringing a bell calling matins, and became frightened at the sound.

However Fionnghuala declared the sound of the bell would liberate them from the curse of the spell, and so they listened to it. When it finished they sang a song. The holy man heard their song, and discovered that it was swans that sang it. Speaking to them he asked if they were the Children of Lir, stating that he had travelled to that place for their sake.

The swans put their trust in the holy man, and allowed him to bind them with silver chains. The birds felt no fatigue or distress in their situation in the company of the monk. Eventually the account of the swans reached Deoch, the wife of Lairgnen, the King of Connacht — she asked him to get the swans for her. He sent messengers immediately but the monk Mochaomhóg refused, making Lairgnen angry. He went to Mochaimhóg himself, and attempted to grasp the swans, but on his touch the swans' feathers fell off revealing three very old men, and an old woman, all lean, and very bony. On this Lairgnen left.

Fionnghuala asked the monk to baptise them and to bury each, stating she sensed they were close to death. They were baptised, then died, and were buried. Mochaomhóg was sad for them. That was the fate of the children of Lir.

Reflection Question

At what point in your life were you not able to reveal your true self to the world?

Was this due to the actions of others or something from within yourself ?