

The Children of Lir

Long ago in Ireland, there was a chieftain of the Tuatha De Danann by the name of Lir. Lir was married to Aobh, the eldest daughter of the High King, and they had two children – a girl called Fionnuala and a boy called Aodh. They were a close family and there was great rejoicing when Aobh found that she was pregnant again. But things went badly at the birth, and shortly after the twins Fiachra and Conn were born, Aobh died.

Lir was inconsolable. He grieved fiercely and he thought his heart would never be whole again. He had his children, though, and they were the light of his days. After some time, he decided that they needed a mother, and he asked Aobh's sister Aoife to marry him and help him raise the children. Aoife was delighted, for she had always loved Lir and she was fond of the children. Over time, though, she realised that whatever love and affection Lir had left in him went to the children and there was nothing left for her. She became ill, and took to her bed. They were all happier without her, or so it seemed. She became jealous and hatred grew in her heart.

She determined to be rid of the children. One day she could bear it no more. She packed them all into her chariot and told them they were going to visit their grandfather. Her plan was to kill them on the way. The boys hopped in, ready for an adventure, but Fionnuala had had a warning dream the night before. She knew something was wrong. She didn't want to go. But she was a child. She had no choice. When they came to a remote part of Lake Derravaragh, Aoife called a halt. She had her knife at hand but when it came to it, she wavered. She couldn't do it. She sent them off into the water for a swim and once they were a little way out, she heard them laughing and the hate rose up in her again. Taking her druid staff, she struck the water and cast a spell, turning them into swans. 'You will stay this way until the woman from the south and the man from the north come together!' she shouted. People didn't mix much in those days, so it was a bit like saying 'until pigs fly!' She could see the shock in them as they began to transform and a terrible glee bubbled up in her. 'And you will spend 300 years here on Lake Derravaragh, 300 years on the Sea of Moyle, and 300 years on Inis Glora – each one more miserable than the one before!'

Aoife looked into Fionnuala's eyes and whatever she saw there brought her a shred of remorse. The spell she had cast was so strong that not even she could break it but she allowed the children to keep their human minds and voices, to sing the sweet music of the Sidhe, that has no equal in the human world. She left them there and continued to her father's house, well satisfied by her revenge.

When Aoife's father found she had come without the children he sent word to her husband. Lir knew straightaway something was wrong so he gathered his horses and his men and set off for his father-in-law's house. The children, swimming in swan form on the lake, heard the riders and called out to them. They told the story of Aoife's treachery and their father's heart broke all over again. 'Can't you come with us?' Lir asked them, but they were bound to the lake. They sang for their father and their friends that night and when morning came, they said a sad goodbye and Lir set off after Aoife.

When Bodb Dearg, Aoife's father, heard what she had done, he flew into a fierce rage. He was also a great enchanter and he turned her into a demon of the air, condemned to wander lonely and alone until the end of life and time. She flew away on the wind in that form, and she flies in it still, and sometimes if you listen very hard on a stormy night you might just be able to hear her screaming in the distance.

The Tuatha De Danann began to gather at Lake Derravaragh to listen to the song of the children of Lir and to keep them company. They were as happy there as they could be, for they had many friends.

But after 300 years, they could feel the enchantment pressing on them again and they knew it was time to move on. They said a sad farewell to all who loved them and they took to the wing, heading north to the Sea of Moyle. The people grieved to see them go, and an order was sent across the land that from that day, nobody was ever to kill or harm a swan in Ireland.

The Sea of Moyle was a harsh, barren place. The swans were cold and lonely, battered by the wind and the rain and the waves and the ice. Though they clung together, Fionnuala sheltering her brothers under her wings, at times they were forced apart by the elements. It was always such a fear that one of them would be lost and such a relief when they came back together again. Three hundred years they spent there, in constant torment, until at last the day came when they could fly west, to Inis Glora in north west Mayo.

But as they flew over their old homelands, all had changed. The Tuatha De Danann had gone into the hollow hills and nothing was as they had known it. They found a safe and sheltered spot on Inis Glora, in the north west of the country and there they settled for the next three hundred years. All the birds of the country gathered round to sing with them, so the lake became known as Loch na nÉan, or The Lake of Birds.

Ireland was changing as the centuries passed and as the third period of 300 years came to a close it wasn't just the birds that were making their home on Inis Glora. There was also a gentle hermit called Mochaomhóg who followed a new faith. And the swans would hear Mochaomhóg ringing the Matins bell, and after that, he would hear them singing the low sweet music of the Sidhe. And they got talking, and became friends. The swans were much impressed with the monk's wisdom and kindness and sometimes they would even pray together.

Another thing changed as the 900 years drew to a close – a prince from the north finally married a princess from the south. When the princess heard of these magical swans that lived on Inis Glora, nothing would satisfy her but that she must have them, and she sent off her new husband to get them for her. But Mochaomhóg protected the swans and would not give them up. The prince rose up in anger and grabbed at the birds but as he laid hands on them the enchantment fell away and he was left with three frail old men and an ancient woman with all the age and wear of their 900 years. That was enough for the prince and he made his escape as soon as he could.

Then Fionnuala asked her dear friend Mochaomhóg to baptise her and her brothers. ‘And when we die,’ she said, ‘which won’t be long now, bury us together with Conn on my right side, Fiachra on my left and Aodh before me in my arms. For that is how we clung together on the Sea of Moyle, and that is how we’ll rest together now.’

Mochaomhóg did as she asked. The children of Lir were baptised before they died, and their gentle friend Mochaomhóg the hermit wept for their loss, and the loss of the beautiful magical song of the Sidhe that would never again be heard lilting over the waters of Inis Glora.

Adapted by Margaret Brady from the version recorded by Lady Augusta Gregory in Gods and Fighting Men

Reflective Questions for The Children of Lir

1. In times of loss, abandonment or ‘orphanhood’ as shown in the story of the Children of Lir, how do you stay true to yourself (the ‘wise innocent’) when the world seems unfair?
2. Everyone’s family has its strengths and challenges. What strengths and challenges can you identify in your own family of origin?