

# Tales from Old Ireland

Malachy Doyle

Niamh Sharkey



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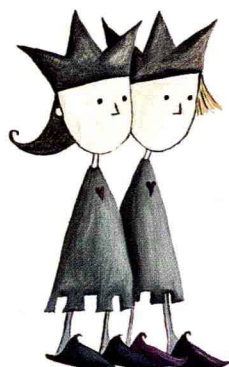


retold by  
**Malachy Doyle**

illustrated by  
**Niamh Sharkey**



In memory of my mother, Eileen Mary Doyle – M. D.



For Emer and  
Caoimhe – N. S.

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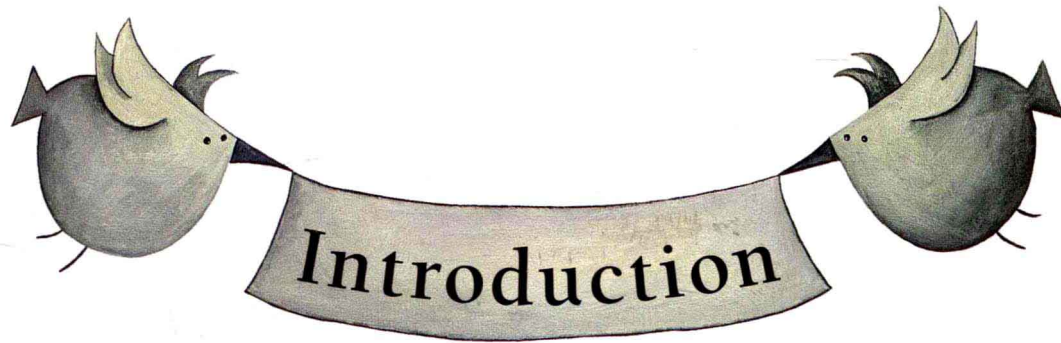
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**T**here is an old Irish proverb, 'A tune is more precious than birdsong, and a tale more precious than the wealth of the world.' As a child growing up in Whitehead, a quiet little town near Belfast, I was well aware that folk tales were some of my most precious possessions. I heard them, and later read them, as often as I could, and I love them still.

The Irish oral tradition is one of the richest in the world — stories have been told around our firesides for thousands of years and the tradition has never died. Some of the myths and legends, folk and fairy tales told now are the same ones that were heard in the times of the early Celts, long before Christianity came to Ireland. Others were written down by monks as early as the seventh century, but most were passed on solely by word of mouth. In the nineteenth century, people began to collect and publish the songs and stories that had survived, gathering them from the country people, mainly in the Irish language.

When the Irish Folklore Commission was set up in the 1930s, one of the ways it went about its job was to encourage schoolchildren to ask the oldest people in their area to tell them their stories. The greatest collection of folklore in the world was thus assembled, and it is now held at University College, Dublin.

Irish folk tales have a magic and a simplicity, a depth and a passion that appeal to people of all ages and nationalities. They have survived so long because of the great enjoyment they give both in the hearing and the telling. They are full of action and rhythm, with little description to slow them down. In Ireland, a story is rarely told the same way twice, so that you can hear or tell it many times and never feel bored. While some of the early heroic tales can be fairly gruesome, others are full of emotion and feeling, and there is a great strand of humour running through many of them.

This collection contains many of my favourite stories. I have retold them freely, as was always the way. Try reading them aloud — that's how they work best.

Malachy Doyle





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# Pronunciation



(Underlining indicates emphasis)

Aed	ee
Aherlow	ah-her- <u>low</u>
Aidan	<u>ey</u> -dan
Aoife	<u>ee</u> -fuh
Bevin	bay-veen
Cahir	care
Cappagh	<u>kapp</u> -a
Connacht	<u>konn</u> -ukt
Cormac	<u>kor</u> -mac
Craic	crack
Erin	<u>air</u> -in
Fiacra	<u>fee</u> -ak-ra
Fionn Mac Cumhail	finn ma- <u>cool</u>
Fionnuala	fin- <u>noo</u> -la
Inish Glora	inn-ish <u>glor</u> -a
Leinster	<u>len</u> -ster
Lir	lur
Lorcan	<u>lor</u> -kan
Niamh	<u>nee</u> -uv
Oisín	ush-een
poteen	puh- <u>cheen</u>
Tara	<u>tar</u> -a
Tír Chonaill	<u>teer</u> kon-ill
Tuatha Dé Danaan	<u>tooa</u> -ha juh <u>dan</u> -an
Tír na nÓg	<u>teer</u> na <u>noag</u>



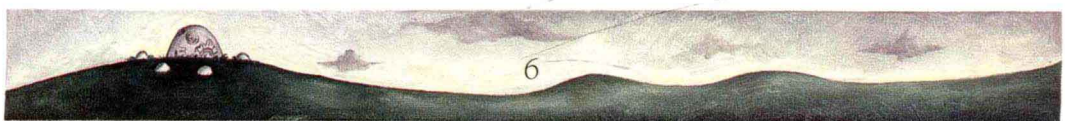


## The Children of Lir

**I**n Ireland long ago there was a king called Lir. He was one of the Tuatha Dé Danaan, a mighty and magical race, and he had a charming wife and four lovely children. Fionnuala was the eldest, the only girl, and she was as beautiful as sunshine in blossomed branches. Aed was like a young eagle in the sky, and Fiacra and Conn, the two youngest, were as cheerful as bubbling streams.

Everything was as it should be, until the queen took sick and died. The king's heart was broken, and the children missed their mother every minute of the day. They missed her games, her songs and stories, and most of all they missed her love.

Lir could see that they were sad, but he did not know how to help them. He decided to find a new wife as soon as possible, for





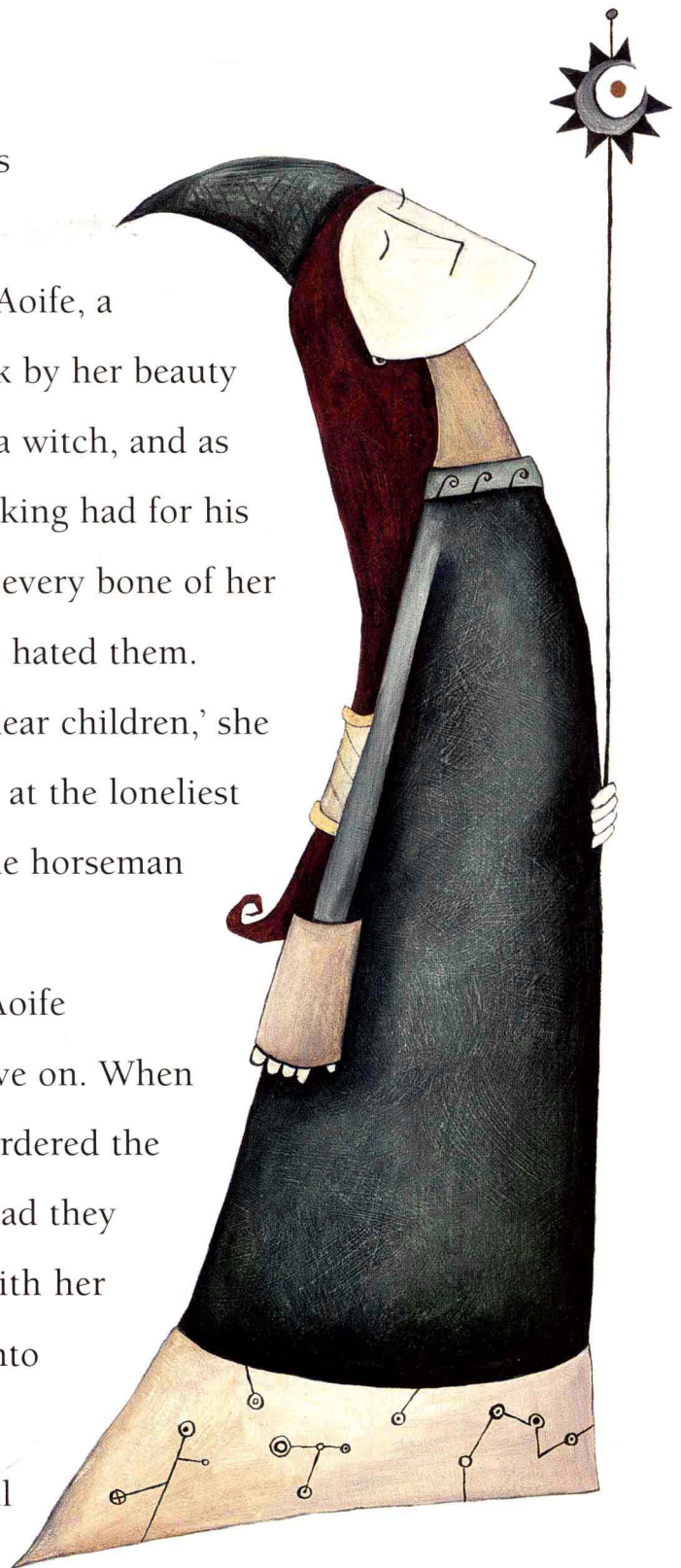
he could not bear to be alone and his children needed a mother.

And so it was that when he met Aoife, a stranger to those parts, he was struck by her beauty and blind to her evil. For Aoife was a witch, and as soon as she saw how much love the king had for his four children, she hated them. With every bone of her body and every hair of her head, she hated them.

‘Come for a ride in my chariot, dear children,’ she said one day. And when they arrived at the loneliest place in the province, she ordered the horseman to kill them.

‘I shall not!’ cried the man, but Aoife knocked him to the ground and drove on. When they arrived at the Great Lake, she ordered the children into the water. No sooner had they entered than she struck each one with her rod of enchantment, turning them into four swans.

‘For three hundred years you will swim on this lake,’ she gloated, ‘and then you will fly to the cold Sea of Moyle. For another three





hundred years you will shiver and suffer, before you can go to the Sea of Erris, for the final three hundred years!’

‘You are a wicked woman and my father will punish you!’ Fionnuala cried.

But Aoife only laughed. ‘You must wait until a druid with a shaven crown comes over the seas and you hear the sound of a bell, ringing for prayers. Only then will your exile be over,’ she said.

‘Will you do nothing to lighten our sorrow?’ pleaded Fionnuala. ‘Surely not even you are so cruel?’

‘You shall keep the power of speech and thought,’ answered the cruel queen, ‘and you will be able to sing more beautifully than the world has ever heard. That is all I shall give you.’

When the horseman returned to Lir to tell him what had happened, the king flew into a terrible rage. He called for his horse, summoned his men and rode out to find them. As he passed by the Great Lake, Fionnuala and her brothers cried out to him, and deep was his grief when he saw them.

‘Come to me, my children,’ he said, stroking their feathers. ‘I cannot give you back your shapes till the curse is ended, but come home with me and I shall try to make your lives more bearable.’

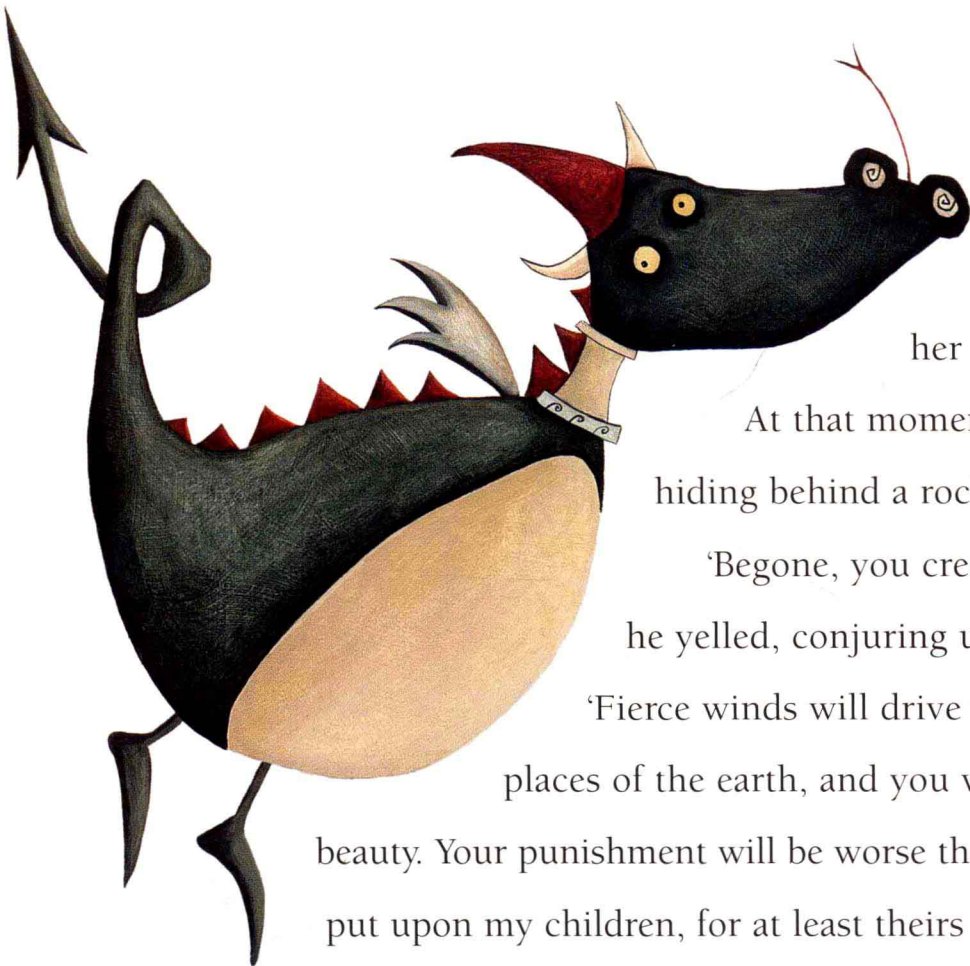
‘We are unable to leave this lake, Father,’ said Fionnuala. ‘And anyway, how could we return to the castle? Our stepmother











will be there and it  
would pain us  
to the heart to see  
her again.'

At that moment, Lir spotted Aoife  
hiding behind a rock, laughing slyly.

'Begone, you creature of the night!'  
he yelled, conjuring up his own magic.

'Fierce winds will drive you to the restless  
places of the earth, and you will lose all your  
beauty. Your punishment will be worse than the one you have  
put upon my children, for at least theirs will cease after nine  
hundred years. Yours will continue until the end of time!'

Then he turned Aoife into a demon, and with a howl of terror  
she vanished. That night, Lir and his men stayed by the lake,  
listening to the swans. Their songs were more beautiful than the  
world had ever heard.

The king made a law that no one in Ireland should kill a swan,  
for fear it might be one of his children. He promised a reward to  
anyone who could break the spell, but although many tried, no one  
succeeded. So every evening, King Lir would ride out to the Great  
Lake to speak to his children, and to hear their beautiful songs.





The king's heart was sorely broken. First he had lost his beloved queen, and now he had lost his sons and his daughter. Slowly the years passed, and one night he came to the lake to say goodbye, for he knew that he would not last another day.

'Farewell, my lovely children,' he said. 'My blessings be upon you, till the sea loses its salt and the trees forget to bud in spring-time. Farewell Fionnuala, my blossom; Aed, my eagle of the sky; and Conn and Fiacra, who brought me gladness always. May you find joy at the end of your troubles.'

And with that he lay down and died, and the four swans took to the air and circled around him, keening.

As time went on, more and more people heard about the swans. They flocked to the Great Lake, and all who heard their music were cured of their illness, pain or sorrow.

When the first three hundred years had passed, long after all the people who had known Lir and his children were gone, Fionnuala told her brothers that the time had come to fly north.

Into the air they rose, and far away they flew, and they never rested once till they came to the narrow Sea of Moyle that flows between Ireland and Scotland. A cold stormy sea it was, and lonely, and there was no one to listen to their singing. They had little heart for song anyway, as the bitter waves tossed them this







way and that, dashing them against sharp rocks when they tried to shelter near the shore. The winds from the north lashed their feathers with ice, and in winter snow whirled so densely they could hardly see.

In the pale mornings, Fionnuala would gather her brothers under her wings and comfort them, but three hundred sad and hungry years seem forever, and even she was in danger of forgetting the songs of their childhood and the days when life was good.

When, at last, they could leave the Sea of Moyle, Fionnuala said to her brothers, 'It is time for us to fly once more. We must seek the western sea, the Sea of Erris.'

First they flew south and then they flew west, until they came to the island of Inish Glora. The wild Atlantic was cold, but summer brought gentle winds and sunshine to warm their aching bones. Fionnuala kept her brothers' spirits up by singing the songs







of their youth, and by reminding Aed, Fiacra and Conn that the spell was slowly coming to an end, and in time they would be free.

When the last three hundred years had passed, Fionnuala said to her brothers, 'Let us fly to our father's house, to see how his people are.'

They were all day flying, for age and storm had slowed their wings, and at last they came to their old home. When they looked down they saw no light, they heard no music. The many-coloured house, the white hounds and the beautiful horses had disappeared. All they found was a mound of grass and nettles.

'Beauty is gone from the earth, brothers,' said Fionnuala, lamenting. 'We have no home.'

All night the Children of Lir lay in the long grass, silent with grief. When they felt the warmth of morning, they rose in the air and flew in wide circles, seeking their people. On the plains





where the Tuatha Dé Danaan had hunted silver-horned stags, all they could see were the dwellings of strangers, tending flocks and sowing corn.

‘Let us return to the isle of Inish Glora, my brothers,’ said Fionnuala. ‘For at least we shall have the warm winds of summer on our backs. And in time a bell, ringing for prayers, will lighten our sorrow.’

So they returned to the Sea of Erris, and in the shelter of the island they sang quietly to each other and waited.

And one evening, as the sun set, Fionnuala lifted her head, listening. Yes, there it was again, the clear, sweet ringing of a bell.

‘Surely this is the sound we’ve been waiting for,’ she cried.

They followed the noise up a grassy path, until they came to a small church. An old monk came out, and was startled to meet four swans on the doorstep.

‘What are you doing here, birds?’ he asked, scratching his head.

‘We’ve come to hear your bell,’ replied Fionnuala.

The monk jumped back, amazed to hear her speak, but Fionnuala told him their story, and all that their stepmother, Aoife, had done.

‘What a terrible life you’ve had, poor creatures,’ said the monk. ‘It was the sound of Patrick’s bell you heard. He has gone away







from here, leaving me to tend his church, but I know that he would want me to take care of you.'

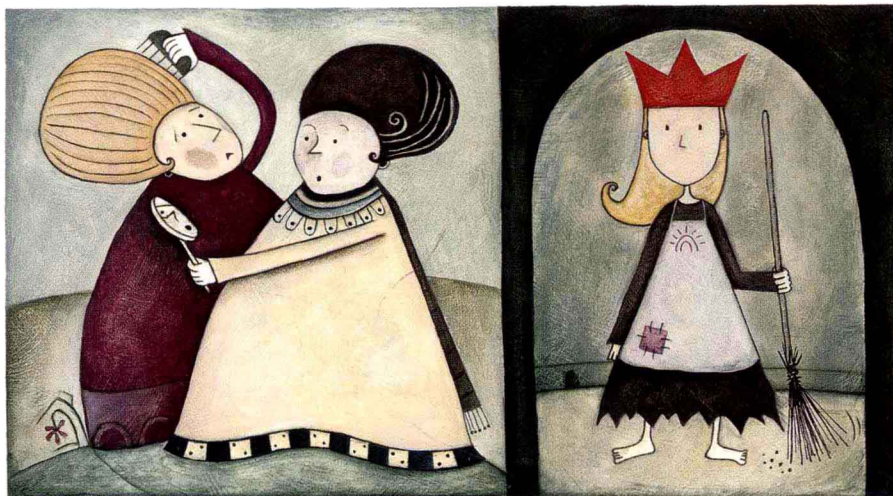
The holy man went inside the church and brought out some holy water, which he sprinkled on the swans while he prayed.

As soon as the water touched them, their feathers fell away and Fionnuala and her brothers were human again. But they were over nine hundred years old, and so they died. The monk dug a grave and buried them side by side, close to his little church.

At last they were together again, King Lir, his good wife and their four children.







## Fair, Brown and Trembling

**A** long time ago, before you were born, or your grandmother was born, or your great-great-grandmother before her, there was a king in Tír Chonaill and he had three daughters, Fair, Brown and Trembling.

Fair and Brown had new dresses whenever they wished, and went to church every Sunday. But Trembling, the youngest, was kept at home to clean and cook. Her sisters wouldn't let her out of the house at all, for she was by far the most beautiful of the three, and they were afraid she might marry first.

This went on for seven long years, and at the end of the seventh year the son of the King of Omany began to show an interest in the eldest sister.