



# StoryTell

## **The Children of Lir, written and read by Neil Dennehy**

Fado, fado... a long time ago there lived a great Irish King called Lir. Not to be confused with Mananan mac Lir, the Celtic sea god who was also a member of the Tuatha De - the magical, nature-loving race that once ruled Ireland. Nor should our Lir be mistaken for William Shakespeare's King Lear, this Lir was famous in his own right - powerful, wise and fair, he almost became the chief of the Tuatha De himself when the Dagda, their first king died. However, it was the Bodb Dearg, eldest son of the Dagda who was elected to become their new leader.

After claiming his throne, and wanting to ensure peace, loyalty and friendship between them, Bodb Dearg arranged a feast, to which he invited Lir as guest of honour and offered him the opportunity to marry one of his daughters. Lir chose the beautiful Aoibh, Bodb Dearg's eldest who was beautiful, delicate, wise and gentle.

Aoibh was happy with the match, and they fell deeply in love, and by the time four seasons had passed, Fionnuala their daughter was born, then came their son Aodh and later they were blessed with twin boys – Fiachra and Conn. Lir could not have been happier with his life. Unfortunately, as is the way of the world, all things must change and even the magic of the Tuatha De cannot hold onto perfect happiness forever. The effort of carrying and giving birth to the twins had been too much for the fragile Aoife and she never fully recovered. A short time later, her weakened body came to rest and her spirit crossed to the otherworld.

Lir was heartbroken, for himself and his little ones. He lost all interest in hunting, fishing or his responsibilities in leading his people. Only his love for the children kept him going. He found peace in watching them play and listening to their sweet voices.

Bodb Dearg, out of concern for his grandchildren and the people of Lir's kingdom suggested that his next daughter Aoife might marry Lir, providing the children with a mother and the king with a good wife so he could resume his duties. Aoife jumped at the chance. Secretly, she had wanted Lir to choose her as his wife the day of her father's feast. Like her older sister she was beautiful, intelligent and trained in the ways of magic, but she was made of tougher stuff and lacked the tender heart wisdom that came naturally to Aoibh.

Aoife tried to fill her sisters boots in all ways but didn't realise that it takes time for close connections to form, and though she was welcomed by Lir and his family into their home, they simply weren't ready to replace a mother just yet. Aoife soon came to resent the closeness, time and attention the children and their father had for one another.

She wanted to feel love, as we all do. She longed for the same love from her new family as she had seen them give their mother. With patience, Lir and his children would have come to love and accept her, not exactly as they did their mother... love expresses itself differently with each situation, but every bit as much. And, had she been a little wiser, Aoife would have known that the wonderful warm and cosy feeling that radiates from your chest and fills your entire body doesn't actually come from being loved by someone else anyway, we feel it when we allow love to flow through us for somebody else. That is the key!

And so, with each passing day her disappointment and feelings of hurt grew and the new stepmother became more and more jealous of the sweet, innocent children. Her heart became tighter, and as it closed off to kindness and compassion, her mind opened to darker thoughts, and she started to entertain plots and schemes that would give her the all the attention that she believed was rightfully hers.

Now, we all know that hurt people, hurt people so Aoife, in her heartache, began to consider ways to harm the children and she eventually came up with a plan to get rid of them completely. Only then, she thought, could she have Lir all to herself, start a family of her own with him, and finally be happy.

Since the king had been neglecting his duties to his people, he had much work to catch up on so Aoife offered to take the children down south to see Bodb Dearg on Slievenamon, co. Tipperary. The children, bursting with excitement to see their grandfather, convinced Lir that it was a good idea, and after a quick breakfast of eggs and toast, they packed their bags into a carriage and left with Aoife.

It was a very hot summer's day so as they were passing Lough Derryvarragh, just north of Mullingar, in the Co. of Westmeath, Aoife ordered her carriage driver to stop and sent all the children to cool off in the lake. The three boys howled with enthusiasm and tore down to the water as fast as their legs could carry them. Fionnuala, whose Tuatha De magic was already starting to show itself, sensed that something was wrong. She had a dream, just the night before of water, wings, storms and songs but couldn't make sense of it. Dreams are often like that – they tell us something but in a mixed-up muddled kind of a way. Despite her better judgement, Fionnuala followed the brothers into the water and then forgot her troubles as she joined in the splashing and the fun.

Aoife settled herself into a comfortable patch of grass a little way back from the water's edge, and seeing the children were paying her no attention she brought out a sleek hazel wand that was hidden in the long sleeve of her velvet purple cloak. She began to draw patterns and symbols in the air and whispered words of power and intent. Well versed in the art of magic, she understood that an intention when thought, good or bad, would only affect the one thinking it, but an intention spoken clearly and carefully is released out into the world to help or harm as it may. Then she added even more power to her words with a melody, singing a beautiful but terrible song.

The air directly in front of her shimmered as she wove her spell, wisps of darkness spinning into an orb surrounded by the symbols drawn with her magic wand. The floating globe pulsed with dark greys, purples and reds as it filled with Aoife's jealousy, bitterness and disappointments. However, even on our worst days, in our darkest moments, there is always some good in everyone, and this was the case with Aoife. Some of the kindness and love that was buried deep inside for her niece and nephews escaped through a tiny crack in her heart and glistening strands of gold flowed out to join the spiralling, hovering mass.

The children suddenly became aware of Aoife's wicked song. As they turned in her direction, she became deathly silent, looked them cruelly in the eyes and gently blew on the now completed spell. The children watched with mouths open as it floated toward the lake, above their heads and

suddenly expanded into a great storm. Fionnuala's heart sank as she realised that she should have trusted her instincts and that now it was too late to escape.

A deafening wind raged about their ears, waves crashed over their heads, and the lake water swirled in whirlpools all about them. Aoife smiled callously from the shore as she watched and waited for the four innocent children to disappear for good, just as she had imagined.

But then, all at once, something happened that none of them expected. The slivers of golden threads that had found their way into the incantation had also grown stronger and they sought out the four siblings that were holding onto each other for dear life. They created a golden bubble around the children, sheltering them from the full force of the storm and the dark magic that would do them ill. It couldn't protect them entirely, but it did respond to their deepest wishes to stay together and to see and speak to their father again.

They began to transform into creatures that could weather such a storm, their necks became long and slender, their arms stretched and formed into wings, waterproof feathers of pure white formed all over their bodies and their mouths turned into vibrant orange beaks. When the golden magic of kindness and the dark power of the storm were finally spent, the clouds cleared, the wind became quiet and four of the most beautiful swans ever to grace the land were revealed, floating on the still water of lough Derravaragh.

Aoife was enraged to see that not only had they survived but that they could speak as she heard Fionnuala comfort her crying brothers. With her magic almost exhausted Aoife used what remained to curse the children to live as swans for 900 years, 300 on the midlands lake in which they now swam, 300 up north in the sea of Moyle between Ireland and Scotland, and the last 300 out west on the sea of Erris. And even then, after 900 years as swans, only when a King of the North marries a Queen of the South and the bell of a new religion rings, could her spell be broken and the children returned to human form. When her curse was cast, Aoife fled, in her carriage, for the safety of her father's house leaving the swans to their fate.

But Bodb Dearg was less than impressed to hear what Aoife had done to his only grandchildren, all that he had left of his own first-born daughter Aoibh. Infuriated, he took his own druid's wand and transformed Aoife into nothing more than the cold breath she had used to cause so much suffering. She became a chill wind that to this day causes shivers down spines, collars to be turned up around necks and makes you cold to your bones if you stay out in it too long.

When Lir heard of what had befallen his children, he went straight to Lough Derravaragh. Again, his heart was broken as he realised that nobody, magician, sorcerer, not even Bodb Dearg could undo the curse. But once more it was the sweet voices of his children that brought him peace. He spent the rest of his days by the lakeside, with the magical swan songs not just giving him comfort but their songs also healing him each day letting him live on for another 300 years. Many others heard of this, came to the lake and were cured by the magic of the swan song.

Even 3 centuries, as long as it seems, passes too quickly when you don't want it to end and one day an icy wind, that some say was Aoife returned to ensure her curse fulfilled, blew hard across the lake and forced the swans to take flight. It was time to say goodbye to their father, leave the lake of oaks and head north for the sea of Moyle.

If the first 300 years of their curse was somewhat pleasant, the next 300 in that stretch of water between Ireland and Scotland was anything but. In the spring, wild storms and violent waves dashed the rocks where the three brothers were sheltered under the wings of their sister. Aoife had noticed that in the worst weather local seals would congregate on one large rock, Carrigarone – the rock of the seals and knowing that it must offer some protection from the elements, she told her siblings to meet there whenever they became separated by the turbulent and unpredictable weather.

Summer was a little better but lonely without human visitors to speak or sing to. Winter was so cold that the sea itself iced over, and the swans often found their webbed feet and wing tips frozen to the rocks. Only the warmth of each other's bodies, as they huddled together gave them any reprieve. Every day was a lesson in working together and taking care of those closest to you.

Time often appears to pass more slowly in difficult situations, but it moves on all the same and after 300 years a bitter, whispering wind picked them up and drove the graceful birds inland over a landscape and a people that had changed dramatically while they were away. The shapes of the hills and valleys were the same but much of the great forests had been cleared to make fields as hunting and gathering gave way to farming. They winged their way towards their first home at Castlepollard but found only moss-covered ruins. They flew on to their grandfather's home at Slievenamon but didn't realise he now lived under the cairn, a huge pile of rocks, at the top of the mountain. While the children endured the wild storms of the north, the Tuatha De had all gone underground and become known as the Sidhe or fairies... myths and legends to the people that now lived on the land, just like the children of Lir had become fables themselves.

So, the four swans flew west to the sea of Erris, off the coast of county Mayo. With warmer air, more shelter and plenty of food, they were comfortable, happy even and they began to sing again for the first time in centuries. Though people rarely came there, from their favourite spot on the island of Inis Glor., their glorious music attracted birds of all sizes, colours, shapes and shades. It became a paradise for migrating geese, ducks, gulls and waders. Native birds from the mainland, Achill and the Aran Islands would flock there to what became known as "Lough na nean", the Lake of the birds, to listen and add their own melodies to the symphony of sounds.

During this time, a new religion was brought to Ireland by St. Patrick, and as its followers spread throughout the country, one day a holy man in simple robes, named Mochaomhog arrived on a small rowing boat to Inis Glor. He couldn't believe his ears when he heard the angelic music floating on the sea breeze, nor his own eyes when he found it coming from four beautiful swans and an orchestra of birds. He fainted on the spot when they saw him approach and began to speak to him in human voices. Luckily a thick soft, mossy mound cushioned his fall and when he awoke, Fionnuala spoke gently as she told him a story that he too had heard but believed was only a fairytale.

Mochaomhog chose to stay on the island paradise and build a small church. When his work was done each day, he would share stories with the from the mainland and of his god, religion and the bible swans and they in return told him tales of the old gods and their magic. They enjoyed each other's company and time passed quickly.

One day a new sound came to the island when Mochaomhog rang, for the first time, the bell that he had just installed to finish his church. The swans stopped for a moment as they recognised what this could mean and then sang even more joyously than before, waiting to be transformed back into their human forms... but nothing happened. They asked Mochaomhog to ring it again, as loudly as he could for as long as his arms would allow... still their feathers, wings, webbed feet and beaks remained.

That evening Fionnuala spoke once more of the curse that had been placed upon them 900 years before. She remembered a part that had been long forgotten, like a dream that is just out of reach – for the curse to end, a king from the north must marry a queen from the south. Luckily, on one of his overnight trips to the mainland for building supplies and after having a little too much wine at a pub, Mochaomhog had told the locals that the children of Lir were real and living on Inis Glor.

None of them believed it but the story spread of the hermit priest that spent too much time alone on the island and now believed in fairytales. It reached the ears of Lairgnean a King of the North who intended to marry Deoch a princess of the South. He knew that she loved the story of the children of Lir and if there were any chance that he could have them as a wedding gift for his bride he would have to go to Inis Glor to see for himself.

Lairgnean arrived at the island with a small band of warriors to meet the holy man and ask for the birds, but Mochaomhog could not give what he did not own. He didn't believe that any person could own any creature of nature. They were each their own. Lairgnean, went to the swans himself and told them of his desire and when they too refused, he ordered his men to grab them, but they did not get a chance.

Hearing the northern king's intention to marry a woman from the south was enough to fulfil the final part of the curse. A chill wind blew in from the sea, surrounding the swans and keeping the men back in a flurry of feathers. When it died down, four humans lay on the soft grass, but they were not children. Their hair was as white as the feathers they had worn, their skin as wrinkled as their webbed feet. They looked every day of the 900 years they had lived.

Mochaomhog, being a kind man, covered them in his own cloak and, realising that their time left on this earth was short, he took out some holy water to baptise them. But, as he did so, a mound of earth just yards away suddenly split open with a flash of lightening, revealing a doorway to the underground world of the fair folk. A host of Tuatha De marched from the mound, each one tall and elegant with beautiful features and glimmering robes. The northern king and his men stepped back as the Sidhe surrounded the children of Lir, softly whispering words of magic and comfort to them in the warm glow of the evening light. Fionnuala, Aodh, Fiachra and Conn drifted into a deep sleep as the magic restored their youth. In that moment the northern king vowed to proclaim a new law, one that survives to this day, that no swan shall ever be harmed on the island of Eire or her waters.

Picking them up gently, the Tuatha De carried the children of Lir to the seashore where a shimmering golden path stretched out across the calm water toward the setting sun. Mochaomhog gazed in silent wonder as the entire party of magical beings strode gracefully away along its glistening passageway.

Ireland was changing, it seemed to be getting smaller as North and South were coming together, people's connection with the land, the water, animals and trees gave way to new ways of living and new beliefs and faiths were emerging. But still, Mochaomhog knew, as he watched the Tuatha De vanish into the horizon, that their magic and wisdom would live on in our stories and in our very bones to be reclaimed when we are ready.

If you sit quietly in nature, for even a few minutes, listen carefully and breathe softly I'm sure you will hear their gentle whispers, feel the magic tingling through your body and know they never really left.