

THAT IRISH HERO FINN.

By Mary Keelan.

"Everyone is a visionary, if you scratch him deep enough", said William Butler Yeats. "But the Celt is a visionary without scratching."

The literature of Ireland is not goblin, graveyard or ghost stories; is not leprechauns, banshees and weefolk; is not alcoholics and angry young men. Though these have come to be synonymous with all that is Irish, such generalization is a mistake. It is wrong to take Behan as all that is twentieth century Ireland, just as it is wrong to believe in Kerouac as all that is 1959 America. To get at the heart of a people, one must get at the core of their literature; to get at the core of the Irish literature one must go back, back, back to the cycle literature, to the tales of the Red Branch and the Fenian Cycles. Of special interest is the literature of the Fenian Cycle.

As the Gaelic language is the oldest surviving vernacular in the world today, a unique charm, whether of antiquity or of romance, envelops the stories that had their origins in this tongue. There were many cycles of these stories that grew up in the early third century- a cycle being the balladry, tales, and hero legends of a particular geographic area, and in a general way they could be compared to the Eddas of the Scandinavian countries.

Just as the people of Ireland are divided into the adventurous, hardy, war loving and unflinching and into the wistful, nature loving and romantic, so are the cycles. The hardy, war loving can be linked with the Red Branch cycle which is military and aristocratic; whereas, the nature loving and romantic can be aligned with the Fenian cycle which developed after the Red Branch

and is concerned with the wild life of nature. Aodh De Blacam makes the following distinction: "The Red Branch Cycle was written for a warlike caste of rulers, the Fenian for a whole community - for a virile, sensitive, agricultural race, which could enjoy tales of enchantment that were born of contemplation of the star in the mountain mist, and poems that recalled the sweetness of the blackbird's song. Whereas the Red Branch Cycle has classical firmness and relates every event to a single age, the Fenian Cycle resembles a Gothic building, romantic and fluid in form, the creation of the people, borrowing from every age."

The Fenian cycle centers not so much on pagan gods as on an ideal hero, Finn, who embodies many of the qualities of the epic hero yet is close to the ordinary people. He is someone who has a tragic flaw-selfishness- yet he is a person who commands the honor and allegiance of a nation. To some he appears a paradox of strength and sensitivity, idealism and pragmatism, open courage and conniving cowardice.

Surrounding the origins of the hero Finn, is the legend of the salmon. After his father had been killed in battle, Finn was hurried away to the forest and reared secretly, so that the