

# THREADING THE TÁIN WESTMEATH

# About 'Threading the Táin'

'Threading the Táin' is a community, visual arts project, where five tapestries have been created to celebrate the Táin Bó Cúailnge. Each tapestry depicts scenes from the great epic that relates to each of the five counties through which the Táin March Festival traces the route of the Táin; namely Roscommon, Longford, Westmeath, Meath and Louth. A variety of textile techniques have been used in the creation of the tapestries, including dyeing, painting, felting, appliqué, faux chenille, hand embroidery, quilting and hand and machine sewing. The project was helmed by Louth based artist Sophie Coyle and Sophie has worked closely with archeologist Paul Gosling, to determine which parts of the story to include in the tapestry. The project was coordinated by a textile artist in each county and a team of over 40 community sewers. When placed together the five tapestries portray the overall story of the Táin, while each piece stands alone as an individual artwork.

## Lead Artist: Sophie Coyle

Roscommon	Longford	Westmeath	Meath	Louth
Textile Artist: Frances Crowe	Textile Artist: Catherine Gray	Textile Artist: Claire Delabre	Textile Artist: Ina Olahan	Textile Artist: Úna Curley
Volunteers: Geraldine Beirne Immacula Deane Franziska Lienberger Rosaleen Martin Ríona McGuinness Lynn Naughton	Volunteers: Elise Moxham Ursula Burke Sadie Sheridan Trish Ryding Marie English Anna D Atkinson Breda Clarke	Volunteers: Margaret Cunnane Bridie Scally Brigid Mayers Trish Ryding Paula Sheridan	Volunteers: Margaret Dean Sinead Leahy-McCabe Antoinette Flanagan Jennifer Richardson Ann Campion Tracy Owen-Griffiths Anne Reilly Philomena Barrett Cosette Olohan Dympna Smith	Volunteers: Marian Conway Frances Byrne Aoife Carr Fiona Lennon Margaret Watters Ann Nixon Deanna McGuinness Nuala McArdle Muriel Gorman Mary Gilsean Mary Grannell-Dwyer Anne Thompson Coleen Hardy

Threading the Táin is produced by An Táin Arts Centre in association with Creative Spark. Funded by the Creative Ireland Programme 2021 and each of the five Local Authorities. The exhibition was launched in the An Táin Arts Centre, Dundalk on 22nd April 2022 and Áras an Chontae, Roscommon on 24th June 2022



# Roscommon Tapestry

The central figure in this panel is Queen Medb (1). The war begins because of a grudge she holds against her husband Ailill who is equal to her in all possessions save for a white bull (Finnbennach) for which she does not have the match. She hears of the Brown Bull of Cooley (Donn Cúailnge) and asks for the lend of it, but her messengers offend the bull-owner who then refuses them the bull. Medb then decides to take it by force and the war ensues.

Medb's palace was in Rathcroghan or Crúachain Aí, near Tulsk in Co. Roscommon. This is depicted at the top of the tapestry (2). It is here that the armies from the five provinces of Ireland gathered to fight for Medb: hence the five colours (3).

By Medb's left shoulder is Fert Fergusa, the burial mound of Fergus Mac Róich at Énloch: probably Loughnaneane, on the outskirts of Roscommon town (4). Fergus was an exiled King of Ulster whom Medb was able to recruit as an army scout and leader. He became her lover on the campaign. The significance of his burial mound lies in how the story of the Táin was found once again after being lost for hundreds of years. A young man called Muirgen Mac Senchán – the son of Senchán Torpéist, the chief poet of Ireland – came across Fergus's burial mound, and the ghost of Fergus rose up and recounted the tale to him. Below Medb is Targba i Magh nÁi (5), a bull ring purported to be the place where the final fight between the Brown Bull (Donn Cúailnge) and the White Bull (Finnbennach) occurred. The White Bull was slain, and the Brown Bull then made its way back across Ireland to Cooley, scattering parts of the White Bull as it went e.g. at Athlone or Áth Luain (the ford of the bull's loin or shank). The figure beneath the bull ring is Feidelm (6), a young prophetess whom Medb encountered at the beginning of the story. She bade Feidelm tell her the outcome of the quest to capture the Brown Bull and Feidelm said, 'I see crimson, I see red.' Although it was not a promising prophecy, Medb continued undaunted.

To the right of Feidelm is Lough Carcin, now Ardakillin Lough in Co. Roscommon (7). In medieval times, there were multiple crannog dwellings here belonging to an important branch of the Ó Conchobhair family. This was where Medb's army made their first camp (8).



Lead Artist: Sophie Coyle

Textile Artist: Frances Crowe

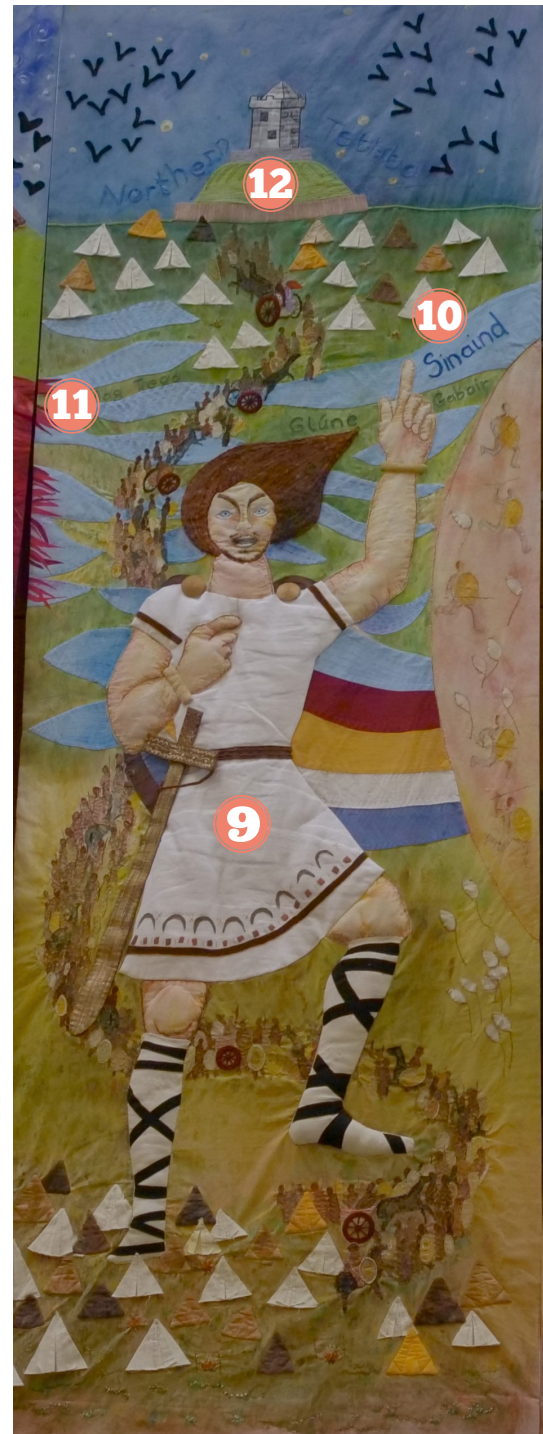
Volunteers: Geraldine Beirne, Immacula Deane,

Franziska Lienberger, Rosaleen Martin, Ríona McGuinness

& Lynn Naughton



# Longford Tapestry



Fergus Mac Róich is the central figure in this tapestry (9). He was an exiled Ulster King who agreed to fight for Medb and Ailill and to show them the best route across Ireland.

He was very well known to Cúchulainn who valued him as a great warrior and countryman. Fergus Mac Róich had the reputation of being a bit of a Romeo as he was very well endowed.

He and Medb have an affair during the campaign, but he still has loyalties to Ulster. Knowing that his kinsmen are suffering the pangs of childbirth – a curse they undergo for a certain period every time Ulster is attacked – Fergus realises that they are unable to defend themselves. After they cross the River Shannon (Sinaind) at Clondara (Glúne Gabair) (10), he tries to buy time by misleading Medb's forces on a meandering path through the bogs and streams of Longford: Mag Trego (11). You can see the army trailing off from their camp at the bottom of the panel, and through Fergus's legs as he points the way.

The army eventually reach Northern Tethba and make camp in Granard at what is now the Anglo-Norman motte-castle (12).

Lead Artist: Sophie Coyle

Textile Artist: Catherine Gray

Volunteers: Elise Moxham, Ursula Burke, Sadie Sheridan, Trish Ryding, Marie English, Anna D Atkinson & Breda Clarke





# Westmeath Tapestry

The final act of the Táin is a great battle – the Last Battle – which takes place near Ballymore between the Men of Ireland (Medb and Ailill's Army) and the men of Ulster. This is represented by the clashing forces in the centre of the panel – soldiers with spears, swords and shields, chariots and horses. Those from Connacht are on the left (13), those from Ulster are emerging out of the mist on the right (14). In their midst is Cúchulainn, his tattooed body warped in battle-fury (15).

At the centre, are the figures of Fergus Mac Róich and King Conchobar as they are about to come to blows (16). Fergus attacks with his rainbow sword (Caladbolg). Conchobar with his white shield (Óchain) which wails as it goes into battle. Looming from the top left is Némain (17), the Goddess of War, who strikes fear into the hearts of men on both sides as she sees fit, and can cause warriors to go mad and kill themselves. She is accompanied by a flock of crows.

Towards the bottom of the panel, centrally placed, squats Queen Medb receiving her 'gush of blood' as it is described in the story (18). The place where this occurred is called Fual Medba which is unlocated but probably lay between Ballymore and Athlone. This happens on the return journey as her armies bring the Brown Bull back towards Connacht. Medb is forced to stop even as the Ulstermen pursue her defeated army. The gush of blood carves out three large channels. While this is happening Cúchulainn creeps up behind her but does not kill her for his chivalry prevents it. Flanking Medb are ravens amongst whom is the Mórrígan, the Goddess of Death (19). Below Medb to the right, is the stepped mound on Slemain Midi (20), now Slanemore hill, north-west of Mullingar. On the eve of the Last Battle, the Ulster warriors build a mound or throne for their leader, King Conchobar mac Nessa.

Below Medb to the left, is Athais Midhe (21), now Knockastha Hill, near Rosemount, to which Medb's warriors retreated to dress their wounds after the Last Battle.

At the top of the tapestry is the Hill of Uisneach (22) the Celtic ceremonial site and geographic centre of Ireland. The fire lit on top of the hill acted as a central beacon from which hilltop fires throughout Ireland were lit. In the Táin, it is one of the high places from which Medb's army were driven westwards during the Last Battle.



Lead Artist: Sophie Coyle

Textile Artist: Claire Delabre

Volunteers: Margaret Cunnane, Bridie Scally, Brigid Mayes,  
Trish Ryding & Paula Sheridan



# Meath Tapestry



The central figure in this tapestry is the god Lúgh (23). He is portrayed as a warrior, a king, a master craftsman and a saviour. He is associated with skill and mastery in multiple disciplines, including the arts. He is the god of the harvest: the month of August (Lughnasadh) is named after him. He was a man as well as a god, and the mythical father of Cúchulainn. By the end of the Táin, Cúchulainn has been very badly wounded in defending Ulster singlehandedly (24) so Lúgh appears at Fert Sciaich, now Skeagh Hill, to watch over his healing body for a week and guard him.

Behind Lúgh to the right, is the Brown Bull (Donn Cúailnge) (25). Having defeated the White Bull (Finnbennach), he pauses at Crossa Caíl – now Crossakeel, Co. Meath – on his return journey to Ulster and bellows loudly upon seeing his homeland on the northern horizon.

Above and behind Lúgh, we see the fog rolling over Mide, the plains of Meath (26). Animals run scared from it, and it is full of flashing sparks and lightening. We are told this fog has been created by the heat and fury of the men of Ulster as they wake from their curse and realise they are under attack and must rush to the battle. The sparks are their eyes.

At the top right of the panel is the standing stone at Balnagon (27), just east of Crossakeel, Co. Meath, on which Cúchulainn placed a message in ogham issuing a challenge to Medb's army. None of her warriors could complete it so instead they moved around it. Further on they came across more challenges placed by Cúchulainn who was seeking to buy a bit of time. One of these was a three-pronged fork (28) placed in the bed of a ford – Áth nGabla on the Meath/Louth border near Monknewtown – upon which he placed the heads of the three warriors who had challenged him.

Lastly in this panel is the heavy snowfall that swamped Medb's encampment at Kells, Co. Meath. The snow fell so deep it came up to the army's chests (29).

Lead Artist: Sophie Coyle

Textile Artist: Ina Olohan

Volunteers: Margaret Dean, Sinead Leahy-McCabe,

Antoinette Flanagan, Jennifer Richardson, Ann Campion, Tracy Owen-Griffiths, Anne Reilly, Philomena Barrett, Cosette Olhan & Dympna Smith





# Louth Tapestry

Louth is the home of Cúchulainn, and it is he who is left with the job of single-handedly defending Ulster against Medb's armies. He forms the central figure in this panel (30). Though skilled, he was a very young warrior, only seventeen years old. At the outset, he was not taken seriously by Medb's warriors, but they came to realise his full powers as they progressed into Ulster.

Below him to the right (31), we see him as a young boy (then called Setanta) playing with his hurl and sliotar, a hound at his heels.

At the top of the panel, are the hills of the Cooley Peninsula (32). Slieve Foy is depicted along the famous Medb's Gap where the army in their fury cut a valley through the summit of Barnavave Mountain. Medb's army are shown trailing across the hills pillaging and plundering the villages of Cooley and south Armagh. They are searching for the Brown Bull, which had been hidden up around Slieve Gullion. Their quest for the bull was not made easy as the rivers of Cooley (33) rose up against them and drowned many of their soldiers: hence the depiction of waves at the foot of the hills.

To the right of Cúchulainn, is the standing stone Lia Toll (34), now Hurlstone, near Smarmore, Co. Louth. It was here that the Ulster warrior Cethern, pierced the stone with his sword, thinking it was Queen Medb's husband Ailill.

Below Cúchulainn is the slumped figure of Finnabair – Medb and Ailill's beautiful daughter (35). Over the course of the campaign they had promised her to so many warriors that it eventually took its toll and Finnabair died broken-hearted because so many warriors lost their lives. The place where she died is Finnabair Sléibe (white water of the mountain), in the hills around Mount Oriel, near Collon, Co. Louth.

Below her are the figures of Cúchulainn and his foster-brother Fer Diad during their famous single combat (36). Because they had such a close relationship, and were so reluctant to fight one another, at the end of each day's combat they would embrace and then tend to each other's wounds. Fer Diad was eventually killed on the fourth day in the ford on the River Dee at Áth Fherdia, now Ardee.



Lead Artist: Sophie Coyle

Textile Artist: Úna Curley

Volunteers: Marian Conway, Frances Byrne, Aoife Carr, Fiona Lennon, Margaret Watters, Ann Nixon, Deanna McGuinness, Nuala McArdle, Muriel Gorman, Mary Gilsenan, Mary Grannell-Dwyer, Anne Thompson & Coleen Hardy



# What is Táin Bó Cúailnge?

Táin Bó Cúailnge – the driving off of the cattle of Cooley – is the story of a cattle raid reputed to have taken place during winter sometime about the time of Christ. Set in a rural, tribal and pagan Ireland, it is peopled with fearless warriors, haughty queens and kings, and prize bulls. It is ranked among Ireland's greatest literary classics and frequently described as 'epic literature'. This sobriquet arises from its comparison to the heroic tales of Greece and recent scholarship suggests that the stimulus for its composition was the translation of the story of Troy (Togail Troí) into Irish in the 10th century. The more traditional 'nativist' view sees the Táin originating, fully-formed, from oral tradition to be set down on vellum in the 7th century. What is clear is that Táin Bó Cúailnge is not unique but forms part of a small group of tána bó – cattle raiding stories – themselves part of the Ulster Cycle, one of four great collections of medieval Irish literature. This cycle comprises about 50 stories with Táin Bó Cúailnge being the central tale. Táin Bó Cúailnge is preserved in a number of medieval manuscripts of which the Book of the Dun Cow (Lebor na hUidre, circa 1100) and the Book of Leinster (circa 1160) are the best known. A number of versions or 'recensions' of the story exist, that known as Recension 2 being the most polished. Post 1200, its popularity waned and by the early 1800's, Táin Bó Cúailnge had fallen out of popular memory. However, it was revived at the turn of the 20th century through a series of classic translations and retellings, of which Lady Gregory's Cuchulain of Muirthemne (1902) is the most memorable, albeit Thomas Kinsella's Táin (1969) is now the most popular.

Táin Bó Cúailnge is set in time at the beginning of the Common Era (0 BC/AD), in an Ireland peopled by pagan septs and tribal centres. The story unfolds over one winter, beginning at Samhain (Halloween) and ending just after Imbolc (Brigid's Day). It recounts how Queen Medb of Connacht becomes envious that her husband Ailill owns a prize bull, Finnbennach, which is better than any in her herds. Learning of the existence of a finer bull, Donn Cúailnge, she resolves to steal it from its homeland in south-east Ulster. She launches a cattle raid from Crúachain (Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon) to Cúailnge (Cooley, north Louth). Amongst her warriors is Fergus Mac Ríoch, an exiled Ulster king who is also her lover. As Medb's army approaches Ulster, its warriors are laid low by a curse which sees them suffer the pains of child-birthing. The defence of Ulster falls to the youthful warrior, Cúchulainn. Fergus, troubled by feelings of loyalty towards his kinsmen, connives with Cúchulainn to deceive and delay Medb's forces. Via a series of skirmishes and single-combats, culminating in the fight with Fer Diad at Ardee in Louth, Cúchulainn harries the Connacht army until the Ulstermen recover from their curse. Despite his efforts, Queen Medb captures Donn Cúailnge and retreats westwards towards the Shannon as spring begins. The Ulstermen, led by King Conchobhar, finally rouse themselves, pursue the Connacht army, and engage them in a tumultuous battle near Ballymore in Westmeath. Though defeated, Medb succeeds in brining Donn Cúailnge across the Shannon at Athlone, and back to Rathcroghan. The two bulls clash, Donn Cúailnge triumphs but ultimately dies of his wounds. Connacht makes peace with Ulster.

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## A Note on Spellings

Medieval orthography is full of inconsistencies even within the same manuscript text. It is often difficult to decide whether this is the result of scribal error or grammatical context (words in genitive case, nominative case, etc). Táin Bó Cúailnge is no exception and the fact that the story survives in three major versions adds to this complexity. For the purposes of this project, we have followed the spellings found in the indexes of 'Places, Peoples, River' in Cecile Rahily's authoritative editions of the story: Táin Bó Cúailnge Recension 1, and Táin Bó Cúailnge in the Book of Leinster (Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies, 1967 and 1976).

Booklet Text courtesy of PJG, Eanáir 2022