

The Táin March: an analysis of a regional walking/heritage festival

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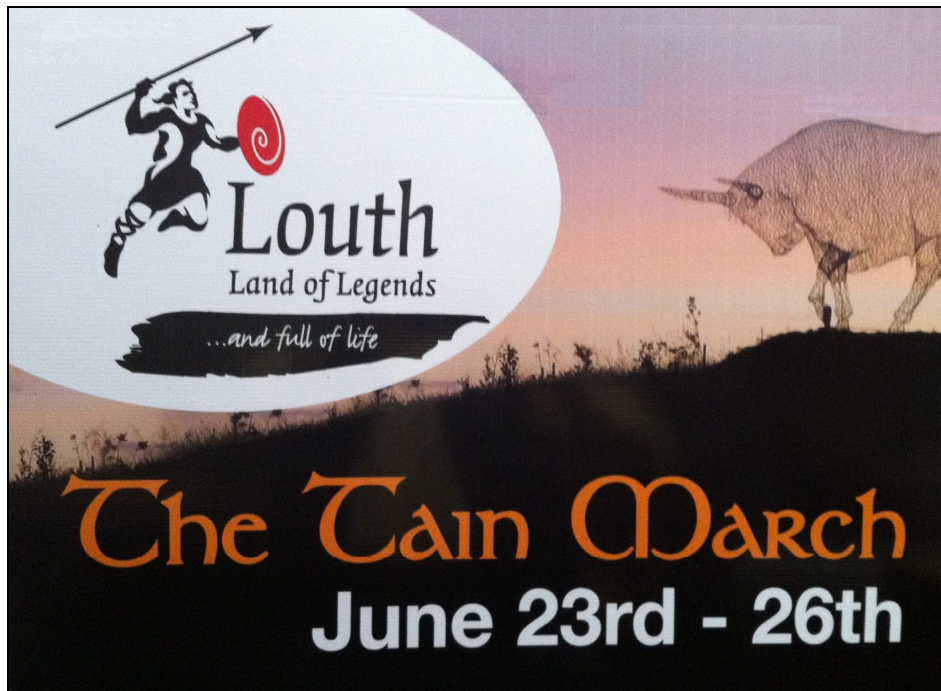


Figure 1: Extract from the poster advertising the inaugural *Táin March* of 2011. Note how the banner incorporates the ‘Louth Land of Legends’ logo (top left), Louth Tourism’s new marketing initiative for the county which was launched in 2011 (Source: *The Táin March*, 2011).

Introduction

This paper owes its origins to the research interests of Paul Gosling, a lecturer in Built Heritage in the College of Tourism and Arts, Galway Mayo-Institute of Technology (GMIT). Having conducted many fieldtrips through the historic landscapes of Cooley, Co. Louth, he has developed an interest in the topography of Ireland’s most famous literary epic, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. Arising from this, he is researching the toponymic aspects of the story (Gosling 2011; 2012a; 2012b). When *The Táin March* was

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established in 2011, Paul made contact with the organisers and began working with them on ensuring, as far as possible, the historic accuracy of the route being followed.

Aron Donnelly is currently a fourth year student on the BA (Honours) in Heritage Studies programme in GMIT. For his final year research dissertation, he has been evaluating *The Táin March* as an example of community-based heritage tourism along with researching a wholeway walking route from Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon to Carlingford, Co. Louth (Donnelly 2013).

What is *The Táin March*?

The Táin March is a not-for-profit, inter-community initiative based in Co. Louth which was established in 2011 (Fig. 1). Broadly speaking, its aim is to promote and celebrate the heritage of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* via walking, re-enactment, exhibitions and drama. At present, it comprises a three-day, weekend festival held annually in June. Its activities are currently limited to Co. Louth with a c.60 km walking route beginning in Ardee and ending in Carlingford (Fig. 2). However, the long-term aim is to motivate participation by communities along the whole *Táin* route from Rathcroghan, near Tulsk, Co. Roscommon to Carlingford, Cooley, Co. Louth (Fig. 3).

Like many initiatives of this kind, there is a raft of community activists and local organisations behind the project. These include founding members like Kevin Woods of Carlingford and Tim Mullins, proprietor of *Glen Gat*, an award-winning B&B in Dundalk which is themed on the *Táin*. Other key players comprise Frances Taylor of Carlingford & Mourne Region Ltd, Hughie O'Neill of O'Neill's Menswear in Ardee, Margaret Barry and Brendan Murphy of Tallanstown, Carlingford Cooley Tourism Association, and Ardee Traders & Business Association. The festival has also received crucial support from Michael McCabe, Business Development Manager with Louth Local Authorities and Andrew Mawhinney of Dundalk Town Centre Commercial Manager's Office (TCCM).

Perhaps the most innovative aspect of *The Táin March* is the idea of actively tracing the route of Queen Medb's army through Louth rather than focusing on the Ulster hero, Cú Chulainn, as has been the tradition in local heritage (Gribben 1988, 1990). Alongside this, the organisers have actively sought to engage the support and participation of local communities along the route from the start point in Ardee (Fig. 2). Thus, local groups in the villages of Tallanstown, Louth, Knockbridge and Bellurgan have all played a part in the hosting and/or contributing to *The March* as it passes through their localities (see Tallanstown 2013, under 'Tain March 2012').

The main showpieces of the festival are held in Ardee, Dundalk and Carlingford, three of the main population centres in Louth. In these towns, events with a mass appeal, including re-enactments, musical performances and banquets, have been successfully staged in 2011 and 2012. Though the numbers participating have so far been small – there were eight in the core-group of re-enactors who walked the route in 2012 – it is estimated that 1,200 to 1,500 people attended the various events along the way.



Figure 2: Extract from the 'TÁIN TRAIL Cycling & Touring Route' map produced by the East Coast & Midlands Tourism (Moriarty c.1996). *The Tain March* festival currently re-traces only a small part of the route, from Ardee through Dundalk to Carlingford, a total of 63 km.

What is the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*?

The *Táin* or to give it its full title, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, is the longest and most important tale in the Ulster Cycle, one of the four great cycles or sets of stories from early medieval Ireland. It translates simply as the Cattle-raid of Cooley. The Ulster Cycle comprises a series of inter-related stories which recount the exploits of the Ulaid (Ulstermen). They primarily focus on King Conchobor (Conor) and the champions of the Red Branch, particularly Cú Chulainn, the Hound of Ulster. *Táin Bó Cúailnge* tells how Queen Medb of Connacht is envious that her husband Ailill owns a prize bull, *Finnbennach*, the White-horned, which is better than any in her herd. She musters an army and launches a cattle-raid into Ulster in order to steal its equal, the *Donn Cúailnge*, the Brown Bull of Cooley (Fig. 3). The Ulstermen are laid low by a periodic curse (the pangs of childbirth) which renders them unfit for battle every time the province is attacked. The defence of Ulster is thus undertaken by the youthful Cú Chulainn. Through a series of skirmishes and single-combats, he holds back the Connacht army until the Ulstermen recover from their debility. In a final battle, the Ulstermen defeat Medb's forces. However, Queen Medb succeeds in capturing the Brown Bull and brings him back to Rathcroghan. The two bulls clash, *Donn Cúailnge* triumphs but then dies of his wounds. Connacht makes peace with Ulster (Carson 2007, xi).

The *Táin* has been preserved in three versions or recensions. Recension I is found in the early 12th century *Lebor na hUidre* (Book of the Dun Cow) and the late 14th century *Leabhar Buidhe Leacáin* (Yellow Book of Lecan). Recension II is contained in the mid-12th century *An Leabhar Laighneach* (The Book of Leinster). The latter version represents a rationalisation and expansion of the story. Inconsistencies present in Recension I have been removed and some new material, such as The Pillow-talk, has been added (Ó hUiginn 1992; Caerwyn Williams and Ford 1992, 96-107). Recension III is preserved in fragmentary form in two 13-14th century manuscripts.

In recent times, two fine translations of the epic have been published – by Thomas Kinsella (1969, 1970) and Ciaran Carson (2007). These have greatly increased the awareness and popularity of the epic. While both include introductions which explore the background to the story, Kinsella's also presents details of the place-names and a set of maps of the route of the *Táin* based on the research of Gene Haley of Harvard University (Haley 1970).

Organisation

As already outlined, for the first two years of its existence *The Táin March* has been organised by an ad-hoc grouping of activists, including those mentioned above. However, for the 2013 *March* a more formal management structure has been put in place with a committee and officers with designated responsibilities. This will allow the organisers to directly draw down funding rather than having to use other organisations as conduits. The *March* will still be relying on local organisations for strategic support, such as the TCCM in Dundalk who provide public liability insurance for the festival.

Funding

The Táin March has been designated as one of the ‘Signature Projects’ of the Louth Tourism and Heritage Forum (Louth LA 2013). However, as one might expect in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, the resourcing and funding of an event like *The Táin March* is fraught with difficulties. Thus, it is currently being run on the proverbial “shoe-string” with almost all of the organisational work and resources being provided voluntarily. However, the organisers have developed some innovative methods to acquire equipment and raise finance for the festival. For instance, the Dundalk branch of the Irish Men’s Sheds Association came on board in 2012 and provided the skills and labour necessary to construct a replica of a Celtic chariot (Fig. 4). A full-colour A5 pamphlet containing a commentary on the route of *The March*, and a reprint some recent research on placenames, was also produced as a fund-raiser (Gosling 2012a).

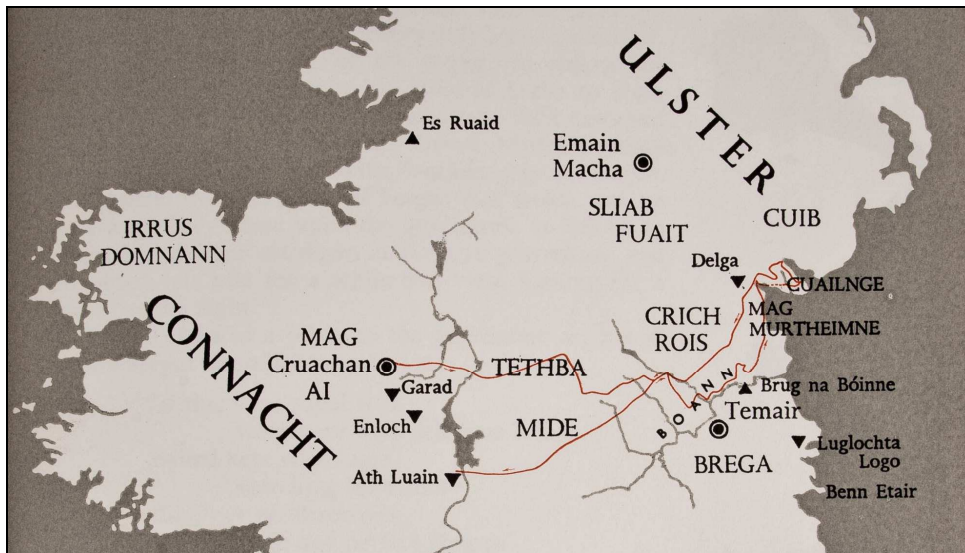


Figure 3: Extract from the map of Ireland in Thomas Kinsella’s *The Tain* (1969, Map I), showing the route of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* from ‘Cruachan Ai’ (Tulsk, Co. Roscommon) to ‘Cuailnge’ (Cooley Peninsula, Co. Louth).

Support in kind and in cash has also come from *Fáilte Ireland* in 2011 and 2012. Moreover, *Prometric*, a multi-national company based in Dundalk provided €13,000 in 2012 to the Dundalk Town Centre Commercial Manager’s Office (TCCM). This was used to fund sports and concert events which coincided with *The March* and included the provision of a full-scale outdoor concert stage in town’s Market Square. This infrastructure was made available to the organisers of *The Táin March* allowing them to re-enact some scenes from the *Táin*. The result was a well-choreographed, open-air drama lasting 30 minutes which attracted almost 700 spectators (info., TCCM office, Dundalk). For 2013, the organisers have secured a budget of €7,000 from *Fáilte Ireland* and €2,600 from the Louth Local Authorities’ Tourism Festival & Events Scheme. There are also plans in train for a number of fund-raisers including the production of a second pamphlet on *Táin* placenames.

Marketing

Marketing is obviously an essential element in the development of *The Táin March*. An effective marketing strategy must include a broad and flexible approach to publicising the festival including a website, brochures, promotional events and press releases, etc. Currently, the main methods of promoting *The Táin March* are via a website and posters. The festival's website (Táin March 2013) fulfils many of the basics requirements of web-based marketing. It presents information on when and where events are being held as well as details on the route to be taken by the re-enactors. It also provides background information on *The March* as well as photographs from previous years. However, like many voluntarily run websites, tainmarch.com has suffered from management issues since its inception in 2011. Principal amongst these has been the absence of a designated site manager. As a result, the website has on occasion featured out-of-date details and duplication of information. On a broader level, it has also displayed a distinct lack of segmentation and depth in terms of providing background details – what is *Táin Bó Cúailnge*?, who was Medb? – alongside the marketing and event information.

The second main thrust of the marketing has been the use of large, full-colour, A0-sized posters advertising the event in each of the towns as well as along the route. From a graphic art viewpoint, these posters have been quite eye-catching and have featured very attractive banner titles and logos (Fig. 1). One idea which is emerging from this process is that a new logo based on a bull motif will feature each year (see Fig. 4). Apart from refreshing the event's image annually, this has the potential to create an iconic set of posters. These could become a collectible set in the future as has happened with posters from the Galway Arts Festival and the Ballyshannon Folk Festival. One drawback of the poster design has been the inclusion of too much text. Given their role as marketing tools, and their placement in roadside locations, these details are often lost on passersby and should be replaced by simply listing *The Táin March*'s web address in a bold type.

Awareness of *The Táin March* and its back-story has also been raised through the engagement with local national schools. In the months prior to the 2012 *March* a series of school visits were undertaken in Louth during which re-enactors engaged with pupils regarding the *Táin* and promoted the festival. Running parallel to this initiative, a schools art project on the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* was also organised by the Dundalk Youth Centre involving six primary schools in north Louth. Curated by two artists, Gareth Loughran and Sophie Coyle, it resulted in the production of an enormously long banner (in the mode of the Bayeux Tapestry) on which the principal episodes of the *Táin* were painted. The completed banner was then exhibited in the Louth County Museum and received a positive response and widespread coverage in the local media.

While the focus of all this has been local, *The Táin March* has had one spectacular marketing coup on a national scale. Early in 2012, Tobar Productions, an Irish language radio and television production company based in Belfast, was commissioned to make a documentary on *The Táin March* for TG4. Having filmed in north Louth for over week in June 2012, 'Tóirse don Táin' aired at 9.30pm on Sunday, 23rd December, 2012 to wide acclaim. The film followed the marchers as they walked the route, and included a series of interviews with Tim Mullins, the chairperson of organising committee. As well

as detailing the preparations for the event, the documentary also included exclusive footage of *Táin* re-enactors meeting with the official torch bearers of the London Olympics on the Louth-Armagh border during the latter's tour of Northern Ireland.

Future Development

In the short-term, the most immediate concern is to put *The Táin March* on a solid management and financial basis. In its first two years, the festival was driven by much enthusiasm but its management was very organic and too dependent on a few individuals. The creation of a formal committee for the 2013 festival is thus a sensible move which will hopefully bring a more measured approach to its organisation.

Regarding marketing, the provision of fliers and a brochure describing the *March* and the route would be a great boon in complimenting the existing posters. As well as providing details on places of interest, public transport, services (such as toilets) and accommodation, any brochure should also include a map. The *Guidelines for the Developing & Marking of Waymarked Ways* (Heritage Council 2002, 35) have emphasised that map-guides are an essential component of a walking route. The organisers should also consider targeted advertising in national media – newspapers, radio and television – to complement their existing engagement with local news outlets.

In the medium-term, the most important goal for the organisers has to be the promotion of participation by communities all along the route from Tulsk, Co. Roscommon to Carlingford, Co. Louth. As part of his research, Aron Donnelly has drawn up a wholeway route between these locations based on Kinsella and Haley's research which totals 230 km in length (Donnelly 2013, Appendix C). Such a wholeway walking route needs to start at Rathcroghan (Cruachan Aí), as this is the site of the ancient capital of Connacht from where the *Táin* commenced and ended. For this to happen, the Rathcroghan Visitor Centre (alias Cruachan Aí Centre) in Tulsk, Co. Roscommon, needs to be brought on board. As an established bricks-and-mortar facility with its own staff, the Rathcroghan Visitor Centre could provide essential management and marketing advice. The key to promoting this wholeway walking route would be to engage with the relevant communities and towns along the way and to hold a national march and/or cycle along the route every year.

Such an initiative would not be entirely novel as there have been previous attempts to demarcate and promote all or part of the route as a tourism attraction. The inspiration for all of these stems from Thomas Kinsella's exposition of the route of the *Táin* in his translation of the epic (1969, Maps I-II; 1970, Maps I-III). The short but detailed paper on the placenames of the *Táin* which he published in *Ireland of the Welcomes* in 1975 was particularly influential in this regard (Kinsella 1975). Re-issued as a stand alone brochure in the late 1970s, its slick presentation and colour map tracing the route of Medb's army provided the template for a series of tourism brochures on the *Táin* route post-1990. These include the 'Táin Trail' (Moriarty c.1996), a long distance 'cycling and touring' route (Fig. 2) and the 'Táin Way' (NWWC 1997), a walking route confined to the Cooley peninsula. While the latter has proved reasonably successful – it is now one of the growing network of national waymarked trails (see Irish Trails 2013



Figure 4: Collage of photographs showing *The Táin March* of 2012. As well as views of actual marchers, it also shows the logo used, one of the many roadside sculptures along the route, and a view of the famous Barnavave *alias* 'Bernas Bó Cúailnge', the pass reputedly cut by Queen Medb across the summit of the Cooley mountains. (Source of photography: Shay Larkin and Paul Gosling).

under ‘National Waymarked Trails’) – the only legacy of the cycling route is a series of forlorn signposts running from Roscommon to Louth.

To our mind, the success or failure of a wholeway walking route will hinge on the engagement of the local communities along it. If they can be encouraged to take part-ownership of *The Táin March*, it could provide the stimulus for the development of a sustainable walking and cycling route. One illustration of how this might be promoted is the innovative ‘on the Táin Trail’ tour undertaken by the Irish comedian, Tommy Tiernan, in January 2012. He walked and cycled from Roscommon to Louth and back, staging gigs in many of the provincial towns (Tiernan 2012). In an interview with Aron Donnelly in January 2013, Tiernan was enthusiastic about the potential of a wholeway route but cautioned that it could prove difficult to plot a trail avoiding busy roads (Donnelly 2013, Appendix B.6).

Thus, one immediate agenda for the 2013 *March* has been the delineation of an accurate but safe route for walkers in Co. Louth. To that end a sub-committee has been tasked with identifying a trail from Ardee to Carlingford which maximises by-road and off-road walking. As a result, only 15 km of the 63 km route being followed in 2013 will be on National or Regional roads. Of the remainder, 36 km will be on third class roads and 12 km will be on mountain tracks and paths, mainly in Cooley (see *Táin March 2013* under ‘route’). In coming years it is hoped to negotiate specific access agreements with local landowners to include another 5 km of off-road walking. As well as allaying safety concerns, the increased provision of off-road sections will not only increase the historical accuracy of the route but also make it more attractive to historical, re-enactment and hill-walking groups.

In the medium term, it is imperative that *The Táin March* initiate strategic links with regional cultural institutions such as the Dundalk Institute of Technology, Louth County Museum and the Navan Centre & Fort in Co. Armagh. A collaboration with the latter body would be particularly appropriate as Navan Fort, alias ‘Emain’, features a number of times in the epic. It would also facilitate the development of a cross-border dimension for *The Táin March*, building on the traditions of the so-called “The Gap of the North” and encouraging communities in Armagh and Down to participate in the festival.

Finally, there are the participants of *The Táin March*. At present, the marchers are composed of a small number of local amateur re-enactors dressed up as Celtic warriors. In order to widen this base, the organisers should aim to make segments of the walk attractive to children, families, students and tourists – groups whose motivation for walking may well be purely recreational or fitness orientated. These people will mostly be day or half-day walkers (Heritage Council 2002, 41) of varied fitness and experience, but nevertheless interested in the historical and pageantry aspects of the *March*. For the 2013 *March*, the wholeway walkers are being organised into ‘troops’ of nine, each formally named and equipped with long-staffs. Moreover, each troop is to be choreographed by colour and musical signature.

To conclude, *The Táin March* has great potential to become more than just a walking and re-enactment festival confined to Co. Louth. The recent proposals by Michael Fassbender to film the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Anon. 2012) has the potential to open up this

epic to even wider international audiences than at present. Be that as it may, the core values of the *Táin* must be nurtured in the local, rooted in the communities from Roscommon to Louth for whom this epic tale is a unique aspect of their heritage.

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