

Seanchaí

A seanchaí - plural: seanchaithe - is a traditional Irish storyteller/historian. A common English spelling of the Irish word is shanachie (pronounced "shaan-a-key").

The word seanchaí means a bearer of "old lore" (seanchas). In the ancient Celtic culture, the history and laws of the people were not written down but memorized in long lyric poems which were recited by bards (filí), in a tradition echoed by the seanchaithe.

Seanchaithe were servants to the chiefs of the tribe and kept track of important information for their clan. They were very well respected in their clan. The seanchaithe made use of a range of storytelling conventions, styles of speech and gestures that were peculiar to the Irish folk tradition and characterized them as practitioners of their art. Although tales from literary sources found their way into the repertoires of the seanchaithe, a traditional characteristic of their art was the way in which a large corpus of tales was passed from one practitioner to another without ever being written down. Because of their role as custodians of an indigenous oral tradition, the seanchaithe are widely acknowledged to have inherited – although informally – the function of the filí of pre-Christian Ireland.

Some seanchaithe however were not part of a clan, some were itinerants, traveling from one community to another offering their skills in exchange for food and temporary shelter. Others were members of a settled community and might be termed "village storytellers" who told their stories and tales at ceremonies and community events, similar to the servant Seanchaithe.

Within our CROFT village, the seanchaí tells the younger - and newer - members not only the rules and standards we keep, and tales of early days of the CROFT, but also myths and legends of the Celtic peoples. Here below are some of those myths and legends. The seanchaí will be telling new tales from time to time, so check back soon.

The Salmon of Knowledge



The Salmon of Knowledge (Irish: bradán feasa) is a creature figuring in the Fenian Cycle of Irish mythology. (It is sometimes confused with Fintan mac Bóchra, who was known as "The Wise" and was once transformed into a salmon.) Stories differ on whether Fintan was a common fish or one of the Immortals, that could be eaten and yet continue to live.

The Salmon figures prominently in The Boyhood Deeds of Fionn, which recounts the early adventures of Fionn mac Cumhaill (Finn macCool). According to the story, an ordinary salmon ate nine hazelnuts that fell into the Well of Wisdom (Irish: Tobar Segais) from nine hazel trees that surrounded the well. By this act, the salmon gained all the world's knowledge. Moreover, the first person to eat of its flesh would, in turn, gain this knowledge.

The poet Finn Eces spent seven years fishing for this salmon. One day Finn Eces caught the salmon Fintan and gave the fish to Fionn, his servant and son of Cumhaill, with instructions not to eat it. Fionn cooked the salmon, turning it over and over, but when Fionn touched the fish with his thumb to see if it was cooked, he burnt his finger on a drop of hot cooking fish fat. Fionn sucked on his burned finger to ease the pain. Little did Fionn know that all of Fintan's wisdom had been concentrated into that one drop of fish fat. When he brought the cooked meal to Finn Eces, his master saw that the boy's eyes shone with a previously unseen wisdom. Finn Eces asked Fionn if he had eaten any of the salmon. Answering no, the boy explained what had happened. Finn Eces realized that Fionn had received the wisdom of the salmon, so gave him the rest of the fish to eat. Fionn ate the salmon and in so doing gained all the knowledge of the world. Throughout the rest of his life, Fionn

could draw upon this knowledge merely by biting his thumb. The deep knowledge and wisdom gained from Fintan, the Salmon of Knowledge, allowed Fionn to become the leader of the Fianna, the famed heroes of Irish myth.

Taliesin



In Welsh mythology, the story of how the poet Taliesin received his wisdom follows a similar pattern.

Taliesin began life as Gwion Bach, a servant to Ceridwen, the wife of a nobleman Tegid Foel, in the days when King Arthur ruled. She was a magician who had three arts she learned: enchantment, magic, and divination. Ceridwen had a beautiful daughter and an ugly son named Morfran, which means "Great Crow", whose appearance no magic could cure. Later he became known as Afagddu, which means "Utter Darkness". Ceridwen felt in order for him to gain respect and acceptance from noblemen he had to have great qualities to compensate for his ugly looks, so she sought to give him the gift of wisdom and knowledge. Through her arts she found a way of giving her son these special qualities, so she found special herbs from the earth in order to do this Inspiration (Awen), which had to be constantly stirred and cooked for a year and a day in a cauldron.

A blind man, whose name we do not know, was assigned by Ceridwen to stir the cauldron, while Gwion Bach, a young lad, stoked the fire underneath it. The first three drops of liquid from this cauldron would give, "extraordinarily learned in various arts and full of spirit of prophecy" (The Tale of Gwion Bach), and the rest was a fatal poison. After all Ceridwen's hard work, she sat down, and accidentally fell asleep. While she was asleep the three drops sprang from the cauldron and Gwion Bach shoved Morfran out of the way so he could get the three drops. Instantly, he gained wisdom. Knowing from his wisdom that Ceridwen would be very angry once she found out what happened, he ran away.

All too soon he heard her fury and the sound of her pursuit. He turned himself into a hare on the land and she became a greyhound. He turned himself into a fish and jumped into a river: she then turned into an otter. He turned into a bird in the air, and in response she became a hawk.

Exhausted, Ceridwen managed to force him into a barn, where he turned into a single grain of corn and she became a tufted black hen and ate him. She became pregnant because of this. She resolved to kill the child, knowing it was Gwion, but when he was born he was so beautiful that she couldn't, so she had him put into a hide covered basket and thrown into the lake, river, or sea, depending on which version of this tale it is.

Discovery by Elffin

The baby was found by Elphin, the son of Gwyddno Garanhir, 'Lord of Ceredigion', while fishing for salmon. Surprised at the whiteness of the boy's forehead, he exclaimed "this is a radiant forehead." (in Welsh: tal iesin). Taliesin, thus named, began to sing stanzas (poetry), known as Dehuddiant Elphin, saying:

Fair Elffin, cease your weeping!
Despair brings no profit.
No catch in Gwyddno's weir
Was ever as good as tonight's.
Let no one revile what is his;
Man sees not what nurtures him.
Gwyddno's prayers shall not be in vain.
God breaks not his promises.
Fair Elphin, dry your cheeks!

It does not become you to be sad.
Though you think you have no gain
Undue grief will bring you nothing,
Nor will doubting the miracles of the Lord.
Though I am small, I am gifted.
From the sea and the mountain, from rivers' depths
God sent bounty to the blessed.
Elphin of cheerful disposition-
Meek is your mind.
You must not lament so heavily.
Better God than gloomy foreboding.
Though I am frail and little
And wet with spume of Dylan's sea,
I shall earn in a day of contention
Riches better than three score for you.
Elphin of the remarkable qualities,
Grieve not for your catch.
Though I am frail here in my bunting,
There are wonders on my tongue.
You must not fear greatly
While I am watching over you.
By remembering the name of the Trinity
None can overcome you.

Taliesin sang these stanzas all the way home, where Elphin gave Taliesin to his wife; together they raised him with love and happiness. Ever since Taliesin had become part of the family, Elphin's wealth had increased each day. Elphin became too proud, resulting in trouble with the king, but his wonderful son Taliesin saved him.

Court of Maelgwn Gwynedd

Sometime later, during a Christmas feast, a crowd of lords, knights, and squires praised King Maelgwn Gwynedd. Amongst this, Elphin interjected that he had a wife who is even more chaste than the King's and that he also had a bard who is more proficient than all of the king's bards combined. When the king heard of this boast from his companions, he was very angry and imprisoned Elphin.

To test Elphin's claims, Maelgwn sent his son Rhun (who had a reputation of never being turned down by a woman) to Elphin's house to despoil his wife's virtue. Taliesin intervened just in time with a clever scheme that involved his mistress exchanging places with a scullery maid. Rhun sat down to have dinner with the disguised maid, and when she fell asleep, he cut off a finger of hers that wore Elphin's signet ring. When the king saw this, he tried to boast to Elphin that his wife was not so virtuous after all. Elphin then calmly inspected the finger and told the king that there was no way that this finger actually belonged to his wife. The size was wrong, the nails were not manicured enough, and there was evidence of kneading rye dough which was not an activity that his wife took part in. This angered the king even more, and Elphin was once again imprisoned.

To prove Elphin's boast about his bard, Taliesin showed up at Maelgwn's court. Somehow, Taliesin supernaturally enchanted the king's bards so that they could only pucker their lips and make nonsensical sounds. When the king summoned Taliesin to see why this was done, Taliesin replied to the king in a series of stanzas. Taliesin's wisdom amazed and intimidated the king, so he decided to release Elphin.

Once freed, Taliesin provoked Elphin to wager that he also had a faster horse than the king. This resulted in a race to prove that boast. Under Taliesin's instruction, Elphin whipped each of the king's 24 horses on the rump

with a burnt holly stick. A cap was thrown down exactly where Elphin's horse finished, and gold was later discovered to be buried under the same spot. In this way, Taliesin repaid his master for taking him in and raising him.

The tale of Taliesin ends with him telling prophecies to the Maelgwn about the origin of the human race and what will now happen to the world.

Story of the Wee Bannock

There was once an old man and an old woman who lived in a nice wee house by the side of a burn. They didn't have very much, but they had two cows that gave them milk, five hens who gave them lovely brown eggs to eat, a cock who crowed in the morning and told them when it was time to get up, a cat who kept the house free from mice and two kittens who played rough-and-tumble by the side of the fire. The old man looked after the cows and the hens and grew vegetables in the garden while his wife cooked, cleaned and spun wool on a spindle and distaff. One day, after their morning porridge, the old woman thought that she'd like a nice wee oatmeal bannock for their supper, so she took down her mixing bowl and she made two fine wee bannocks and she set them over the fire to cook. When they were ready, and lying toasting by the fireside, the old man came in and sniffed the air.

'Mmmm, bannocks,' he said, 'they smell grand!' He picked up one of the bannocks and snapped it in two and started to eat it. The other wee bannock sat up, rubbed its eyes in horror as it saw its friend being eaten, and then it jumped down onto the floor and ran out of the house as fast as its wee bannock legs would carry it. The old woman ran after it, still carrying the spindle and distaff in her hand, but she was an old woman and it was a very young bannock and it soon disappeared out of sight.

It ran and it ran until it saw a fine house with a thatched roof and it ran through the door and headed for the fireplace. In the room were three tailors, who were sitting crossed legged on a big table, but as soon as they saw the wee bannock they gave a scream of terror and ran and hid behind the tailor's wife, like chicks behind a mother hen. 'Och, you bunch of scardy-cats,' said the tailor's wife, 'it's only a wee bannock come to warm its wee nose by our fireside. Quick, catch it and we can have it along with a glass of milk.' The tailor and his two apprentices tried to catch the wee bannock, but it was too fast for them. The tailor threw an iron at it, while his wife, who had been carding flax, threw her cards at it, but they both missed. The one apprentice tried to hit it with his lap-board while the other one ran after it with his shears, going Snip! Snip! Snip! trying to cut the wee bannock into two. But the wee bannock ran outside and was away.

By the side of the road stood a wee house, and the bannock ran in there to hide. There sat a weaver at his loom, weaving cloth, while his wife was winding a hank of yarn. 'Tibby, my love,' said the weaver, 'what was that?' 'Why Willie, my dear,' said his wife, 'it's a fine wee bannock.' 'Then be quick, and grab it,' said the weaver, 'for that porridge we had for breakfast was very thin and watery.' The woman threw her hank of wool at the bannock, while the weaver lunged at it, but it was too fast for them. It was out the door and over the hill like a freshly tarred sheep!

It ran into another house where a woman was standing churning cream into butter. She smiled when she saw it enter and said: 'Come away in, wee bannock! I have some cream left over and you'll be very tasty mixed with that.' She chased the wee bannock around and around the churn, until she nearly knocked the churn over and only just managed to steady it to stop it from falling. By the time she had saved the churn she was just able to see its wee bannock backside disappearing through the door.

Down the hillside the wee bannock ran until it saw a mill and ran inside. The miller saw the wee bannock come puffing through the door, and he smiled a big smile. 'My, what a great country this is,' said the miller, 'that there is so much food that wee bannocks are running around wild. Why don't you come here while I introduce you to my friend, Mr Cheese! I am very fond of cheese and bannocks, and will be happy to give you a nice, warm place to spend the night.' As he said that he rubbed his big belly, and licked his lips. The wee bannock

knew that cheese was a dangerous thing to be around, and he didn't trust the miller, so he turned tail and ran out of the mill and away.

The next place that the wee bannock came to was a smiddy, and there inside was a huge blacksmith standing by his anvil hammering away at some iron to make it into horseshoe nails. The forge was burning brightly alongside of him, so the wee bannock toddled towards it for a warm. They seem to like the fireside, wee bannocks, maybe it's because that are made over a fire, or maybe they are related to cats. Anyway, the blacksmith laughed when he saw the wee bannock, and he picked up an iron rod and put it into the forge and pumped the bellows until the sparks flew and the fire blazed. 'I'll heat this rod until its red hot and then thrust it into a cog of strong ale to heat it up and make it tasty. Then I'll toast you over the forge and eat you up with the ale.' The poor wee bannock was frightened by the blacksmith, and he knew that ale was as dangerous to a wee bannock as cheese was, so he ran towards the door. The blacksmith picked up his heavy hammer and threw it at the wee bannock, but it ducked out of the way and escaped.

On and on the wee bannock ran until it reached a farmhouse that had a large stack of peats by the end of it. It ran in and up to the fire to warm its wee toes and nose. By the fire a man was busy beating lint on the floor with an iron bar while his wife was combing the flax that had been split by her husband. 'Look, Janet,' said the man, 'a wee bannock! I'll have half of it.' 'And I'll have the other half,' said his wife, 'hurry up John, and hit it over the back with the rod.' The man swung the iron rod at the wee bannock, while his wife threw her flax comb at it, but it was too quick for either of them. They chased it around and around the room, but the wee bannock ducked and weaved around them. Why, if only they could have taught that wee bannock to play rugby then Scotland would never lose a match again! It slipped between the man's legs, was out the door and away. It ran up a stream to the next house, where a woman was stirring a porridge pot with a stick.

'Jock! Jock!' she shouted to her husband, 'You're always crying that you would like a wee bannock, well, one has just walked through the door! Come here and help me to catch it.' Jock came lumbering into the room and they both tried to grab the wee bannock, but it was far too clever for them. The woman threw her porridge stick at the wee bannock, while the man tried to catch it with the rope that he had been plaiting from rushes, but he didn't know how to make a lasso, and so after leading them a merry dance the wee bannock slipped out of the door and away into the evening.

The next house that the wee bannock came to sat up on the hillside. It ran through the door and right up to the fire where the woman of the house was dishing up the supper porridge with a big spoon. 'Well, well! Will you look at that; a wee bannock is warming itself by our fire.' 'Quick,' said her husband, 'bar the door. We'll have that wee bannock to eat after our porridge. There is never enough to eat around here.' As soon as the wee bannock heard that it was off through the house, being chased by the man and his wife, both with spoons in their hand. The man threw his bonnet at the wee bannock, but despite its size it was as fast on its feet as a pancake and the bonnet skimmed over the top of its head and landed on the floor in front of it. The wee bannock jumped over the bonnet and was out the door in a flash.

By the time it reached the next house the sun was setting, and the old man and the old woman were getting ready to go to bed. The old man had just taken off his trousers and was standing by the bed in his long, woolly drawers, when the wee bannock ran past him. 'What was that?' he asked his wife. 'Why, it's a wee bannock,' she replied.

'I could do with a bite of that bannock,' the old man said, 'for the supper porridge tonight wouldn't have stuck much flesh to my ribs.' 'Catch it,' cried the old woman, 'for I could do with a piece of it too.' The two of them scrambled around after it, but it was too fast for them. 'Throw your trousers over it,' shouted the old woman. The old man grabbed his trousers and threw them over the top of the wee bannock. The wee bannock lay there on the floor, almost smothered by the old man's trousers. They smelt of old string and Pan Drops mint sweeties, but eventually the wee bannock struggled free and ran out of the door and into the night. The old man ran after it too, but after a while he gave up and had the embarrassment of walking home wearing just his long woolly drawers and matching woolly simmet.

By this time, it was getting dark, and the wee bannock thought that it would have to find a safe place to sleep for the night. There was a big clump of whin bushes up ahead, so the wee bannock slipped into them to find a soft spot to rest. There, under the whin bushes, was a big hole, so the wee bannock went inside to see what was there. Mr Fox sat and watched the wee bannock as it walked towards him; for this was the fox's home. He hadn't eaten for two days and he was very hungry. He smiled, a big, toothy smile, and said, 'Welcome, welcome!' and then with one snap of his sharp teeth he bit the wee bannock in two; and that was the end of the wee bannock.