

Cú Chulainn, hero of Ulster, stood at the ford at Cooley, ready to face an entire army singlehandedly— all for the sake of a single bull. The army in question belonged to Queen Meadhbh of Connaught.

Enraged at her husband's possession of a white bull of awesome strength, she had set out to capture the fabled brown bull of Ulster at any cost. Unfortunately, the King of Ulster had chosen this moment to force the goddess Macha to race her chariot while pregnant. In retaliation, she struck down him and his entire army with stomach cramps that eerily resembled childbirth— all except Cú Chulainn. Though he was the best warrior in Ulster, Cú Chulainn knew he could not take on Queen Meadhbh's whole army at once.

He invoked the sacred rite of single combat in order to fight the intruders one by one. But as Queen Meadhbh's army approached, one thing worried him more than the grueling ordeal ahead. Years before, Cú Chulainn had travelled to Scotland to train with the renowned warrior Scáthach. There, he met a young warrior from Connaught named Ferdiad. They lived and trained side-by-side, and soon became close friends. When they returned to their respective homes, Cú Chulainn and Ferdiad found themselves on opposite sides of a war. Cú Chulainn knew Ferdiad was marching in Meadhbh's army, and that if he succeeded in fending off her troops, they would eventually meet. Day after day, Cú Chulainn defended Ulster alone.

He sent the heads of some of his adversaries back to Meadhbh's camp, while the rushing waters of the ford carried others away. At times, he slipped into a trance and slayed hundreds of soldiers in a row. Whenever he saw the queen in the distance, he hurled stones at her— never quite hitting her, but once coming close enough to knock a squirrel off her shoulder. Back at the Connaught camp, Ferdiad was laying low, doing everything he could to avoid the moment when he'd have to face his best friend in combat. But the Queen was impatient to get her hands on the prize bull, and she knew Ferdiad was her best chance to defeat Cú Chulainn. So she goaded him and questioned his honor until he had no choice but to fight.

The two faced off at the ford, matching each other exactly in strength and skill no matter what weapons they used. Then, on the third day of their fight, Ferdiad began to gain the upper hand over the exhausted Cu Chulainn. But Cú Chulainn had one last trick up his sleeve: their teacher had shared a secret with him alone. She told him how to summon the Gáe Bulg, a magical spear fashioned from the bones of sea monsters that lay at the bottom of the ocean.

Cu Chulainn called the spear, stabbed Ferdiad to death, and collapsed. Meadhbh seized her chance and swooped in with the rest of her army to capture the brown bull.

At last, the men of Ulster were recovering from their magical illness, and they surged out in pursuit. But they were too late: Queen Meadhbh crossed the border unscathed, dragging the brown bull with her. Once home, Meadhbh demanded another battle, this time between the brown bull and her husband's white bull.

The bulls were well matched, and struggled into the night, dragging each other all over Ireland. At long last, the brown bull killed the white bull, and Queen Meadhbh was finally satisfied. But the brown bull's victory meant nothing to him. He was tired, injured, and devastated. Soon after, he died of a broken heart, leaving behind a land that would remain ravaged by Meadhbh's war for years to come.