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Among the old Irish tales is one of special interest to those who live with Irish wolfhounds...

An old man was found lying on the beach one day in the Fifth Century and they took him to St. Patrick, who'd been sent to the Emerald Isle to convert the pagan Celts. The old man was bald, toothless, bent and withered by age, but they could see he may have been a large man once, and powerful.

There was no hint, though, that he had been the handsomest man in Ireland, a great warrior and a poet. He was Oisín, son of Fionn mac Cumhaill, the legendary leader of the Fianna, the wandering band of warriors and heroes who served the High

King in the wild old days. Patrick asked the old man to tell him how he'd come to be left crumpled on the rocks at the edge of the cold Atlantic.

Patrick himself had an encounter with Irish wolfhounds years earlier after he'd been kidnapped by Irish raiders from his home in England and spent seven years a slave. A vision directed him to an Irish port where he stowed away on a ship loaded with wolfhounds bound for England and the continent for sale. Patrick had a way with them and soothed them in the long voyage.

Now he was back winning over the Irish people in a rare bloodless conquest of the Isle. Chieftain after chieftain led his people to Christianity after hearing Patrick speak. But the saint's silver tongue was getting him nowhere with the strange old man before him.

Oisín had known the clamor and glint of a thousand Bronze Age battles with the Fianna, strapping, fearsome fighters who rode to war, chased down stag and lived the wandering life with their wolfhounds by their side. The huge hounds were more than helpers. They were equals and treasured for their wits and beauty. Fionn mac Cumhaill himself had a hundred hounds. Myths, many of them attributed to Oisín, are full of their deeds.

Then one day Oisín was spotted by the daughter of Manannan Mac Lir, the Irish god of the sea, Niamh. The golden-haired goddess fell in love with him and convinced him to go with her home to Tir na nÓg, the land of the forever young, which lay under the sea west of Ireland. Oisín feasted in shining palaces, hunted, had myriad adventures and thought he'd been there just a

year. But time was strange in Tir na nOg. Some say he was gone 300 years. In other tales it was a thousand. While he was with Niamh, the golden age of Ireland faded and blew away like powdered snow in a winter wind.

In time, Oisín ached to see his father, his warrior friends and the old places again. He yearned to ride with his hounds and feel the brush of their beards. Finally, with a heavy heart, Niamh agreed to let him see home again. She let him ride her white horse, Embarr, and she warned him that if he ever set foot on the ground, he could never come back to her again. Three times she warned him, then watched him go, knowing she was seeing the last of Oisín.

On the shore of Ireland, Oisín rode upon three men trying to lift a sack of sand. Like any of the Fianna, Oisín could easily lift it with one hand. But when he bent to help, his stirrup broke. Oisín fell to the ground and the weight of the centuries came crashing down. He turned ancient before the eyes of the sand-sellers.

Saint Patrick pressed to convert the last of Ireland's mythic men because he knew time was short for the old man. Patrick told Oisín of the wonders of Heaven. And the old man creaked forward and told Patrick of enchanted Tir na nOg, of battles in Spain, of the shouts of the Fianna, the voices of their hounds, the screams of eagles skimming the wild woods. In a huff, Patrick told the old man that Fionn and all his pagan men were gone now, locked from Heaven, bound in chains in hell. And Oisín's days were numbered, as well.

But what of the hounds, asked Oisín. If he were to sit at God's table, would his wolfhounds be there? "I'd expect him to have

his own fine hounds.”

Patrick snorted. No dogs would be allowed in the Kingdom of Heaven. None.

And Oisin said, "I am the last of the Fianna, great Oisin, son of Fionn, listening the the voice of clerks and bells. It is long the clouds over over me tonight."

The old man went and slept with the hounds, yet a pagan.