A DREAM OF ANCIENT IRELAND

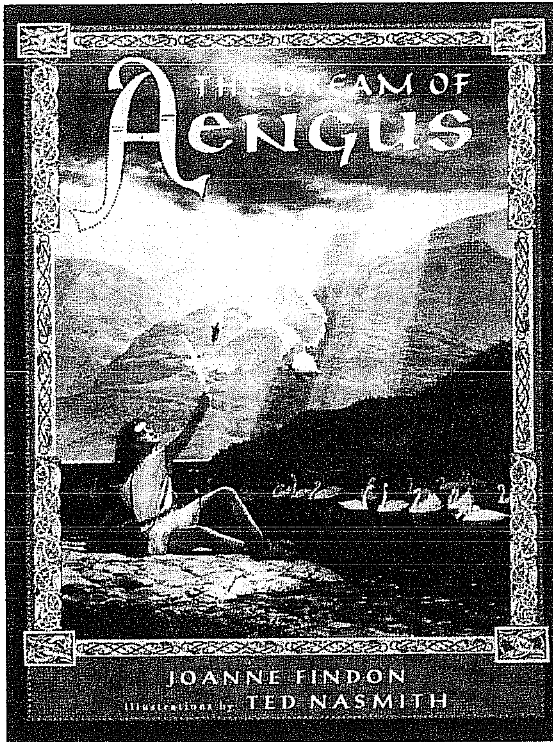
The Dream of Aengus. Joanne Findon. Illus. Ted Nasmith. Lester Publishing, 1994. 32 pp., $16.95 cloth+jacket. ISBN 1-895555-72-8.

Joanne Findon's first book for children is not, as the publisher's release claims, "retold," since in some respects she has cut as far loose from her unmentioned original — Egerton MS 1782, British Museum, printed with translation by E. Müller *Révue Celtique* iii (1877) 342f— as W.B. Yeats in his very different "The Song of Wandering Aengus." The Yeats poem is of a quality Harold Bloom judges "very rare," indeed unmatched in its lyrical simplicity and perfection in this century, and hence is one Heaven of an act to follow. Yet Findon's tale, while obviously no such rarity, may stand mention alongside it without shame. It's a moot point on first reading if her book will work, but by the end the reader's prickling eyes and caught throat concede the poetry in this prose, the magic in this child-silencer — my 27-year-old daughter Leila, herself now a folklorist, comments "I think a little girl would love it."

Aengus (more correctly "Aonghus"), familiarly labelled "Óg" (the young), may well be the most likeable of all gods apart from Jesus Christ. His loving protection of the nonetheless doomed Diarmuid (who fled from the wrath of Fionn MacCumhail, the Fianna chieftain) shows in Aengus an altruistic benevolence (almost all other pagan gods are either parents, debtors, or lovers of their beneficiaries). In fact, the Christlike associations are probably far from accidental, and, if not sufficiently celibate, will still give Aengus a fine credential as a pre-Christian guardian angel.

Aengus was an important god, son of the Dagda and of the river Boyne. He was identified with the citadel near the river which continues to astound modern archaeologists and, in some interpretations, he was a Zeus-like leader owing his place to having tricked a hostile father into endowment. But if his morals were infinitely superior to those of Zeus, his power was much less. He cannot restore Diarmuid's life (although he removes his body, daily reanimates it, and converses with it).

Egerton MS 1782 has Aengus fall in love with a girl he sees in a dream, for the want of whom he sickens. His mother has the girl sought through Ireland; she fails; his father tries and fails; resource is had to the Dagda's brother Bodhbh, king of the Munster fairies. A year's search produces the girl living on the Lake of the Dragon's Mouth with 150 handmaidens, and she is Caer, daughter of the fairy prince of Connacht, Ethal Anubal. Aengus lacks the strength to carry her off, but on Uncle Bodhbh's advice calls in the mortal King and Queen of Connacht who — as King Ailill and Queen Maedhbh — will be the future invaders of Ulster. Ethal refuses Ailill's request for Caer, is defeated by the Dagda and Ailill, and when made prisoner says he has no power over this daughter in that she and her maidens become swans on the lake every second year, by Caer's own volition.



Caer (whom Ethal states is "more powerful than I") makes her annual metamorphosis on Hallowe'en and dwells on the lake whither the Dagda now bids his son go. Aengus calls her to come to him and apparently transforms himself into a swan — in John Arnott McCulloch's version (1918). T.W. Rolleston (1911) says Aengus "finds himself transformed into a swan." This is an indication of consent. Both swans plunge into the lake whence they fly to his palace (all commentators now agree) singing so beautifully that everyone else falls asleep for three days and three nights.

Findon and Yeats find themselves in accord in borrowing Aengus's obsession with his vision of the maiden, while denying his divinity. Further, Findon makes drastic changes to the original story. Aengus is mortal; Caer and her father are "immortals"; Ethal, not Caer, declares the annual Swan season (with companions cut down to 20): after all, there is an artist to consider. Almost at the outset, Aengus finds the lake and sings to Caer, who drops him a feather picked up by him in mid-song. She then drops in on him herself, metamorphosed nocturnally into a woman, plays his harp until dawn, and gets away just before swansdown returns. She can only play; sometimes he sings. Then he becomes ill and she absents herself. Not knowing of her swanhood, Aengus's mother and father

make search for her, following medical advice. (His parents' names seem infelicitous: his mother is not the Boyne, but "Aife," and his father "Leary," possibly prompted by the stepmother and father of the Lir-children (or cygnets). Mother Aife ultimately bids messengers search the fairy citadels, and these arrive chez Caer after Hallowe'en when the ladies return for their human year. Caer plays to the messengers, until her father throws them out. Aife receives the news and sends for "my old friend the Dagda," their friendship presumably Platonic rather than consummated (in the old stories the Dagda's paternity of Aengus is initially unknown). He complies, again on Hallowe'en. Caer is unable to see the outcome when Ethal and Dagda respectively confront one another with "sorcerer's staff" (Disneyesque?) and "magic club" (authentic), but flies off fairly firmly unfavourable to Father. Back at the lake, the dying Aengus arrives after three days, together with her mother whom he reveals, to nobody's regret, to be now widowed; the Dagda's fate is unknown. The spell is still irremovable but, says the widow, Caer "can transfer the curse to others, and grant immortality to whoever she chooses." Thus prompted, Aengus cries:

> 'Then let me also be a swan, Caer! ... Let me share this curse and we will live together always!'
> Caer beat her wings in joy and flew to him. Her handmaidens followed and, in a moment, a spiral of white beating wings swirled around Aengus. And then the whirling spiral was gone and twenty maidens danced hand in hand around two white swans. The swans rose in the air and soared over the trees. They circled the lake three times and were gone.
> You might still see them even now, on moonlit nights on Loch Bél Dracon. And if you listen carefully, every other year, you might hear the strains of a harp and two voices singing in the shadowy woods by the cold, cold shore.

And with that conclusion Findon shows herself a rare artist. How rare, then, is the art of her collaborator, Ted Nasmith?

Nasmith's previous work includes Tolkien calendars and book jackets. This is appropriate enough among Celtic preparatory schools: Tolkien, a Roman Catholic, was an external examiner in the overwhelmingly Catholic University College Dublin, and used Gaelic no less than Anglo-Saxon linguistic matter for episodes and characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, Gollum especially, and Ireland was the first country to produce a cult for that book. Nasmith's front cover, with the newly-fascinated Aengus waving the feather from Caer, is a Celtic wonder in landscape, birdscape and boyscape, slightly marred by streaks of darkness suggesting localised but irrelevant rain. Caer, when human, is less fortunate. No doubt love and acute indigestion are curiously similar in their effects on facial expressions, but such naturalism is hardly appropriate. The use of blue for night scenes is sufficiently magical, and the swans-into-women descent seems Blakean in its range. That Nasmith can master female emotion he shows in a fine study of Aengus's anxious mother. The Dagda and Ethal are definite Disney heavies of a bad year; that the Dagda's bare chest would puzzle any anatomist may, of course, be intended for fairy folklore. The final nightpiece is perfect of its kind. Nasmith is good, but wants maturity.

But when all appropriate reservations have been made, this Canadian achieve-

ment merits quite exceptional admiration. Findon has given a peerless demonstration of the uses of scholarship in the creation of children's fiction: she has rebuilt a dream of ancient Ireland in modern Canada, and done it very well.

Owen Dudley Edwards *teaches in the Department of History at the University of Edinburgh. His books include* Celtic Nationalism *(with Hugh Macdiarmid et al.),* The Sins of Our Fathers: Roots of Conflict in Northern Ireland, The Mind of An Activist: James Connolly, P.G. Wodehouse: A Critical and Historical Essay, Burke and Hare, The Quest for Sherlock Holmes, Eamon de Valera, *and* Macaulay. *More recently he edited the* Oxford Sherlock Holmes, *and he is now writing a study of Ireland in the British imagination. His late mother, Sheila O'Sullivan, was an authority on the mythological origins of Yeats' poem.*

HUCK FINN MEETS GLENN GOULD: *THE MAESTRO*

The Maestro: A Novel. Tim Wynne-Jones. Groundwood/Douglas & McIntyre, 1995. 223 pp., $9.95 paper. ISBN 0-88899-242-2.

"Maestro" derives from the Latin *magister* or master, a teacher of art or more specifically a master composer or conductor. In Tim Wynne-Jones' award-winning novel, "maestro" refers most obviously to Nathaniel Orlando Gow, the musical genius with the eccentricity of a Glenn Gould. Gow tells young Burl Crow, a boy with the survival instincts of a Huck Finn (and a Pap to boot), to call him Maestro, and when Burl asks if that's "like a conductor," he replies: "Oh, more than just a conductor. Master, Teacher" (54). He then teaches Burl to play four cords of "Silence in Heaven," part of the oratorio he is writing. Master and teacher, Gow teaches Burl and Burl masters the four cords. On the other hand, Gow does not teach Burl to play the piano, nor does Burl master the instrument. Gow is a master of the instrument, and Burl teaches him something about himself. Both conduct themselves badly, but both have composure. Each grows his own way, and neither crows about it. They are tricksters both. They create lives from out of the wilderness of their own souls. And this is what *The Maestro* is all about: creation. Or more precisely, creation through performance. To perform well, this is the thing devoutly to be wished. And wishing has to do with desire, and desire is perpetual wishing, never satisfied, never closed. *The Maestro* is like a game, never truly over. Like the Book of Revelation, about which Gow is writing his oratorio, this novel expresses itself in mystery. It thrives on paradox.

I begin by attempting to capture the whirligig effect of the book's richness. But