

# Dream Angus

The Celtic God of Dreams

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## Introduction

This story is a retelling of the myth of Angus, a popular and attractive figure of the Celtic mythology of Ireland and Scotland. Angus is a giver of dreams, an Eros, a figure of youth. He comes down to us from Irish mythology, but he is encountered, too, in Celtic Scotland. He is a benign figure – handsome and playful – who in modern times has inspired not only the poem of W.B. Yeats, ‘The Song of Wandering Aengus’, but also the lilting Scottish lullaby, ‘Dream Angus’.

In this version of the story of Angus, although I have taken some liberties with the original, I have tried to maintain the central features of Angus’s life as these are revealed to us in the Irish mythological sources. These sources, though, do not provide much detail, and so I have imagined what his mother, Boann, might be like; I have interpreted the character of his father, the Dagda, in a particular way and have deprived him of the definite article that precedes his name; I have assumed that

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Bodhb was rather overbearing. Purists may object to this, but myths live, and are there to be played with. At the same time, it is important to remind readers of the fact that if they want the medieval versions, unsullied by twenty-first-century interpolation, they still exist, and are accessible. We must bear in mind, however, that those earlier texts are themselves reworked versions of things passed from mouth to mouth, embroidered and mixed up in the process. Myth is a cloud based upon a shadow based upon the movement of the breeze.

Celtic mythology is a rich and entrancing world, peopled by both mortals and gods. It embraces the notion of parallel universes, the real world and the otherworld. There are signs of the otherworld in the real world – mounds, hills and loughs – and the location of mythical places is frequently tied to real geographical features. It is no respecter of chronology, though, even if the later Irish heroic tales claim to have happened at a particular time in history. Angus belongs to the early body of stories – stories of a time beyond concrete memory.

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## INTRODUCTION

In retelling the story of Angus, I have brought him into the modern world in a series of connected stories which for the most part take place in modern Scotland. The part played by Angus, or the Angus figure, in each of these, may be elusive, but such a figure is present in each of them. Unlike some mythical figures, Angus does no particular moral or didactic work: he is really about dreams and about love – two things that have always had their mysteries for people. Angus puts us in touch with our dreams – those entities which Auden described so beautifully in his Freud poem as the creatures of the night that are waiting for us, that need our recognition. But Angus does more than that: he represents youth and the intense, passionate love that we might experience when we are young but which we might still try to remember as age creeps up. Age and experience might make us sombre and cautious, but there is always an Angus within us – Angus the dreamer.

*Alexander McCall Smith, 2006*

## There was water

This happened in Ireland, but the memory of it is in Scotland too. The precise location of things was not so important then, as there was just the land and the sea between them, and people came and went between the lands, and they were brothers and sisters. The land itself was beautiful, with hills that ran down to the sea, and there were cold green waves that broke on the rocks that marked the edge of the land. There were islands, too, with stretches of white sand, and behind the white sand there was the machair, which was made up of meadows on which grew yellow and blue flowers, tiny flowers.

The gods lived everywhere then, and they moved among the people. But there were some gods who had their own place, and they were sometimes very powerful, as Dagda was. He was one of the great gods, and his people lived on islands at the very

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edge of the world, where there is just the blue of the sea and the west beyond the blue. They came to Ireland on a cloud, and lived there. Dagda was one of them, the good one, and he had great power, with his cauldron in which there was limitless food, and his great club, with which he could slay many men with a single blow. But he was often kind to men, and he could bring them back to life with the other end of the club. He also had fecund fruit trees which never stopped bearing fruit, and two remarkable pigs, one of which was always being cooked while the other was always growing.

There are many stories of Dagda and his doings. This one is about how he came to father a boy called Angus, and how Angus delighted all who came across him. In many ways, this was Dagda's greatest achievement, that he gave us this fine boy, who brought dreams to people, and who was loved by birds and people equally and who still is. For Dream Angus still comes at night and gives you dreams. You do not see him do this, but you may spot him skipping across the heather, his bag of dreams by

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his side, and the sight of him, just the sight, may be enough to make you fall in love. For he is also a dispenser of love, an Eros.

How was it that Dagda, a great and powerful god, a leader of warriors, should have had such a son? One might have thought, surely, that a god like that would have a son who was skilled in military matters, rather than a dreamer who fell in love and who was a charmer of birds. For an explanation of the gentleness of Angus, we must turn to his mother. She was a water spirit called Boann. Water spirits are gentle; their sons are handsome and have a sense of fun; they sparkle and dart about, just like water, which is the most playful of the elements.

Boann lived in a river. This was one of those rivers which was both great and small. There were places where its bed grew quite broad, and at such places one might walk across the river without getting even one's ankles wet. At other places there were pools, deep and dark, with water the colour of peat, and in these pools swam trout who lived for many years and had a great wisdom of matters



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pertaining to water and fish. Then there were places where the river was in-between – not deep, but not shallow. These were good places for water spirits to live.

Boann lived in one of these places. She was shy, as water spirits often are, and it was possible to walk right past the place where she was and not see her at all. All that you might see would be a ripple in the surface of the water, or a splash, perhaps, of the sort made by an otter or some other small creature slipping into the water, not enough to make you turn your head or think of investigating further.

Boann was gentle, and if, after rain, the river ran high, it was still always calm when it came to the place where she lived, as she would smooth the surface with her breath, which was like a soft, warm breeze. She was kind, too, and when a holy man came to the river's edge and asked whether he could lie down in the water, she readily agreed. She brought him some honey which she had and let him suck on the comb until it was drained of sweetness

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and all that was left were the wax cells of the bees.

That holy man was tired; he lay back in the water after he had sucked on the honey and he soon fell asleep. His head dropped beneath the surface, but he did not drown, as it is well known that holy men can live under a river even if ordinary men cannot. She watched over him, and saw that he was breathing peacefully, even though he was underwater.

This holy man was still there when morning came. Boann looked down through the water and saw that his eyes were open, and that he was staring up at her. She called to him, and he surfaced, coming up slowly through the clear water and breaking out into the air with a great shaking of his locks. She gave him another honeycomb, which again he sucked dry. Then he sank back beneath the water once more.

Sometimes the holy man spent all day under the river; on other occasions he would emerge from the water and walk off along one of the paths. He would talk to the people who were working in the fields and give them his blessings. They would give him

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food in return. They all knew that he lived under the river, but they were respectful of him, and they did not come to see him there. They knew, too, that Boann was looking after him and that they did not need to do anything for him other than listen politely when he spoke to them about things that they did not really understand.

The holy man told Boann many stories. For the most part these stories were about his boyhood and about the white dog which he had. This white dog had a brave heart, and did many fine deeds. Then he went away, and the holy man never saw him again, although he sometimes heard him barking in the distance. There were many stories of this sort, which Boann listened to, and each time the holy man told them they were different in some small detail. Sometimes the dog wore a collar of gold and sometimes it was a collar of leather. Sometimes the dog caught a hare, and sometimes he would pursue and capture a deer. Boann listened patiently to all these stories and occasionally at night she dreamed about a white dog, which she

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was convinced was the dog of the holy man's boyhood.

Boann was pleased that the holy man had come to live under her river. She knew that the local people had seen him, and she knew that he was safe with them, but she did not want any gods to hear about him. It was not unknown for gods to become jealous of holy men, or to be possessive of them, and she did not want anybody to kill her holy man or take him away from her place in the river. So if ever any god came into that part of the country, Boann would tell the holy man to stay underwater until she called to him that it was safe to come out. She also acquired a bell which she would ring if she spotted a god. This was to be the warning signal to the holy man to get back into the water if he was sitting on the bank or walking in the fields.

Boann was, of course, very beautiful, although very few men had seen her face. Eventually word reached Dagda that there was a graceful water spirit living in that river and he decided that he would see whether her beauty was as striking as was

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reported. He picked up his club and set off towards the river. The sun was high in the sky and his shadow was short. Nobody would know that Dagda was coming, because he was the wind and the rain and the clouds in the sky. Dagda was Ireland, and Ireland was all about. He was Scotland too, and lands beyond that.

When he came to the river he saw Boann sitting upon a rock. She was singing to the holy man, who had come up out of the water and was drying his hair in the sun. Dagda stopped and listened to the song that Boann was singing. It was very beautiful – like the sound of running water. He was, of course, immensely jealous, and he decided that he would kill the holy man as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

Boann had to go to another place to see her husband, Elcmar. She had not thought of gods who might be watching; she had not thought of Dagda.

Dagda saw Boann set off, and he puffed out his cheeks and blew a wind which would help her on her journey. Then he waited. Now there was nobody

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about, nobody who would see him on his murderous errand. Laying down his great club, he strode across to the edge of the river and looked down into the water. There was the holy man, staring up at him, wondering who it was who had seen fit to disturb his retreat.

Dagda laughed. A holy man was no match for him, and he reached down into the water, his great forearm making small waves, his blunt fingers snatching at the holy man below. Then he pulled him out of the water, shook him, and held him high up in the sky, as one would hold up a fish one had caught so that others might admire it. The holy man could not breathe up there. All about him was sky and more sky, and he struggled and gasped, his thin cries lost in the rushing wind that was Dagda's breath. It was to no avail; he drowned in the sky, and after he died, as a fish will die in the air, his eyes were wide, as the eyes of a fish will be, and his skin turned to scales. The light was silver on these scales – silver and gold, like the scales of a trout when it is taken from sweet water. Dagda then

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tossed the body of the holy man away, and it cart-wheeled across the sky before it fell.

Dagda now put on the holy man's clothes, which had slipped off him when he died. Then, entering the water, he sank below the surface, making his face and his hair look like the face and hair of the holy man. There he waited for Boann to come back from her journey.

At sunset the next day she returned. Dagda lay quite still as she settled for the night, but when the stars were out and all was quiet he called to her from under the river, and he called her in the voice of the holy man. Boann arose from her bed of reeds and crossed the river in the darkness, going to the place where the holy man lived. Dagda, now revealed, was waiting for her and he held her in his arms and she immediately conceived of a child. Boann was secretly pleased by this, as she had been in love with Dagda but had been frightened by what her husband would think if she were to be seen in the company of the powerful god. Fortunately, her husband had been sent off on an errand by Dagda,

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who had also made time stand still for him for a period of nine months – the time during which Boann would be bearing Dagda's child.

Dagda, however, did not intend to stay with Boann. He was already married and had to return to his own wife. He went away, laughing so loudly that people woke up and thought that there had been thunder, and were frightened.



## His child grew within her

Boann was filled with anger that she had been tricked in this way by Dagda. For several days she lay in the river weeping – weeping for the humiliation which the god had visited upon her and weeping, too, for the holy man, whose fate she had heard about from a man who had seen what had happened. She had loved the holy man, and she missed his undemanding company and his often-repeated stories about his boyhood. But she knew that soon she would have a child and that this child would keep her company and make up for the loss of her friend. So she did not mourn for long.

She went to see her husband, who was in a distant part of the country. She found him standing on a rock at the entrance to a valley. He was perfectly still, one arm raised as if he were about to point at something; but the gesture never came, as

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Dagda had frozen him. Boann spoke to him, addressing him as her husband, but he did not respond. Even when she shouted to him that she had been taken by Dagda, he did not respond. It was as if all his senses had gone to sleep and nothing could awaken him.

Boann carried Elcmar back to her river and stood him by the side of a field. People took him offerings of food in the evening, leaving them at his perfectly immobile feet. The next day the offerings were not there. People pointed to this and said that it showed that Elcmar was eating, although he only ate late at night when there was nobody about to see him. In fact, the food was being eaten by large rats, who passed by that way each night and were delighted to find a source of good food. The only person who could have seen this happening was Elcmar, and he could see nothing, because his eyes could not move: not the pupils, not the muscles within the ball of the eyes, not the eyelids. Nothing could move.

Boann felt Dagda's child growing within her. She

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had not had a child before and she found the experience a strange and exciting one. As the months wore on, she became heavier and heavier, and rarely left her place in the river. The fish, who had been wary of her when she was quick in the water, now swam up to her with impunity, staring at her with their unblinking eyes, moving slowly in the current of the river, watching her. Some of the fish brought her food, which they found further down the river, gently nudging it into her hand, waiting for her to grasp it before they swam off. Boann was grateful for this, and she remembered the names of those fish who had helped her, writing them down in a book which she had with her.

When her time came, she moved slowly out of the water and lay upon the bank. From the river, the fish watched her silently; a great number of them had now assembled, and they gazed at her with wonder as she lay under the sky, looking up into the blue, the sun upon her hair and brow, like gold.

There was silence, just silence. Then she let out

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a great cry and Angus was born. At that moment, a great flock of birds that had alighted in the nearby trees rose up in a cloud and wheeled and dipped through the morning sky. In the river the fish swam rapidly this way and that and some leaped out of the water, describing half circles in the air before falling back again with a great splash.

Angus looked at Boann with his blue eyes. She kissed him gently and held him in her arms with all the tenderness of a mother. She knew that this was a child who would be filled with love and who would bring that love to all who saw him. She knew that. She wanted the world to see him, to share in her pride, but she knew that this was not possible. She would have to hide him, as Dagda would steal him if he heard that she had borne him a son. So she made a basket for him, a small cradle, out of the rushes that grew there. Angus slept in this cradle, which floated on the edge of the river, and was watched over while he slept by Boann, who was never far away. Her husband was still in his enchanted coma, but was beginning to show stirrings of life

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now – the twitching of a muscle here, the almost imperceptible movement of a limb there; small signs that he would not be asleep forever.

There were a number of remarkable things which happened now. One of these was the appearance around the infant's head of small birds, of many different colours. These birds came from the hedgerows and from the trees, and took turns in circling Angus as he lay in his basket. At first Boann tried to shoo them away, fearing that they would disturb the baby's sleep, but when she saw that they did not do this, and that Angus slept soundly even as the birds sang, she left them unmolested.

Other things happened. People began to have vivid dreams. One woman who lived not far from the place where Angus was born had for many years hoped for a child, but none had come. She and her husband were wealthy in other ways, but she had remained barren. She began to dream that she had a child, and every night this child appeared to her in her dreams, growing each time from being so

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tiny as to be almost invisible, until it was the same size as a normal baby. She mentioned these dreams to her husband, who smiled and said, 'That is a dream baby and it is not a real baby at all.' But she knew differently, and each night she knew that she would meet the baby in her dreams and would care for him. Then one night the dream baby said to her, 'It is time for me to be born, mother', and when she awoke there was a baby beside her, and he was the same baby who had appeared to her in her dreams.

'Do not talk about this thing,' her husband warned her. 'People will not believe you if you tell them that this is a dream baby.'

The woman remained silent and nobody knew that her baby had arrived in this way. But they knew that she was happy.

Although Boann took every care to make sure that Dagda did not hear of the birth of Angus, it was inevitable that the news should reach him. Only a few days after Angus had been born, Dagda heard

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from one of his men that Boann had built a cradle. This man had seen her pick the reeds for the cradle from the river bank and had immediately reported the matter. Dagda smiled. ‘I have a son,’ he said.

Creeping out of his house, his great club in his hand, Dagda made his way to a small hill that overlooked the river. There he hid behind a large tree, and his club appeared from a distance to be no more than an extra branch of that tree and his hair was the leaves of the tree. He stood there for a whole day, waiting until Boann should come out of the river and reveal where Angus was hidden.

Dagda waited. There were clouds in the sky and there was rain; there were black cattle that moved across the hillside; there was a deer in the high grass; there were swans which came from the west and flew low over the river. But Dagda did not move.

At last Boann appeared from the water, singing a song that she liked to sing to Angus. From his hill Dagda watched her walk to the place where Angus’s cradle was hidden. He watched as she picked him up and held him to her. The god’s eyes

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were bright, and with a great roar he came from the tree and strode down the hillside and snatched Angus from his mother. Boann struggled, but she was water. She pleaded with Dagda not to take her child, but her pleading was no more than the sound that a river makes when it crinkles between stones. She called to her husband to help her, but it was like calling to one who is not there, or to one who is dead. She wept, but her tears were no more than the soft rain which fell when Angus had gone from her sight.

After the kidnapping of Angus, Boann's husband awoke from his long sleep. He opened his eyes and looked about him. In his mind it was the same day as it had been before, and it was as if he had only been sleeping for a few minutes. He saw his wife, and smiled at her. He saw the cradle in which Angus had been laid, but thought that it was just a basket that his wife had made while he was sleeping.

Boann watched him. He did not know, and she could not tell him. She could weep for the child she had lost, her beautiful child, but she could not let



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her husband see her tears. Her husband was puzzled at her sadness, but he decided that she must simply have had a bad dream – such things happened, and he knew that people could cry if they woke from a bad dream. He put his arms around her to comfort her, but she was water.