

November 2, 2015

---

## American Folk Rock Cattle Raid: The Decemberists's The Tain

Kendra Leonard (Humble, TX)

[The Decemberists's](#) *The Tain* is a five-part, 18-minute audiovisual piece in which the music and lyrics obliquely comment on the story, crafted in stop-motion animation using paper silhouettes. In this confluence of music and literature, we hear and see an ancient Irish epic become a twentieth-century folk rock narrative. The combination of roots music with an edge and sly, knowing lyrics—together with the animation—offers an imaginative approach to the legend, the action of which is said to have taken place in the first century CE.

*The Decemberists's The Tain. It's worth the whole 18 minutes, I promise.*

In the original Irish legend—*Táin Bó Cúailnge* (pronounced “Tane bo coo-lenje”) or *The Cattle Raid of Cooley*—Queen Medb of [Connacht](#) plots to steal the prize bull of [Ulster](#), the neighboring kingdom. But the bull is protected by the great Irish hero [Cúchulainn](#), who has a number of supernatural friends who mostly help him in his quest to save the bull and, ultimately, Ulster. The battles of the Raid generally involve Cúchulainn (“coo hull-an”) against a single foe, but at times he must take on an entire army by himself, as the other warriors of Ulster are cursed and suffer a debilitating illness.

The story of the *Raid* is one of the oldest in Irish literature and has been translated into [English](#) several times. In [The Decemberists's](#) video, the artists include a simplified version of the story using [intertitles](#)—a technique from silent film where frames of text help viewers understand the action sequences. The video is divided into four “cantos” or books, but the music is really in five parts, each with varying narrators.

“Canto One: Medb” focuses on the origins of the *Raid*. In the first section, [The Decemberists's](#) lead singer [Colin Meloy](#) narrates the complex and intertwined histories of the main figures in many Irish legends. The music is fairly monotonous: a steady, heavy bass guitar line reverberates beneath Meloy's voice. This single melodic line comes from roots music's connection with rhythm and blues (R&B), which often has an insistent, heavy beat. As the [animation shows Medb and Ailill arguing](#) about their treasures and displaying their prizes to each other—described in the lyrics as “possessions laid to measure”—the other instruments of the band join in to create a denser texture. [Meloy dubs Medb](#) a “salty little pisser” with “a will of her own,” out to show up her husband Ailill by acquiring more wealth—and a better bull—than him.

In [part two](#) (the second section of Canto One), Meloy takes on the persona of Ailill. Using his typically harsh, no-polish, reedy voice, Meloy rejoins that Medb is a greedy and unfaithful wife, always needing new conquests: “baby needs a new and shiny prize,” he sings. The plunking bass is joined by more active, even frantic, playing on multiple guitars, representing the anticipation in the air as Medb's seers and priests sacrifice a goat and read its entrails to determine if her war with Ulster will be propitious. The narrator, possibly voicing the priest's words, repeats “You were born here,” signifying Medb's right to rule, and the guitars play

a [heavy-metal-like repeated gesture](#). Ailill's persona returns, [lamenting](#) the unnecessary deaths and rapes that will occur because of his wife's desires. The animation shows both animals and humans [trying to escape](#) the hordes of soldiers, silhouetted against a red sky. Finally, the animation shows soldiers attacking and raping civilian women. The tempo slows throughout the refrain to suggest regret or sorrow in witnessing the barbarities of Medb's unnecessary war.

Part three is titled "[Canto Two: Cuchulainn](#)." In a slow tempo, an anonymous soldier from Medb's forces sings of the experience of war: seeing tiny details around him ("They settled dust into your hair"), unsheathing swords and readying for a stand, and seeing Cuchulainn and his cursed men (who "can scarce lift his line and lariat") come charging at them. The soldier falls ("[I'll lay me down](#)") and recites the single line of the piece taken directly from the original text: "The mirror's soft silver tain/reflects our last and birthing hour." In the animation, the music lines up so that on every downbeat, the figure of another soldier topples, knocking over those behind him like dominoes. Soft vocals follow the soldier's laments "Blow me down" and "Lay me down." Following the battle, drawing on the bluegrass and folk music traditions of extended instrumental passages, a long [cello solo](#) accompanies images of the landscape: flowers, the dead, carrion birds. At the [line about the mirror](#), the animation switches back to an image of Medb; at the word "tain," she is shown as a skeleton regarding herself in a looking glass: this piece is about death.

"[Canto Three: Ferdiad](#)" includes part four. In the epic, Ferdiad is Cuchulainn's foster-brother. He reluctantly agrees to fight for Medb, and at the end of the *Raid*, he faces Cuchulainn in a three-day duel. Just as it seems that Ferdiad will win, Cuchulainn's charioteer sends the warrior the *Gáe Bulg*, a multi-barbed spear that only Cuchulainn knew how to use. With this weapon, Cuchulainn kills his foster-brother and mourns him as a great man. In The Decemberists's version, however, [Jenny Conlee](#) (credited as Jennee Conlee), [accompanied first by piano alone](#) and then also by Meloy, takes on the persona of the narrator and sings a lullaby for the soldiers and assesses their condition. Between verses, the [full band](#) enters playing a [polka-like dance](#) in the style of a [calliope](#), and the animation shows the relentless Cuchulainn knocking down soldiers with rocks hurled from a sling.

The [final part of the song](#) is titled "Canto Four: The Brown Bull of Cooley." At the end of the epic, Medb finally gets the Bull, but she is mortally wounded. Here, Meloy takes on two female roles—a mother and daughter—and recounts their dialogue. The dialogue song is common to country music and vaudeville, two genres that influence and help inform The Decemberists's take on roots music. The mother asks her daughter what has happened to her, why she is so ragged and bloody. The [daughter replies](#) that she's been running through brambles and rivers and escaped a chaplain who may have meant her evil. The mother becomes the narrator of the first section and, speaking for all of those involved in the war, refers to Medb, saying that "we've seen your powers," and now she should "go wandering home." The animation depicts the battle between Cuchulainn and Ferdiad and the [rising of the Ulstermen](#) from their illness. The brutalized countrymen and raped women rise as well and fight off their assaulters. As the [Bull runs free](#), killing all those in its path and finally exploding, the heavy bass line from the opening returns. Meloy sings the [final stanza over the bass](#) as Medb retreats into a graveyard.

In *The Tain*, The Decemberists—who have also written works based on *The Tempest* and other literary sources—create a new approach to telling the story using elements from bardic

practice, such as the recitation of text over a bass line; nostalgia—the calliope sound in Canto Four; and their own style of [American roots music](#). The end result is a highly organized and coherent musical tale about conflict and war and needless death.

**For Discussion**

1. What qualities in a story or legend help make it a good fit for a musical treatment?
2. How does The Decemberists's *The Tain* compare with other musical settings of epics?