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THE VOYAGE OF MAEL DUN

The Voyage of Mael Dun (pronounced *Muldoon*) is a bardic recitation recorded in the 10th Century Irish manuscript, *The Book of the Dun Cow*. It features a fantastic and bizarre series of islands visited by the hero, Mael Dun and his companions as a result of an ill-fated quest to find the killer of Mael Dun's father. This vividly imaginative legend has inspired writers and storytellers, amongst them Alfred Lord Tennyson, whose fanciful and highly rhetorical verse rendition bears little resemblance to the original. The modern bard and former Incredible String Band member, Robin Williamson has recorded a compelling short version with harp accompaniment that could be closer to the original conception.

This account gives the main islands visited by the heroes in a simple, unornamented form with only a little elaboration, so that storytellers and writers can explore each island through re-telling, story games etc. Some directions reader may want to follow-up for their own development or for work with students of any appropriate age are:-

- *The Voyage of Mael Dun* makes a marvellous memory and imagination exercise for storytellers of all ages. (This indeed may well have been one of its original functions in bardic training and practice.) To help with this, we've given the series of islands as a separate numbered list at the end – storytellers are invited to develop their own imaginative/associative ways of training the memory to recall each island in turn.) Younger storytellers may like to take a selected series of (say) 7 or perhaps 10 islands that particularly appeal initially.

- Once the simple framing story and all (or some) of the islands are memorised or as part of the learning/memorising process, tellers and writers may want to find their own ways to explore each strange land and sight in their own way, to make re-telling vivid, original – and of course improvisational. Many of the games in the new Imaginary Journeys booklet, *Yarn Spinning* are useful here.
- As suggested in the Imaginary Journeys booklet, *Tall Tale Telling* (p. 51), Mael Dun's quest makes an excellent template for the *Magic Islands & Strange Planets* game, which in turn allows ideas for tall tales developed through other games in the booklet to be brought together in a performable oral or a presentable written format.
- The islands are also great for the kind of multi-sensory picturing described in *Imagine On*, the second booklet in the *Natural Storytellers* series,
- A completely new quest tale can be developed using the pattern of the Mael Dun, as in some of the transposition games described in *New Lamps for Old*, the 4th booklet in the *Natural Storytellers* series.
- Some readers will also want to follow through on the metaphors implied by some of the islands.

Most of all, however, this ancient and fabulous yarn is wonderful food for the imagination and we hope you'll enjoy it as such.

Mael Dun and the quest

The hero Mael Dun never knew his own father, a hero who had died in battle. Mael Dun also never knew his mother, who had died young in the nunnery to which she had retreated. He was brought up by the King and Queen of Erin

(ancient Ireland), with the three princes who were their own sons as his foster brothers. It was not until he had proved himself the mightiest of heroes of Erin that he heard from a druid that his father had in fact been killed by a coward who had stabbed him in the back, meanwhile claiming the glory of defeating him. This same druid informed him that his mother's death had been through grief for his father and not as a result of the natural illness of which he had been told. Mael Dun vowed vengeance on his father's slayer who, the druid informed him, lived even now on an island to the north. To seek this murderer, he was told, he should select a band of 17 heroes to accompany him, making 18 in all, no more and no less. He should sail in a large coracle 7 hides thick on a certain day from a certain spot. If he followed these instructions, his journey would be blessed.

Mael Dun gathered together the greatest heroes of the day and, following the druid's instructions closely, set out in just the right kind of ship at just the right time from just the right place. However, as they rowed the ship out across the bay and prepared to hoist the great sails, the king's 3 sons came down to ocean's edge and pleaded with Mael Dun to take them too. 'Go back!' commanded Mael Dun, but the 3 princes dived into the waves and swam out towards the ship. A treacherous current was about to sweep them away, however, so Mael Dun turned his ship around and hauled them into the boat. He then tried to return to the land, but a great wind came up and forced them away to sea. Try and try as they might, Mael Dun and his men could not return to land. And so there were 21 men in the boat instead of the 18. From that moment, the quest was cursed and bad luck attended them.

1. The Island of the Slayer

Mael Dun and the heroes, with the 3 sons of the king, sailed on until they reached two islands with a fortress built on each of them. From within one of the fortresses, they heard the sounds of revelry and then a voice boomed out loudly, boasting of how the owner of that voice had killed Mael Dun's father fairly in battle. They tried over and over again to beach that boat so that Mael Dun could

fulfil his quest and kill the slayer of his father, but even as they did so a great wind sprung up and hurled their boat way out across the waves and over the sea for day after day.

2. The island of the giant ants.

As the storm died away, they glimpsed an island and set a course for it. However, as they approached they saw that this island was infested with huge ants the size of foals, black, white and scarlet and each one of them enormous. They decided not to land on that island.

3. The island of the great birds

Not long afterwards, however, the heroes reached a third island where there were birds as big as men and bigger. Yet these birds were not fierce and clearly not used to human beings, so that they did not run away and were easily caught and cooked and eaten. Mael Dun and his men left that island with enough meat to last them the next 40 days of their journey.

4. The island of the fierce beast

The island they came upon next looked a good place on which to land. But as they approached, they saw a huge horse galloping down to the shore, seeming to smile in a friendly way. As they came closer, however, they realized that this was a crazed beast in the form of a horse, with sharp teeth and scimitar-claws like a huge hound. The smile was the smile of a hungry creature about to be fed. When it saw the heroes turn their boat away, it pelted them with huge stones that almost sunk the ship.

5. The island of the giant racing horses

On the fifth island, Mael Dun and his men found an enormous swath of grass and the hoofprint of a giant horse. Later, they saw huge horses racing and the sound of people cheering as if for the race, though they could see not one single person and all were invisible.

6. The island of the stone door

A stone door in the cliffs of this island allowed salmon to swim into it, but kept the ocean out. Mael Dun and his men found food laid out ready for the eating in the halls on the island, though they met no one. They ate the food and left.

7. The island of the trees and the enormous apples

This next island was so much covered over with trees that it was impossible to find a place to land. However, on the far side of it, the branches of an apple tree overhung the water. The heroes managed to pick just three of its great apples and no more, but each was enough to feed all of them for 40 days.

8. The island of the strange and wonderful creature

There was a strange and wonderful creature on an island all of its own. It could turn its whole body within its skin whilst the skin itself did not move. Also it could turn its whole skin around its body without moving its body at all.

9. The island of the bloody horses

As Mael Dun and his men neared this island, they saw horse-like creatures with sharp teeth and talons like eagle tearing at each other as they raced around, so that the whole island ran with blood from end to end. On this island they chose not to land.

10. The island of the fiery swine

Golden apples hung from the tall trees that grew on this island. Living in caves nearby were pig-like creatures made from fire. They would hurl themselves against the trees, which would hence shower down golden apples, which they would greedily gobble up. Once a day, however, birds flew across the island and, at this time, the fiery swine went down to the sea and swam out across the waves to cool themselves. When they discovered that this was so, Mael Dun and his men chose that very time to go to the trees and pick the apples, though the ground was still very hot under their feet from the feet of the red hot swine. These golden apples restored their strength and fed them for many days.

11. The island of the pillars and the small but dangerous cat

They came next to an island on a tall white chalky pillar. On it there was a great hall with four pillars. A little black cat leapt from pillar to pillar. Food was laid out in the hall, whilst on the walls there were gold and silver brooches, gold and silver torques and gold and silver swords, all set out in rows. Mael Dun politely asked the cat if they might eat the food, but the cat only glanced at the heroes and went on with its game, so they set to and ate their fill. In the morning, Mael Dun's foster brother, the first of the king's sons, went to take gold and silver jewellery from the walls, against the command of Mael Dun himself. As soon as he did so, the cat leapt at him, passing through him like an arrow. He fell to the ground as a pile of ashes, which afterwards Mael Dun and the remaining two princes scattered sadly on the shore. All mourned the loss as they set sail again.

12. The island of the black and white sheep

Now they reached an island that was divided in half, with a black and white fence in the middle. Black sheep were on the one side and white sheep on the other. Sometimes one of the sheep would leap over the fence from the one side to the other and at once it would change from white to black or from black to white, depending on which side it was jumping towards. Mael Dun threw a white stick among the black sheep and it changed to black. He and the heroes sailed away without landing, realizing that to tread the strange soil of this place would confuse them all completely.

13. The island of giant swine and kine and the river of fire.

They did land on the next island, however, and found it divided by a river. On the one side were giant kine (cattle) and the on the other, giant swine (pigs). When Ghermayne, Mael Dun's companion, put a staff into the river, it burned to ashes at once and they realized that the river was of fire. On the far side of the river, they saw a man herding some very large cows. He called out to them not to disturb the little calves. The heroes did not wait to see the mothers of these calves and sailed away rapidly.

14. The island of the mill that grinds the begrudged flour.

Other ships were sailing into the harbour of the next island they came to, carrying cargos of grain to a great mill. There was, they learned, always plenty of grain for this mill, since it ground only grain human beings did not wish to give to others and wished to keep for themselves.

15. The island of the black-robed mourners

Sobbing and wailing sounds filled the air as the heroes approached across the waves, though there was no sign of a reason for grief. All of the people on the

island were dressed in black as if for a funeral and all of them wept. Mael Dun's second foster brother, the second son of the king, jumped ashore and immediately started to lament and cry with the island folk. Two of Mael Dun's men jumped ashore to rescue him, but both instantly began to sob and wail. Mael Dun blindfolded four more men and stopped their ears and these four managed to bring back the two, but not the prince. He refused to come back to the boat, so in the end they were obliged to leave him to his tears and sorrows and sail on.

16. The island of the palisades

This was an island divided into four by great palisades, one of gold, one of silver, one of brass and one of crystal. In the first enclosure were kings, in the second queens, in the third lords and in the fourth there were beautiful young women. Mael Dun's men landed among those young women and were given fine food and drink, but as soon as they tasted their first morsels and sipped their first sips, they found themselves suddenly far out at sea again with not one sign of the island.

17. The island of the glass bridge

On the island of the bridge, a glass causeway led to a great castle. Mael Dun and the heroes tried to cross it, but were driven back by invisible forces. Each day as they watched, a beautiful young woman came out and walked to the middle of the bridge, where she lifted out a large glass slab and let a bucket down into the moat for water. After that, she would return to the castle. After three days, however, she came and invited them into the castle and made them welcome. Mael Dun's companions tried to woo her on behalf of Mael Dun and she finally agreed to give a decision the following morning, but when they woke up they were again far out to sea.

18. The island of the shouting birds

Approaching this island, the heroes were soon aware of huge birds on the shore shouting and screeching very loudly at them. They did not land and sailed on to the next island.

19. The island of the saintly hermit

The hermit had been living on his island for many the long year, dressed as he was now, only in his very long hair and even longer beard, in which the birds who perched fearlessly on his arms and head would make their nests. He welcomed Mael Dun and his men to his island and told his story. It seems he had left Ireland many years before, in search of an island on which to devote his time to God. but had only been able to find a rock on which he stood at his devotions. However, some of the soil of Ireland had clung to the sole of his sandal and, with each year that passed and each prayer that he offered, it had been increased to form the island on which they now all stood.

20. The island of the miracle fountain

The soil of this island was pale and soft, like down. Another hermit lived on it, also clad only in his long hair and beard. There was a marvellous fountain in the centre of the island that fascinated all of the heroes. On Wednesdays and Fridays, it ran water and whey, whilst on Sundays and feast days it ran wine and beer.

21. The island of the giant blacksmiths

The ringing sounds of hammers on anvils battered the air as the heroes were about to disembark on this island. All around they saw very large, very muscular, very fierce looking men hard at their work. And they heard these same men call

out to them, fine heroes in a big ship, as 'little boys in a basket on the waves', so they decided not to land there at all.

22. The sea of clear glass

They sailed the boat onwards and found themselves crossing a sea that was as clear as glass with not a ripple nor a wave to cloud it. They could see the bottom of the ocean far below them, with not a fish in sight, no seaweed, nor rocks nor coral. It was as if they crossed a desert floating in the air.

23. The underwater island

After the Sea of Clear Glass, the heroes found themselves sailing on a sea that seemed thin, like mist, so that they were afraid they would fall through it and perish. Far below, they could see a great monster in a tree, stealing and gobbling up hundreds of sheep and cattle, despite the many warriors who were attacking it without any success.

24. The island of the prophecy

Now the wave before them rose up to form a cliff of water. Mael Dun and the heroes sailed straight up it and then, with their ship balanced on the crest of it, looked down to see people on an island who at once shouted out. 'They have come! It is they!' and then all ran away, looking frightened. It seemed that the heroes' arrival had been foretold in a prophecy, which also told of the doom of that island. Mael Dun and his men did not stay to find out about all that any further.

25. The island of the water arch & the jumping salmon

A gigantic arch of water spanned this island like a rainbow. The water flowed in a great rush both up and down it, though it was impossible to see where this

water came from nor to where it went. Salmon swam in this water, up and down the arch and a person could put in a hand and simply pull one out at will.

26. The island of the silver column & the strange voice

An enormous silver column stretched from the surface of the sea right up to the sky and fanned out into silver nets, which drifted down to the waves again. Hence it was impossible to sail past this island without passing through one of these fine, wispy, silver nets. Diuran, another of Mael Dun's companions, hacked off a piece of it and carried it with him until he at last reached Erin's shores again. There he gave it to a cathedral, where it was kept upon the altar for a hundred years and more, a wonder for all to behold. From the top of the great column, the heroes heard a voice booming out, though it spoke in a tongue none could understand.

27. The Island on a pillar and the door with no key

This whole island was raised above the ocean on a pillar. In this pillar, there was a great door with a huge handle and keyhole. Yet there was no key and the door was locked, so that Mael Dun and the heroes could not enter.

28. The Island of the Women

There were only women on this island, seventeen of them ruled over by a great and beautiful queen and they made the heroes most welcome. The queen clearly liked Mael Dun as much as he liked her. She told Mael Dun that he and his men could rest there and they would never become one day older in all the time they might spend there. Indeed they could stay for ever. This queen, it seemed, was the mother of all the women and yet she looked no older than they. After a year resting and diverting themselves there, all were restless to be travelling onward and to find their own lands again. They made the ship ready

and rowed it out from the harbour. But as they went, the Queen threw Mael Dun a ball of wool, which he caught. She still held the other end of the twine and now she hauled him back to land like a fish, with the boat and all his companions. They stayed for another 3 months and set sail again, only to find that the same thing happened. Three more months passed and they tried again... and again... and again. At length, one of Mael Dun's companions leapt up and caught the ball of wool in Mael Dun's place, calling on the others to cut off his own hand that could not let go the powerful twine. This they did and the Queen reeled in only the hand. All of the women could be heard lamenting and sobbing as they sailed away.

29. The Island of the red berries of slumber

On a small, wooded island, they found red berries that could plunge anyone who ate them into a deep and long sleep, from which they would awaken after days much refreshed. They also discovered that, diluted with clear spring water, these berries made an excellent drink that caused no sleep and yet had marvellous restoring qualities. They took them with them and in the lands of Erin in future years, these berries were much used in healing. Plants descended from them still grow there in hidden places.

30. The island of the giant eagle and the waters of youth

As Mael Dun and his men crossed this island, the sky grew very dark and a bird as big as a church blotted out the light of the sun as it landed high on a mountain peak. They hid themselves away behind bushes and watched as 4 great eagles came and groomed the bird, which they slowly realized was very old and feeble. At length, when the eagles had made it ready, the bird dived headlong into the waters of the great lake of the island and came out young and completely renewed. Once the bird had gone, Diuran plunged into the waters himself, though no others dared to do so. For this reason, Diuran remained young for very many years afterwards.

31. The island of laughter

This island was filled with rosy-faced people who laughed and giggled and chortled and wheezed and ho-ho-hoed all day long. The third foster-brother of Mael Dun, the third son of the king, knew at once that this was the place for him and jumped down from the boat. Two men went to fetch him back, but they were soon chuckling and roaring, so four men were sent blindfolded, with their ears stopped up. They brought back the two companions but not the prince, who stubbornly refused to leave and so was left to his laughter – which floats across the waves sometimes even now, though people think it is only the cries of distant seagulls.

32. The island of the fiery firmament and the beautiful folk

A ring of fire hot as hell surrounded this island and made it quite impossible to approach it, though as they passed the heroes saw people there more beautiful and elegant and happy than anyone seen in this world. Mael Dun looked on this incredible sight with a strange mixture of joy and sorrow.

33. The island of the monk of Torach

Not long afterwards, they came upon an island where there was yet another hermit wearing only his pure white hair and pure white beard. This man was constantly prostrating himself in pious devotion, but found the time to tell his story to Mael Dun and his heroes. It seemed he had been a monk on the island of Torach and, since he had been in charge of the payments to the monastery, he had dishonestly set aside a portion of those payments for himself, until he had amassed very much treasure. This he piled into a boat and set sail, meaning to enjoy the spending of his ill-gotten earthly wealth. But as he sailed rapidly over the waves, he heard a voice calling on him to throw all of the treasure into the sea, or to keep it in exchange for his own immortal soul. At length, he threw the

treasure overboard and soon afterwards had found this island where he now gave himself up entirely to his devotions. On hearing Mael Dun's own story, this hermit counselled Mael Dun to forgive and then forget the killer of his father. This Mael Dun decided to do at once.

34. The island of the falcon of Erin

At the very last island Mael Dun and the heroes visited on their incredible quest, they spotted a falcon which they recognized as the same kind that flew over Erin. They followed this bird and it led them back past the island of the slayer of Mael Dun's father, the man whom he now forgave. Onward it led them back to Erin's shores, where they found their own people and told of their adventures, so that the bards could relate them and the scribes could, at last, write them down in *The Book of the Dun Cow*.

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