

BRIAN BORU

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by Morgan Llywelyn

The youngest of a dozen sons born to a prince of the Dalcassian tribe in AD 941, Brian mac Kennedy's first ten years were spent with his happy, noisy family in the ring fort on the west bank of the River Shannon. But when the Viking longships sailed up the river, the stronghold at Béal Ború was utterly destroyed. Everything was reduced to rubble and ash, bodies lay where the Danes had left them, among these the bodies of his brothers and his beloved mother, Princess Bebinn of Connaught. Desperate to forget his pain and anger, Brian took some comfort in his studies at Clonmacnoise, but swore that he would have his revenge on the foreigners. He studied the military campaigns of the past and decided to unite the warring Irish tribes, his victories in battle earning him the title, Young Lion of Thomond. When he was finally crowned as High King of Ireland, he set about bringing the benefits of prosperity and peace to his war-weary people and many schools and monasteries were constructed during his reign. But the Norsemen still controlled Dublin and Brian was forced to attack. The battle, which took place in Clontarf on Good Friday 1014, ended Viking power in Ireland, but it also claimed the life of this Emperor of the Irish.

LANGUAGE – ENGLISH

- ◆ Descriptive writing: E.g., 'a face as freckled as a blackbird's egg' (p.32), '... every person ... would grease his knife with fat meat every day ...' (p.8), '... hair so red its blaze warmed the hall' (p.104).
- ◆ Discussion: '... history is full of valuable lessons ...' (Brian, p.31), 'History is ashes ...' (Mahon, in reply). Analyse these differing viewpoints or use as the subject of a class debate.
- ◆ Discussion: '... revenge does not bring back the dead ... It only creates more dead' (p.53). Discuss this statement in light of the peace negotiations in Northern Ireland and/or the Middle East.
- ◆ Creative: '... every great deed begins with a dream' (p.34). Children discuss their own dreams and ambitions for the future.
- ◆ Creative: You are one of the native Irish, living outside Dublin in 1014. Write a piece describing your emotions and reactions to the Battle of Clontarf, and expressing your hopes for the future.
- ◆ Letter-writing: Write a letter from Brian's eldest son, Murcha, explaining his resentment of his father's treatment of him and the reasons he judges this to be unfair. The letter could be addressed to Brian himself or to one of Murcha's fellow-warriors.
- ◆ Story: Read or listen to 'The Quest for Aideen', 'The Fabulous Deeds of the Sons of Tuireann', 'Cúchulainn and the Feast of Bricriu' and 'Deirdre and the Sons of Usnach' in *Celtic Magic Tales* by Liam Mac Uistin. **Read also:** *The Hunt for Diarmaid and Gráinne* and *The Táin* by Liam Mac Uistin.

SESE – HISTORY

- ◆ Local studies: Homes. Examining homes and housing of people in the past: Size and layout, construction materials, furniture and fittings, heat, light and environs. Study the descriptions of Brian's family homes (pp.9, 10, 43) and that of the palace at Kincora (pp.82–83) and compare with homes of the Celts designed 400 years earlier (see *Celtic Way of Life*, pp.14–33). List the various similarities and differences. Visit

the Rock of Cashel (Tel: 062 61437) or contact Dúchas, www.heritageireland.ie

- ◆ Local studies: Schools. Examining the bardic school system and its contribution in the wider context of educational development in Ireland. When Brian entered Clonmacnoise he was asked if he was 'entitled' to an education (p.19) and most of the students were men intended for the Church (p.21), although education was not denied to women who wanted it. List the range of subjects available to these students (pp.19–27) and compare with those currently available. Visit Clonmacnoise, Co Offaly (Tel: 0905 74195) or contact Dúchas, www.heritageireland.ie

- ◆ Local studies: Games and pastimes in the past. Exploring aspects of the leisure interests and games of people in the past: Board games, visiting neighbours, storytelling, music and dancing. As a boy, Brian learned to make snares to catch small game and loved listening to 'tales of the great kings and the endless battles that were fought' (p.7), later he excelled at chess (p.78) and his daughter enjoyed embroidery and had caged larks (p.109). See *Celtic Way of Life* (p.70) for further information on games and leisure pursuits during this period, or visit the Viking Age Ireland exhibition at the National Museum of Ireland, Kildare St, Dublin (Tel: 01-677 7444).

- ◆ Early peoples and ancient societies: Celts/Early Christian Ireland/ Vikings. Becoming familiar with some aspects of the lives of these peoples: Origins, homes and settlements, food and farming (pp.11, 84, 89), clothes, tools and weapons (pp.17, 18), faith, beliefs and religious practices (pp.10, 24, 102–103, 128). Brian Boru's reign as Ard Rí is remembered for the building of churches, schools and bridges, which he regarded as important (p.126). He declared Armagh to be the primary ecclesiastical city in Ireland (p.127) and ordered the writing of the Book of Armagh (pp.127–128) and the Psalter of Cashel (p.131). He constantly endeavoured to unite Irish and Vikings (pp.64–65, 91, 96–97), at his inauguration ceremony Irish and Vikings mingled (p.125). Visit the Long Room, Trinity

College, Dublin to see Brian Boru's harp and the Book of Armagh. For further information on the Book of Armagh, see Ch.10, *The Real Story of St Patrick* by George Otto Simms.

SPHE

- ◆ Myself: Growing and changing. Brian's childhood could be said to have ended after the raid on Béal Ború, but he spent the next six years studying and maturing with the help and advice of the monks. Discuss the changing attitudes and increasing personal independence experienced by Brian during this time (pp.16–28).
- ◆ Myself: Making decisions. Brian studied the campaigns of the great military leaders of the past (p.30) and realised that history is 'full of valuable lessons' (p.31). Discuss the decisions taken by Brian as he struggled to unite the Irish tribes and later the Irish and the Vikings.
- ◆ Myself and others: Myself and my family. Exploring what belonging to a family means: Being cared about, having a sense of belonging, having rules and boundaries. Discuss Brian's family life as a child (pp.9–11), and his relationships with Mor, Achra, Ducholi and Gormflaith. Also, examine Brian's relationship with his eldest son who had to live in the shadow of such a powerful father.
- ◆ Myself and others: Relating to others. Finding positive ways of expressing views that differ from others; developing practical suggestions for dealing with pressures and influences. Brian challenged the accepted norm and developed new ideas and strategies (pp.28, 31–32) and believed that the word 'never' would always be a challenge (p.64).
- ◆ Myself: Self-identity. Reflecting on experiences and the reasons for taking different courses of action, identifying realistic personal goals and targets and the strategies required to reach these. Discuss how the pain and loss suffered by Brian when his mother was killed (p.10) influenced his personal goals and how the education system helped him to identify realistic targets (p.23).