



# BRIAN BORU

ISBN 978-0-86278-230-6 pb

MORGAN LLYWELYN

## Teaching Guide

By Irene Barber

### RATIONALE AND THEMES

Reading *Brian Boru* with your class should be a team-building experience, which will sustain established readers and encourage less enthusiastic and less fluent readers. The guided activities meet curricular needs in a fresh, interesting and varied manner. They are designed to stimulate reading, comprehension, analysis, evaluation, summarisation, imagination and empathy, and to hone oral and written expression. These activities will also develop research skills and encourage artistic expression. This novel has been selected for use in the senior cycle of primary schools and in the junior cycle of secondary schools because it deals with the following themes:

- Conflict and resolution
- Experience of loss and death
- Sibling rivalry
- Tension between the generations
- Pagan and Christian ways
- Leadership
- Revenge

### SUMMARY

This is the life story of Brian Boru. It tells of an idyllic early childhood rudely smashed by a Viking attack. It traces the development of a lonely angry boy to the noble and powerful leader killed at the Battle of Clontarf (1014). It details the subtle and not so subtle power-play between conflicting tribes for the most prized position – High King of Ireland. It exposes the sibling rivalry between Brian and his older brother Mahon and later the anguish caused by the conflict between Brian and his oldest son, Murcha. It is an action packed story, full of human interest and intrigue which will entertain and inform.

### APPROACH

This book could be explored in five units and this guide offers discussion points and activities, mostly language-based, at the end of each unit. The pace at which the novel is read is up to the teacher. (As a rough guide, it takes about a minute and a half to read a page aloud!)

## UNIT 1 THE LION OF THOMOND

### SUMMARY

Brian MacKennedy's childhood is a very happy one, living among a large united family in times of plenty. This happiness is shattered when Vikings plunder his home and kill many of his family, including his beloved mother, 'the heart of his world'. An inconsolable Brian is sent to the monks at Clonmacnoise to be educated. Here, despite his youth, he earns the respect of his fellow students and teachers as he grows in knowledge and wisdom. When he returns home, full of ideas for defeating the Vikings, tension grows between Brian and his older brother, Mahon. Eventually Mahon asks Brian to leave, which he does, taking with him a small group of supporters. A reconciliation between the brothers is effected when Brian invites Mahon to his wedding to Mor.

Read pp.7–40.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- What were the elements that made Brian's early childhood so happy?
- There were Christians in Ireland from the fifth century onwards but pagan

practices continued, either side by side with Christianity or integrated with it. Many of these practices still survive. What was the Shee (p.10)? Why did the priests not like the Shee?

- What caused the tension between Brian and Mahon? Try to think of the situation from both points of view.

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. SIMILES

'The young Dalcassian is as prickly as a gorse bush' (p.21). What did Brother Thomas mean? Compose appropriate similes to describe classmates or well-known people. Jumble the lists and ask someone to match the simile with the personality (be kind!).

#### 2. FRIENDS

Brian had lots of friends. 'Others wanted to be with him, because he was so good at everything he did'. Is this important to you when choosing a friend? Do people who are good at everything have more friends? With the help of a dictionary/thesaurus, list five abstract nouns that describe what traits you value most in a friendship.

#### 3. MENU WRITING

Brian was born into a time of plenty. Using the information on p.11, draw up an elaborate menu for a lavish feast in tenth-century Ireland.

#### 4. GRIEF

Brian was devastated by his mother's death and there was no one there to ease his suffering (pp.14,15,16). If you were Brian's older brother or sister, how might you have tried to comfort him?

## 5. STRATEGY

Write the 10-point strategic plan that Brian may have had in mind in order to defeat the Vikings (Read pp.28, 34). Consider the following: weapons, ethics, transport, tactics.

## UNIT 2 BORU! BORU! BORU!

### SUMMARY

While Mahon is away attending Brian's wedding, Ivar and the Limerick Danes plunder his territory. Brian persuades Mahon to call a Council of War and mobilise local chiefs against Ivan. Ivan is routed and flees to Wales. By now Mahon has become King of Munster but this arouses the jealousy of Molloy of Desmond. Molloy tricks Mahon into a meeting and has him killed. Brian, outraged, mounts an attack, first on Molloy's allies and then on Molloy himself. Against Brian's orders, his son, Murcha, joins his army and succeeds in killing Molloy. Because he has disobeyed orders, Brian punishes Murcha. Brian is inaugurated King of Munster and attempts to unite the Irish tribes by alliance through marriage or by force if necessary. However, he fails to make peace with his son Murcha, who is still smarting from his public humiliation by his father.

Read pp.41–70.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- 'Death in battle is better than a life in slavery to foreigners' (p.47). Brian said this to Mahon when Mahon expressed the view that it was impossible to defeat the Vikings. What do you think? Is it better to die than live in slavery?
- Did Brian show good leadership qualities when he publicly disciplined Murcha for disobeying his orders? After all Murcha had succeeded in killing Molloy of Desmond and because of this had expected to be treated as the hero of the day.
- When Brian and Mahon captured Limerick, Brian ordered the plunder and burning of the City and then the mass execution of those who opposed him there. Why did Brian act with such uncharacteristic savagery? Afterwards was he satisfied with his actions? Why?

What do you think he should have done? Can you understand his motives for such slaughter?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. GENERATION GAP

Brian and his oldest son frequently clashed (See pp.57, 61, 65, 66). Script an argument between Brian and Murcha. Begin like this:

M: I don't understand you.

B: You don't want to understand me. You don't listen to anything I say.

(Include references to Murcha's desire for more independence, Murcha's jealousy of Cian, Brian's humiliation of Murcha, Brian's remarriage, Brian's expectations of Murcha).

#### 2. SAFE HAVEN

In Chapter 5 there is a paragraph that is in contrast to the turmoil in much of the rest of the book. It describes the stable and loving atmosphere Mor has created at the lodge – a refuge that Brian hates to leave. Can you find that paragraph? Write it out. Note how the description appeals to our senses of smell, sight and touch. How is a sense of stability communicated to us?

#### 3. WORDS OF WAR

Put the following war terms in sentences that show you understand their meaning:

alliance, looted, outwitted, scabbard, flankers, plundered, executed, fatal, forced march, pockets of resistance.

#### 4. LEADERSHIP

Brian developed many qualities which made him a natural leader. Discuss the following and then rank them in order of importance (1 for the most important and so on):

Knowledge of battle tactics (from books); faith in Aval; ambition (for himself and his people); physical strength; courage; confidence; 'people' skills; wisdom.

Find out what the rest of the class thought, the quality with the lowest score will be the winner. Do you agree with the class findings? Give reasons.

#### 5. TACTICS

Brian studied the successful wars of Alexander, Caesar and Charlemagne in order to make his army more effective. Research one of these three and find out

what lessons Brian might have learned from them.

## UNIT 3 STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

### SUMMARY

Malachy is chosen as the High King of Ireland and he marries Gormla, a striking and ambitious princess of Leinster. It is she who advises Malachy to put a check on Brian Boru, King of Munster. Later when Malachy divorces her, she goes to her brother Maelmora, King of Leinster, having been refused shelter by the son of her first marriage, Sitric. Brian, having made peace with Murcha, forms an alliance with Malachy and together they attack Sitric and Maelmora, who have been plundering Malachy's territory. Then Brian marries Gormla and sets about forming an alliance with the Northern chiefs, the O'Neills. Brian marries his daughter to Sitric thus creating a huge body of support in the event of his anticipated challenge for the High Kingship.

Read pp.71–114.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Brian was impressed by King Alfred in England who had created one strong kingdom out of many warring tribes. Alfred also created a dynasty bred and trained to rule. How would such a model have benefited Ireland?
- Gormla was a formidable woman. Describe her relationships with Olaf, her first husband; Malachy, her second husband; her brother, Maelmora; her son, Sitric; and Brian, her third husband.
- Brian said this about Sitric Silkbeard. 'He is hard and cruel, a Viking to his soul. He wants only to seize and smash' (p.91). But later he encourages his daughter Emer to marry Sitric in order to create peace between the Danes and the Irish. What do you think of Brian putting his favourite daughter in this position?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. CHARACTER SKETCH

List as many adjectives as you can that will describe Brian so far, some will be positive

and some negative. Be sure you can back up each adjective with reference to the text. Draw a picture of Brian (See middle of p.85 and also the end of p.104).

## 2. IN THE SHADOW

Murcha lived in the shadow of his famous father. List four advantages and four disadvantages of being the child of a famous parent. Consider contemporary people as well as Murcha and Brian.

## 3. DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

On p.82 there is a good description of preparation for Christmas 994 at Kincora. Note, in particular, the effect of the verbs: supervising, loading, cutting, running, collecting, hanging, tuning, burnishing, preparing, and so on.

Write a description piece (paying particular attention to the verbs you use) describing last minute preparations for an important event e.g. match feis, play, church or civic ceremony, concert, party. You want to convey anxiety, anticipation and nervous energy.

## 4. PROFANITY

When Malachy destroyed the Dalcassian's sacred tree at Magh Adhair, Brian was outraged and said 'he has profaned a site sacred to our tribe'. What does that mean? Why was Brian so outraged? Would such an act be considered profane today? List acts of profanity that you are aware of from our own times.

## 5. A MAN OF VISION

Brian was a man with a vision of how Ireland could be if the warring tribes could be united. Write down Brian's 'vision statement' for Ireland (see p.72).

Name famous people in the twentieth century who you think had vision, i.e. a publicly stated view of how the future could be better than the present. Access Martin Luther King's famous 'I have a dream' speech and read it aloud.

# UNIT 4 EMPEROR OF THE IRISH

## SUMMARY

In the summer of 1002, Brian marched into Meath demanding the kingship from Malachy. Malachy surrendered

without a fight and gracefully handed over the kingship. Brian was enthroned in a part-Christian, part-pagan ceremony on Tara Hill. There followed a period of peace and prosperity. Brian built churches, schools and bridges and ruled with a fair but firm hand. He declared Armagh to be the primary ecclesiastical city in Ireland – a declaration that can be read today in the Book of Armagh. But Gormla was discontented and caused tension at Kincora. When Brian appointed Murcha as Tanist, in preference to her son Donncha, she was further incensed and intent on making mischief. Following an argument between Gormla and Maelmora, resulting in his terminating the visit in anger, Brian sent Gormla away.

Read pp.115–136.

## DISCUSSION POINTS

- Brian was crowned by an abbot of the Christian church. He built churches, protected monasteries, made large donations to support Armagh. But he frequently prayed to Aval, a pagan god. He was crowned at the Stone of Fal, named after a pagan demon, and handed the white rod of authority, another pagan symbol. Was Brian a Christian?
- 'It was my misfortune to be born in the same generation as such a man' (p.121). What did Malachy mean by this? Can you think of other examples from recent times where unusually high levels of competition in a particular year caused good people who would normally win to be knocked out, e.g. sport, film, book award, feiseanna?
- Why was it that Brian succeeded in spreading peace in the country but not in his own home? Is this realistic? Do people behave differently depending on the environment they're in? Do you behave in the same way at school as at home or on a school trip?

## ACTIVITIES

### 1. DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

'They blacken the earth and the smoke from their fires blackens the sky' (p.118) more than answers Malachy's question, 'How large is the army?' It reminds us of the Irish phrase: 'Bhí an áit dubh le daoine'

or 'The place was black with people', that is, very crowded.

Can you think of a fresh and creative way to describe a large crowd? Think of the setting: a concert, a match, a parade, the visit of a famous personality. Note the techniques used by Morgan Llywelyn: repetition of the word 'blacken', the balance in the sentence between 'earth' and 'sky'.

### 2. SYMBOLS

The dove is regarded as a symbol of peace while the heart is a symbol of love.

'The Stone of Fal was the greatest symbol of all' (p.123).

Read pp.123–125 and write what you think the stone symbolised. Write as detailed an answer as you can.

### 3. WISDOM AND NOBILITY

Read Chapter 14 again and list five examples of Brian showing great wisdom by choosing the action most appropriate to the situation, in order to bring the greatest number of people with him.

(Use the following key words to help you: crown, horses, abstinence, Gormla, Stone of Fal).

### 4. SPIN DOCTOR

Carroll, the historian, was advised by Brian when writing his history for posterity to make the 'victories seen more glorious than they were and defeats less shameful' (p.131).

Write the account that Carroll may have written for the Psalter of Cashel describing the massacre by Brian at Singland (p.52). Your description should attempt to 'put a spin' on the story which would show Brian in a sympathetic light.

### 5. MILLENNIUM

Brian was coming to the height of his power at the end of the first millennium. Speculate on what celebrations he might have planned for the year 1000 and beyond. Write a list of the ceremonies on the date 1/1/1000 and a list of ten millennium projects for the year 1000. Be as creative as you can.

## UNIT 5 CLONTARF

### SUMMARY

Sitric, Maelmora and Gormla unite and plan to attack Brian. They enlist the help of Danes from Scotland, Shetland, the Hebrides and the Isle of Man. Brian gets support from the Danes at Limerick, Prince Malcolm of Scotland and Malachy. During the preparations for the battle Murcha and Brian effect a lasting reconciliation but Brian is now an old man and lets Murcha lead the huge army into battle at Clontarf. A bloody conflict ensues, which eventually Brian's forces win but among the many casualties is Murcha. In the final moments Brian is killed by Brodir of Man as Brodir flees the battle. The Irish begin their victory celebration and their chant 'Boru! Boru!' fills the air.

Read pp.136–160.

### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why was the Battle of Clontarf such an important battle for the Irish? Was it worth all the bloodshed? Malachy succeeded Brian as High King until his death in 1022. What do you think Gormla thought of this?
- It was only when Brian became old and showed signs of weakness that his son

showed kindness to him. Why?

- Did you enjoy reading this book? To whom might you recommend it? If you were the editor would you make any changes to the book?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. OBITUARY

Look at the obituary page of a national newspaper. Can you decide on an acceptable format from the obituaries printed there? Write an obituary for Brian Boru under the heading Brian Mac Kennedy, 941–1014, High King of Ireland.

#### 2. REVIEW THE REVIEW

'...Brian Boru is presented as much more than a brave warrior. He is seen as an educated and progressive leader in a complex and prosperous society. In contrast, the Vikings are depicted as fierce plunderers, while their trading achievements are scarcely mentioned.'

Children's Books in Ireland

Do you agree with this review (1) in relation to the description of Brian? (2) in relation to the description of the Vikings?

#### 3. LETTER TO LLYWELYN

The author, Morgan Llywelyn had this to say about the book:

'In Brian Boru, I tried to tell children what

they would like to know about the man and his time. If I have succeeded, when they are older some of them will investigate him further'.

Write a letter to Ms Llywelyn telling her what you thought of the book and whether or not you think you might like to investigate Brian further in the future.

#### 4. FROM COVER TO COVER

Find the answers to these questions (at the beginning or the end of the book).

1. In what year was the book first published?
2. Who published it?
3. How many reprints have there been to date?
4. What is the ISBN (International Standard Book Number)?
5. What award did it win?
6. What type of book is it? (ie. What genre?)
7. Who designed the cover illustration?
8. To whom is it dedicated?
9. What is the correct Irish spelling of 'banshee'?
10. What is the book's full title?

 Denotes activities that are suitable for both senior cycle primary school use and junior cycle secondary school use.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR, MORGAN LLYWELYN



MORGAN LLYWELYN is the award-winning author of several international bestsellers, including *Lion of Ireland*, *Grania*, *O'Sullivan's March* and *1916*. Her story of the famous tenth-century Irish king, Brian Boru, won her a Bisto Book of the Year Award (Historical Fiction), and *Strongbow* won a Bisto Book of the Year Award (Historical Fiction) and the Reading Association of Ireland Award.

Also by Morgan Llywelyn: *Strongbow*

Set in the late twelfth century, *Strongbow* is the action-packed story of a Norman knight, Richard de Clare, and Aoife, the daughter of the King of Leinster.

ISBN 978-0-86278-274-0

'... the incredibly complex history of the period is made comprehensible and the reader is spellbound ...' *Irish Times*

'... this is an ambitious and wholly successful recreation of the life and times of *Strongbow*, daringly presented in alternate chapters ...'

Children's Books in Ireland



Reviews for *Brian Boru*:

'Morgan Llywelyn has a tough and compelling style which makes this a really good read.'  
Cavan Leader

'Llywelyn, like the chroniclers of the time, makes no attempt to draw her hero with human flaws. She does, however, endow him with emotions, and the book's most convincing moments are tragic ones ...'  
Kirkus

'Rare indeed is it to find in such a book a clear sense of history, researched impeccably and written in a style which I can only describe as compulsively readable ... Fascinating details of life in Ireland 1000 years ago are interwoven in an ingenious way throughout the story.'  
Woman's Way