

LEGEND OF A REDHEAD

In ancient Ireland, if a traveler were to happen upon a woman with red hair, he must turn around and start his journey all over again. Redheads bring bad luck to a ship, so don't sail with one on board. Redheads have only been with us for about 30,000-40,000 years, but in that time, a whole body of superstition has built up around them.

Natural redheads are a rare breed, perhaps 5% of the global population, and historically have always been treated with prejudice and suspicion, or with amazement and awe. Fiery tresses are widely supposed to be a "Celtic gene" as all redheads derive from European populations and the prevalence is highest in Celtic countries. But none of this tells us anything of the superstitions, or why we believe that redheads are fiery and hot-tempered. One answer lies in Ireland.

Of all the great queens and ladies of Ireland, there was one queen of many talents, who outshone all of the others. Macha Mong Ruad (Macha the redhaired) reigned over the land in approximately 300 B.C. Macha placed a curse upon the men of Ulster for their mistreatment of her during her pregnancy. The curse was that during Ulster's hours of greatest need, the men of Ulster would suffer violent pangs like those of a woman giving birth.

Her father, Aod Ruad (Red Hugh) was one of a triumvirate with his brothers Dithorba and Cimbaoth who, by mutual agreement, took turns at seven year intervals in reigning. Red Hugh was the first of the brothers to govern, but drowned before he finished his term of office. Macha should have ruled her father's incompleted term, but her two uncles opposed her. Macha led an army to war, where she killed her Uncle Dithorba in battle. Then with equal skill and mastery, she turned her attention towards her Uncle Cimbaoth, first defeating and then compelling him to formally marry her, thereby confirming her right to rule Ireland as Queen. Cimbaoth became the King of Ireland, and ruled in Tara for 27 years with Macha until his death, leaving Macha in sole power. But the record above all others that this distinguished warrior and leader leaves to history is her founding of the ancient and oft-storied stronghold, named after her – Emania Macha -- later to become renowned as the fortress of Red Branch, which was for more than 600 years to play a vital and important role in the fortunes and history of Ulster, as well as that of Ireland itself. Today, Emania Macha is represented by the grassy ramparts of a great hill fortress, now known as Navan Fort near Armagh.

So perhaps it was Macha, understandably angered with her male relatives, who inspired the myth of the fiery-tempered redhead.

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See: <http://home.fiac.net/marshaw/mmrud.htm>
<http://www.bellaonline.com/articles/art28451.asp>