

Fianna

In early Ireland, *fianna* (singular *fian*) were small, semi-independent warrior bands who lived apart from society in the forests as mercenaries, bandits and hunters, but could be called upon by kings in times of war. They appear in Irish mythology, most notably in the stories of the Fenian Cycle, where they are led by Fionn mac Cumhaill. In more recent history, the name Fianna Éireann has been used by a number of Irish Republican scouting organizations. *Fianna Fáil* ("the *Fianna* of Ireland"; sometimes rendered "the soldiers of destiny") has been used as a sobriquet for the Irish Volunteers; on the cap badge of the Irish Army; in the opening line of the Irish-language version of the Irish national anthem; and as the name of the Fianna Fáil political party, the largest in the Republic of Ireland.

The historical institution of the *fian* is known from references in early medieval Irish law tracts. A *fian* was made up of landless young men, often young aristocrats who had not yet come into their inheritance of land. A member of a *fian* was called a *fénnid*; the leader of a *fian* was a *rígfénnid* (literally "king-*fénnid*"). Geoffrey Keating, in his 17th century *History of Ireland*, says that during the winter the *fianna* were quartered and fed by the nobility, during which time they would keep order on their behalf, but during the summer, from Beltaine to Samhain, they were obliged to live by hunting for food and for pelts to sell. Keating's *History* is more a compilation of traditions than a reliable history, but in this case scholars point to references in early Irish poetry and the existence of a closed hunting season for deer and wild boar between Samhain and Beltaine in medieval Scotland as corroboration.

Some legendary depictions of *fianna* seem to conform to this historical reality: for example, in the Ulster Cycle the druid Cathbad leads a *fian* of twenty-seven men which fights against other *fianna* and kills the twelve foster-fathers of the Ulster princess Ness. Ness, in response, leads her own *fian* of twenty-seven in pursuit of Cathbad. However, the stories of the Fenian Cycle, set around the time of Cormac mac Airt, depict the *fianna* as a single standing army in the service of the High King, although it contains two rival factions, the Clann Baíscne of Leinster, led by Fionn mac Cumhaill, and the Clann Morna of Connacht, led by Goll mac Morna, and lives apart from society, surviving by hunting.

They had three mottoes:

- *Glaine ár gcroí* (Pureness of heart)
- *Neart ár ngéag* (Strength of limb)
- *Beart de réir ár mbriathar* (Deeds to match words)