

The First Anders Ahlqvist Lecture
Irish Myths and Legends

Tomás Ó Cathasaigh

Harvard University



It is a very great privilege for me to have been asked to give the first Anders Ahlqvist lecture. Anders is being honoured for his outstanding scholarly and personal qualities, and of course for the immense contribution he has made to Celtic Studies in Finland. The quality that I should like to mention today is his singular generosity, as friend, as scholar, as teacher, and as mentor. His generosity was once again to the fore when Anders and I discussed this lecture. It became clear that he did not covet this kind of tribute during his lifetime, even if everybody else felt that it was no more than his due. He suggested, and I readily agreed, that this would be a good opportunity to honour the memory of Máirtín Ó Briain, who died in March 2004 at the age of 51. Máirtín, a fine Celtic scholar, was a colleague of Anders's in National University of Ireland, Galway. He was a graduate of University College Dublin, where I may say that he was my first student of Early Irish, and I his first teacher of it. His scholarship ranged widely: he was equally at ease with Old, Middle and Modern Irish, and with language, literature and folklore. Besides his friendship with Anders, he had a particular connection with Helsinki, for he spoke at a symposium here ten years ago, and his paper on 'The Conception and Death of Fionn Mac Cumhaill's Canine Cousin' was included in the proceedings of that conference, *Celtica Helsingiensia*, which was published in 1996 by the Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters (Ó Briain 1996). Máirtín was truly 'a scholar and a gentleman'. His death at the age of 51 was a great blow to Irish scholarship, and he is hugely missed by those of us who were his friends.

An immense body of narrative lore has come down to us in Irish manuscripts, and the earliest surviving tales are probably to be dated to the seventh or the early eighth century. Literacy in the vernacular came early to Ireland. We know that there were Christians in Ireland in 431 A.D. for Pope Celestine sent them a bishop in that year. These Irish Christians must have had men among them

who were literate in Latin. Some degree of literacy in the Irish language was present even earlier than the fifth century, however: evidence for this is found in the nature of the ogam alphabet. The oldest surviving records of the Irish language are ogam inscriptions incised in stone. Something under four hundred of these inscriptions survive, and they generally consist of a personal name in the genitive case, accompanied, more often than not, by the name of that person's father or other ancestor. The earliest inscriptions probably date to the fifth and sixth centuries, and some may belong to the fourth (McManus 1991, 40). The invention of the ogam alphabet cannot be later than the fourth century (MacManus 1991, 41), and Ahlqvist (1983, 10) has suggested that it may date to the end of the second century or the beginning of the third. We know nothing of the identity of the inventor of this alphabet, but we can be sure that he knew Latin and that his invention entailed an analysis of the Irish language. It is possible that ogam may have been used to inscribe on wooden tablets what D.A. Binchy (1961, 9) called 'an elementary type of written literature', but nothing of the kind survives. The only such tablets that we have are six that were found in Springmount Bog (near Ballymena, County Antrim) in 1913: they have been dated to the later years of the sixth century (Ó Cuív 1984, 87) and bear portions of the psalms in Latin.

The literature that survives from the early Irish period, in Irish and in Latin, is the product of an intellectual elite that included ecclesiastical scholars and learned poets (*filid*, singular *filí*). The *filid* were the most prestigious of the *óes dána* ('men of art') in early Ireland: they were highly trained and their power largely resided in their role as purveyors of praise and blame. The *filid* seem to have arrived at an early accommodation with the Church. The sixth-century monastic Saint Colm Cille (Columba) is traditionally represented as a defender of the *filid*, and this seems to have an historical basis. In the life of Colm Cille written in the seventh century by his kinsman Adomnán, Colm Cille is depicted as a patron of the Irish-language poets, who would entertain them and invite them to sing songs of their own composition. Colm Cille was the subject of the *Amra Choluim Chille* 'The Eulogy of Colm Cille', which is attributed to the *filí* Dallán Forgaill and is generally considered to have been composed shortly after the saint's death.

Another poet who is considered to be emblematic of 'the fusion of native tradition and Christianity in sixth-century Ireland' (Watkins 1976, 275) is Colmán mac Lénéni (died c. 606). Colmán was a *filí* who became a cleric late in life. Some fragments of his work have been preserved, and in one of the surviving quatrains clearly dating from his time as a cleric, Colmán uses legal language to say that his poem has not been composed for earthly reward, but rather for the grace of God (Watkins 1976, 274–75). The word used for 'grace' in this connection is not (as one

might expect) a borrowing from Latin, but rather a native Irish word *rath* that is used of the fief given by a lord to his vassal or ‘client’. Colmán’s talent and skill as a *fili*, which he had been using in the service of secular kings, will henceforth be devoted to praise of God.

The indications are that in early Ireland storytelling was a function of the *filiid*, but we cannot say what the relationship may have been between the stories narrated by the *filiid* and those that survive in the manuscripts. Some scholars have emphasized those features of the material that reflect an inheritance from Celtic or even Proto-Indo-European culture, while others have chosen to highlight the innovative character of the tales, and the ecclesiastical and Latin influences on their formation. These need not be mutually exclusive positions. In what I have to say, I shall refer from time to time to inherited features of the material, but I shall also be at pains to point to ways in which the narrative literature is at one with the laws and the wisdom literature.

Irish tales were classified according to their titles. Some of these have to do with major events in the life of an individual, such as *comperta* (‘conceptions’), *aitheda* (‘elopements’), *tochmarca* (‘wooings’), *echtrai* (‘expeditions [to the Otherworld]’), *immrama* ‘sea-voyages’, and *aitte / aideda* (‘violent deaths’). Others relate momentous or cataclysmic events in the social and political history of population groups, such as *catha* (‘battles’), *tomadmánn* (‘eruptions [of lakes or rivers]’), *tochomhlada* (‘migrations’), *oivne* (‘slaughters, destructions’), *togla* (‘destructions’), and *tána bó* (‘cattle raids’).

Modern commentators have found it convenient to classify the material according to cycles. Mythological Cycle deals with the gods and goddesses, and I would prefer to speak of the Cycles of the Gods and Goddesses (Ó Cathasaigh 1983, 11). The Ulster Cycle depicts a Heroic Age in Ireland’s past, and celebrates the acts of a warrior caste. The Fenian cycle also recounts the heroic deeds of fighting men, but these are hunter-warriors, and the Ulster and Fenian cycles ‘differ profoundly in their characters, their milieu, their ethos and their provenance’ (Rees & Rees 1961, 62). The Cycles of the Kings focus on the lives of prehistoric and historic kings, and have to do as well with the activities of saints and poets. The Irish church also produced a formidable number of Saints’ Lives, first in Latin and then in Irish.

What I propose to do today is to focus on a few of the more important texts. The account which I shall give of the material will be a somewhat personal one, and I have no doubt that my biases will be readily apparent. I begin with *Cath Maige Tuired* ‘The Battle of Mag Tuired’ (Gray 1982), which is by common consent the most important of our mythological tales. The text that has come down would

seem to be a composite work put together by an eleventh or twelfth-century redactor mainly from ninth-century material (Murphy 1955, 19), and it deals with a conflict between the Túatha Dé Danann and the Fomoiri, culminating in a great battle at Mag Tuired (Moytirra, Co. Sligo) in which the Túatha Dé Danann are victorious. This battle is included in the schema of legendary prehistory which came to be known as *Leabhar Gabhála Éireann* ‘The Book of the Taking of Ireland’, often referred to as ‘The Book of Invasions’, and which tells of six prehistoric invasions of Ireland (Rees & Rees 1961, 104). It is also concerned with the origin of physical features, boundaries, and names, and with the genesis of Irish customs and institutions. The last three ‘invasions’ were those of the Fir Bolg, Túatha Dé Danann, and the Children of Míl or Gaels. The ‘first’ battle of Mag Tuired was fought between the Túatha Dé Danann and the Fir Bolg. Our text is concerned with the ‘second’ battle, in which the Túatha Dé Danann vanquished the Fomoiri.

The Túatha Dé Danann (‘The Tribes of the Goddess Danu’) are in large measure Irish reflexes of the gods of the Celts, and it is possible to see among them some intimations of a Celtic pantheon (Mac Cana 1970, 23–41). The Fomoiri, whose name derives from *fó* ‘under’ + *mor* ‘spectre’, are malevolent and somewhat shadowy personages. The hero of the Túatha Dé Danann, the young god who leads them to victory at Mag Tuired, is Lug, the Irish reflex of a Celtic god who is commemorated in numerous Continental place-names, and whose Welsh equivalent is called Lleu. According to *Cath Maige Tuired*, the Túatha Dé Danann king of Ireland, Núadu, had an arm lopped off in battle. He had to relinquish the kingship, for an Irish king was required to be unblemished. He was succeeded – at the behest of the womenfolk of the Túatha Dé Danann – by Bres, whose relationship to the Túatha Dé Danann was through his mother. His father was of the Fomoiri: he had come over the sea to Ireland, impregnated Bres’s mother, and left her. Bres proved to be a thoroughly unworthy king, and the Túatha Dé Danann forced him to abdicate. Núadu in the meantime had been fitted with a silver arm, and he again became king. Bres went into exile, and gathered together a great army to invade Ireland.

In *Cath Maige Tuired*, Lug comes as a stranger to Tara, traditionally the seat of the kings of Ireland, and seeks admittance to Núadu’s court. He is opposed by an official of Núadu’s, who asks him repeatedly to name a skill that would entitle him to enter Tara. Lug names a remarkable number of skills, one by one, and is told each time that there is already a practitioner of that skill in Tara. He is not to be bested, however: he asks whether there is anyone in Tara who possesses all of those skills, and of course there is no such person. The king then decrees that Lug should be admitted to Tara. At first Lug sits in the sage’s seat, but Núadu decides

that Lug will be just the one to liberate the Túatha Dé Danann from the depredations of the Fomoiri. He therefore changes places with Lug, who thus becomes king.

Lug's father was Cían of the Túatha Dé Danann and his mother was a daughter of Balor of the Fomoiri. Balor had a destructive eye that would disable an entire army if they looked at it. In the decisive act of the battle, Lug casts a sling stone at Balor's eye that carries it through his head, so that it is the Fomoiri that look at it. Balor dies, and by killing his own maternal grandfather, Lug ensures victory for the Tuatha Dé Danann. He goes on to spare Bres's life, and in return Bres has to reveal the secrets of ploughing, sowing, and reaping.

Cath Maige Tuired is the Irish version of the War of the Gods, an Indo-European theme that is well known from Greek and Scandinavian mythology and can be seen in Indian and Persian mythology as well. Georges Dumézil has interpreted this theme in terms of the tripartite structure that he posited for Proto-Indo-European ideology. This comprises three functions: the sacred, including sovereignty; physical force; and a third function, fertility, that includes food production.¹ In the War of the Gods Dumézil sees a contest between a group who are competent in the first and second functions and one who are competent in the third. The first of these groups vanquishes the second and incorporate them, thus achieving competence in all three functions. In the Irish version, the Túatha Dé Danann did not actually incorporate the defeated Fomoiri, but they did acquire competence in agriculture when the battle was over and Lug wrested the secrets of ploughing, sowing and reaping from Bres (Dumézil 1968, 289–90). Moreover, Lug achieves victories over Náuadu (who tries to exclude Lug from the seat of kingship at Tara), Balar (on the battlefield), and Bres (who is obliged to yield up the secrets of agriculture in exchange for his life): in this sequence he establishes his pre-eminence in kingship, physical force and food production, thereby encompassing all three of the domains which belong to the tripartite structure (Ó Cathasaigh 1983, 71–73).

Bres's reign stands in contrast to that of Lug. His relationship with the Túatha Dé Danann is a contractual one, and, as Dumézil (1943, 230–41) has seen, his failure to fulfill his obligations to his people signals the breakdown of the social contract: a king is obliged to show generosity to his subjects, and Bres declines to do so. What is in question here is the relationship between *rí* and *túath*. There was a hierarchy of kings in early Ireland, but even the most powerful of kings was basically ruler of a single *túath* (Byrne 1973, 41). The reciprocal pair *túath* and *rí* is of Indo-European origin: the small tribal unit (**teutā-*) ruled by a powerful chieftain

¹ There is a useful account in Rees & Rees 1961, 112.

(**reg-*) belongs to the reconstructed lexicon of Indo-European (Watkins 2000, xxxiv). In *Cath Maige Tuired* the Túatha Dé Danann are variously called Túatha Dé or Túath Dé, but in those parts of the text that recount the reign of Bres, the singular is always used. Moreover, the election of Bres to the kingship is described in technical legal language: for the obligations that the king must discharge to his people the word used is *folad*, and it is his failure in this respect that prompts his *túath* to depose him (Ó Cathasaigh 1986, 149). Thomas Charles-Edwards (1994) has shown that the Irish law tract *Críth Gablach* describes a contract between king and people: the king has obligations (*folad*) to his people, and they have obligations to him. He observed that the contractual approach to kingship in *Críth Gablach* is unlikely to have its roots in canon law, 'nor is it to be explained by any influence from Greek or Roman political thought for it stems from native ideas of lordship and contract' (Charles-Edwards 1994, 119). We may add here that those very same 'native ideas of lordship and contract' find narrative expression in the account of Bres's reign in *Cath Maige Tuired*.

An equally important ideological concern in *Cath Maige Tuired* is that of kinship, and the contrast between Lug, who is related to the Túatha Dé Danann through his father, and Bres who is related to them through his mother. Bres is what is known as a 'sister's son' and the Túatha Dé Danann are his maternal kin. The eighth-century poet Blathmac son of Cú Brettan son of Congus of the Fir Roiss in what is now County Monaghan wrote at length about Christ in verse that he addressed to Christ's mother, Mary (Carney 1964). For him Jesus was a 'sister's son' of the Israelites and their slaying of him was *fiugal*, which is the crime of slaying a member of one's own kindred. This was a particularly heinous crime in early Ireland, as it was the duty of the kindred to avenge the death of one of their members, and this would not be practicable if the perpetrator of the crime was himself a kinsman. In *Cath Maige Tuired*, Bres fails his maternal kinsmen; in Blathmac's presentation of the story of Christ, the Israelites fail their sister's son. I may add that Blathmac also sees their slaying of Christ as a repudiation of their legal obligation to him as lord (Ó Cathasaigh 1986, 130–31).

The conceptual framework of *Cath Maige Tuired* is reflected in the way in which an eighth-century Irish poet interpreted and presented the life of Christ, and also in *Críth Gablach*, which Charles-Edwards (1986, 73) has described as 'one of the few outstanding pieces of social analysis in early medieval Europe'. Some at least of the contents of *Cath Maige Tuired* were inherited from oral tradition, but the ideology that it expresses was clearly of vital concern in the literate Christian community of early Ireland.

The Ulster Cycle celebrates the exploits of the warriors of the Ulaid, and especially those of Cú Chulainn. The king of Ulster is Conchobor, and his court is at Emain Macha (now Navan Fort, near Armagh). There is a state of endemic warfare between the Ulstermen and the people of Connacht who were ruled by Ailill and Medb; their court is at Crúachu (now Rathcroghan in County Roscommon). The traditional date of the Ulster heroes is the century before Christ. The centerpiece of the cycle is *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ‘The Cattle-Raid of Cooley’, often referred to as the *Táin* (O’Rahilly 1976; Kinsella 1970). It tells of an invasion of Ulster by a great army (‘the men of Ireland’) led by Medb and Ailill; its purpose is to carry off the Brown Bull from the Cooley peninsula in what is now County Louth. The raid lasts for the three months of winter; during this time the men of Ulster are debilitated, and its defence falls to Cú Chulainn. Clustered around the *Táin* there is a group of foretales, which provide background information on circumstances in which the raid took place and the personages who were involved on either side.

One of the foretales is *Comert Con Culainn* ‘How Cú Chulainn Was Begotten’ (Kinsella 1970, 21–25). Cú Chulainn had a divine father, Lug, and a human one, Súaltaim. According to his birth-tale some birds visited Emain Macha and devoured its vegetation to the very roots. The Ulstermen pursued the birds, which led them to Bruig na Bóinne (Newgrange and associated monuments at the bend of the Boyne). In early Irish literature Bruig na Bóinne is a localization of the Otherworld. A child was born during the night, and Conchobor’s sister Dechtine took the child back to Emain. The child died, and Lug appeared to Dechtine in a dream telling her that he was the father of the child, and he had implanted the very same child into her womb. He told her that the boy would be called Sétantaë. When Dechtine was visibly pregnant, Conchobor betrothed her to Súaltaim. She was ashamed to go pregnant to her husband’s bed, and she aborted the boy. Then she slept with Súaltaim: she conceived again and bore a son, Sétantaë, who was later given the name Cú Chulainn.

This is one of the most remarkable of the many Irish *comperta* (Rees & Rees 1961, 213–43). The hero has a threefold conception. He is first begotten at Bruig na Bóinne by Lug upon his unnamed Otherworld consort; then at Emain by Lug upon Dechtine; and finally by Súaltaim upon Deichtine. In the first conception, the parents are both divine; in the third they are both human. In the second conception the father is divine and the mother human. We see in this sequence how the hero mediates the opposition between god and man.

It has been shown that the lives of many traditional heroes follow a largely uniform plot or pattern, which is sometimes called the heroic biography. The conception and birth of the hero is an essential part of the patter. Other episodes in

Cú Chulainn's heroic biography are his Boyhood Deeds, which are recounted in the course of the cattle-raid in the *Táin*; *Tochmarc Emire* 'The Wooing of Emer', which tells how he overcame formidable obstacles to win the hand of Emer in marriage; *Serglige Con Culainn* 'The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn', dealing with his adventures in the Otherworld; and the story of his violent death.

We have seen that Cú Chulainn's father Lug was a hero among the gods, and that he distinguished himself as a king, as a warrior, and in the domain of food production. Cú Chulainn, on the other hand, is a martial hero. The old words for such a hero 'express the notions of fury, ardour, tumescence, speed. The hero is the furious one possessed of his own tumultuous and blazing energy' (Sjoestedt 1949, 58–59.) This aspect of the hero is most dramatically expressed in Cú Chulainn's *ríastrad*, the physical distortion that seizes him when he is angered, and for which Kinsella uses the inspired term 'warp-spasm'. The martial ethos of the Ulster Cycle is also seen in the wolf-cult which underlies the names: the king, Conchobor, is the 'Hound / Wolf-Desiring One', the great warrior Conall (Cernach) is the 'Hound / Wolf-Powerful One', and Cú Chulainn himself is the 'Hound / Wolf of Culann'. One of the initiatory episodes in the 'Boyhood Deeds' tells how Sétanta faced a fierce mastiff and slaughtered it with his bare hands. The hero assumes the role and name of the vanquished hound: henceforth he is 'The Hound of Culann'.

Cú Chulainn received his training as a warrior from the Amazonian Scáthach. He was a supreme master of the martial arts, with a formidable repertoire of 'feats' (O'Rahilly 1976, 173). In the course of his defence of Ulster, Cú Chulainn faces a number of opponents in single combat, but the greatest of them was his foster-brother Fer Diad. He too was trained by Scáthach, and in their encounter in the *Táin* the foster-brothers perform the feats that they learned from her. In the end, Cú Chulainn achieves victory by using a feat which was taught only to him: the deployment of a strange weapon known as the *gae bulga* which enters a body as a single barb, but once inside becomes twenty-four. He is remarkable for his words as well as his deeds: in the single combats, he shows his verbal dexterity as well as courage and skill. He craves fame above all else: provided that his name live after him he will be content with a short life. But his motivation in the *Táin* is far from being purely egotistical. He is fiercely loyal to his mother's brother. The men of Ulster are at one with Cú Chulainn in their *condábae* (love of kindred), and that I believe is what determines the outcome of the cattle-raid, bringing victory to the Ulstermen over the invaders.

Finn mac Cumail (Mod. Ir. Fionn Mac Cumhail) is the leader of a band (or bands) of hunter-warriors. The Irish word for such a band was *fian*, and it is from this that the Fenian Cycle (Early Ir. *fianaigeacht*, Mod. Ir. *fianmaíocht*) derives

its name. It recounts Finn's exploits, and those of his followers, as they hunt, fight, conduct raids, and live an open-air nomadic life. It is sometimes called the Finn-Cycle, and yet another name for it is the Ossianic Cycle, after Finn's son Oisín, the Scottish Gaelic form of which is Oisean. The oldest texts, which are very short, date from the seventh century onwards. The twelfth century saw the composition of *Acallamh na Seanórach* 'The Colloquy of the Ancient Men', and the formation of a ballad literature about the Fíana. *Acallamh na Seanórach* has recently been translated by Ann Dooley and Harry Roe as *Tales of the Elders of Ireland* (1999). Ballads and poems continued to be composed after the twelfth century and there were also new prose tales. The Fenian material is abundantly represented in the folk tradition of the twentieth century.

This was to become the best known of the cycles outside Ireland and Scotland, thanks to the Scotsman, James Macpherson. He published two works *Fingal* (1762) and *Temora* (1763), and claimed that they were translated from epic poems composed by 'Ossian' in the third and fourth centuries A.D. While a vigorous debate was to ensue as to the authenticity of these works, they did enjoy an enormous vogue in Romantic Europe, and the names of Fingal (Macpherson's version of Finn), Ossian and Ossian's son Oscar were widely known in the nineteenth century (Knott & Murphy 1966, 145–46).

Finn was assigned a place in the synthetic history that was concocted in the Irish schools: he is there said to have been captain of the professional soldiery of Cormac mac Airt in the early third century A.D. Gerard Murphy points out (Knott and Murphy 1966, 147–48) that both the oldest stories about Finn and modern folklore point definitely to Finn's having been originally a mythological figure, and he shows that Finn is comparable in some important respect to the god Lug. Just as Lug opposes the one-eyed Balar, whose eye used to burn up whatever it looked on directly, Fionn likewise has for his chief opponent Aodh who was nicknamed Goll: Aodh means 'fire' and Goll means 'one-eyed'. Finn's opposition to what Rees and Rees have called 'a supernatural malevolent burner' (Rees & Rees 1961, 66) is a recurrent element in the cycle. One of the manifestations of this burner is Aillén mac Midna who, blowing fire from his mouth, burned Tara every Samain. Finn kills Aillén as he is about to escape into a *síd* (Dooley & Roe 1999, 52–54). Another point of comparison, which has been noted by Alwyn and Brinley Rees, is that Finn ousts from the *síd* of Almu his maternal grandfather Tadg son of Nuadu, who was responsible for the slaying of Finn's father by Goll/ Aodh, and that in

tales recorded in the modern period, Balor (who it will be remembered is Lug's maternal grandfather) is responsible for the death of Lug's father.²

Like Cú Chulainn, Finn is credited with a number of 'Boyhood Deeds' (Nagy 1985, 209–18), for which we depend upon what Murphy describes this as the 'poorly constructed but valuable account' of an incomplete text in a manuscript of the fifteenth century. Finn, we are told, was born after the slaying of his father, and he was brought up secretly in the wild by two women-warriors (*fénidí*) because his life was in danger. He is triumphant in contests with other boys, shows himself superior to his elders at deer hunting, and acquires arms and vanquishes a wild beast. He avenges his father's killing and acquires his father's treasure. He then goes on to acquire wisdom: he studies the craft of poetry under Finn Éices (The Poet Finn). One day he burns his thumb on 'the salmon of wisdom' and when he bites his thumb truth is revealed to him. The 'thumb of wisdom' is his from then on. A further defining adventure awaits him: he slays Aodh, son of Fídgá, with a poisonous spear that he has acquired from Fíacail ('Tooth') son of Conchenn ('Doghead'), a spear that, if left in the *síd*, could cause rabies in the land. This is Finn's *Samain* (Halloween) adventure: he acts when the *síde* are open and the murderous Aodh is passing from one *síd* to another. Finn acquires the spear as a reward for his wonderful deed.

The 'Boyhood Deeds' of Cú Chulainn and of Finn define them as heroes. And we see in these adventures that the heroism of one will be very different from that of the other. As Nagy (1984) has shown, Cú Chulainn's 'Boyhood Deeds' have to do with the integration of the hero into Ulster society, whereas those of Finn emphasize his extra-social character. Sjoestedt drew a distinction between 'the hero of the tribe' (Cú Chulainn) and 'the heroes outside the tribe' (the *fian*-warriors). This distinction has won wide acceptance, and it is appropriate to quote Sjoestedt's remarks at some length:

'Passing from the legend of Cú Chulainn to the legends of the Fíana, one has the impression of entering a heroic world which is not only different from that in which the tribal hero moves, but irreconcilable with it. The two bodies of tradition have some conceptions in common: the same fusion of warrior and magician in the person of hero-magicians, the same constant coming and going between the world of men and the world of the *Síde*, between sacred and profane. But in other respects the contrast seems complete. It is not

² Murphy presents two further points of comparison (Knott and Murphy 1966, 147–48). First, that places in Europe are called after Lug (as we have seen) and after Finn; examples of the latter include *Uindobona* = Vienna in Austria, and names in Switzerland and France. Secondly, both of them appear in Welsh tradition: Lug as Llew, and Finn as the magic warrior-hunter Gwyn ab Nudd.

merely a difference of formal character, details of manners, techniques of warfare, here on foot or on horseback, there in a chariot; it is a difference of function, [...] of the position which the hero occupies in society and in the world. Cú Chulainn finds his place quite naturally, though it is a dominant place, in Celtic society as we know it not only from the sagas but from history [...] Finn with his bands of warrior (*fiána*) is by definition outside the tribal institutions: he is the living negation of the spirit which dominates them' (Sjoestedt 1949, 81).

Recent scholarship has explored the extent to which *fiannas*, the activity of the *fián*, lies outside the tribal institutions, and this exploration has focused primarily on *díberg*, which has the meaning 'brigandage', and in Old Irish denotes in particular the activity of organized bands of killers that had their own code of conduct, entailing a vow of evil and the wearing of diabolical marks. McCone (1986, 6) suggests that '*fiannas* denoted *fián*-activity in general, whereas *díberg* had a more specialized reference to a particularly nasty aspect of it that early churchmen were prone to emphasize in order to discredit the institution as a whole'. He has also noted that in some sources no significant difference is made between membership of a *fián* and the practice of *díberg* (McCone 1986, 4–5). One of those sources is 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel', which I shall discuss presently.

Among the many kings who feature in the Cycles of the Kings, Cormac mac Airt and Conaire Mór, two legendary kings of Tara, are of especial interest. Cormac son of Art and grandson of Conn of the Hundred Battles, is a prestige ancestor of the Uí Néill and the ideal king of Irish tradition (Ó Cathasaigh 1977). In his Birth-Tale we are told that he was conceived on the eve of the prehistoric Battle of Mag Mucrama, in which Art and his Munster ally Éogan were slain by Lugaid mac Con, who thereupon seized the kingship of Tara. The child is abducted by a she-wolf, who rears him with her whelps. He is later rescued and returned to his mother along with the whelps. One day Lugaid mac Con pronounced a false judgment. The Queen's garden had been stripped of its woad by some sheep owned by another woman. Lugaid decreed that the sheep should be forfeit. Cormac mac Airt, who was present, demurred, saying that only the wool should be forfeit, on the principle of 'one shearing for another': the woad would grow again, and so should the wool. Cormac's judgment exemplifies *fir flathemon* 'the truth and justice of a ruler', and he is elected to the kingship of Tara in place of Lugaid. Cormac's reign is a Golden Age of peace and plenty in Ireland.

The central role of *fir flathemon* in the Irish ideology of kingship, which is expressed in narrative form in the tales on Cormac, is also reflected in the Laws and in the Wisdom texts, and above all in *Audacht Morainn* 'The Testament of Morann' (Kelly 1976). This is a seventh-century example of the genre known as

Speculum Principum ('Mirror of Princes'). It consists of advice supposedly sent by the legendary judge Morann mac Moín to Feradach Find Fechtnach, who is about to be made king. Much of what Morann has to say concerns *fír flathemon*: it keeps plagues and lightning from the people, and it ensures peace and prosperity in the realm, as well as abundance of milk and corn and fish, and fertility among the people.

The tragic story of Conaire Mór (the Great) is told in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* 'The Destruction of Da Dergas's Hostel' (Gantz 1981, 60–106), a composite text compiled, probably in the eleventh century, from earlier materials, perhaps including two ninth-century versions of the story. Much of the tale is devoted to the circumstances leading to Conaire's death in the Otherworld abode (*bruiden*) of Da Derga, but it is nevertheless a biography of Conaire, dealing in turn with his conception-and-birth, his boyhood, his elevation to kingship, the golden years of his reign, and the events leading to his death. The circumstances of Conaire's conception and birth indicate that he is destined for greatness. The hero's mother is a virgin, lowly of status, but not of descent, who is deliberately rendered difficult of access. She is nevertheless overpowered by a bird that assumes human shape. He sleeps with her and tells her that a son Conaire will be born of their encounter. And so it comes to pass. Meanwhile, Eterscéle, king of Tara, has taken the woman as his wife, and Conaire is brought up as Eterscéle's son. He is fostered with the three sons of a *fian*-warrior named Donn Désa.

When Eterscéle dies, Conaire is visited by Nemglan a bird-man who declares himself to be king of Conaire's father's birds. He instructs Conaire to go to Tara naked and bearing a sling. Conaire does so, and in the meantime it has been revealed to the wise men there that the future king will arrive at Tara in this way. The people of Tara question the revelation, on the grounds that Conaire is too young to be king. Conaire satisfies them that his youth is no obstacle, and they then enthusiastically accept him as their king.

At this point we are given a list of the taboos of Conaire Mór, listing certain actions that he should avoid in his reign. The early years of Conaire's reign is described as a golden age of great bounty. But a threat to these paradisaical conditions arises when Conaire's fosterbrothers, the sons of Donn Désa, yearn for the thieving and robbery and brigandage and murder which their father and grandfather used to commit. They test the mettle of the king by indulging in theft. When this is brought to the attention of the king, he declines to punish them. And so they are emboldened to advance in crime from theft to brigandage (*díberg*). Now one of the taboos laid upon Conaire was that there should not be any *díberg* during his reign.

He has brought about the infraction of one of his taboos by failing to take action against his foster-brothers when they had engaged in the lesser crime of theft.

Conaire makes further difficulties for himself when his foster-brothers and their companions in the crime of brigandage are brought before him for judgment. He decrees that his foster-brothers should be set free, but that the others should die. He immediately recognizes that this is a false judgment, and reverses it. He banishes all of the brigands overseas. As soon as the king's judgment has been given and the brigands have departed, we hear that the perfect peace has broken down that had been enjoyed during Conaire's reign. Conaire finds himself in circumstances that impel him to transgress his remaining taboos. He takes a path that leads him to his doom in the *bruiden*. He encounters a number of malevolent Otherworld beings along the way, and in the meantime his foster-brothers and their allies return to Ireland and assail Conaire in the *bruiden* which they set on fire three times. Conaire's head is cut off, and when at length the severed head is given a drink of water, Conaire dies.

Conaire's tragedy is that he allowed his love of his foster-brothers to deflect him from his duty as king. In this respect he stands in contrast to them: they love him too, but their first concern is their inherited calling as brigands, and their primary loyalty is to their fellow-brigands, who insist that Conaire be put to death. Conaire's placing of his personal feelings about the requirements of his office also contrasts with Cú Chulainn's willingness in the *Táin* to slay his beloved foster-brother Fer Diad when the interests of Ulster are at stake.

The early Irish storytellers were fascinated by the transcendental mysteries of birth and death. I should like to end with an anecdote of threefold death that is recounted (in Latin) in Adamnán's Life of Colm Cille:

Once, this priest called Findchán, a soldier of Christ, brought with him from Ireland to Britain a man of the race of Ulster and of royal stock yet wearing a cleric's habit. His name was Áed Dub, and it was intended that he should remain for a number of years as a pilgrim in Findchán's monastery. This Áed Dub had been a very bloody man and had killed many people, among them Diarmait mac Cerbaill, ordained by God's will as king of all Ireland. This same Áed, having spent some time in pilgrimage, was ordained priest in Findchán's monastery, but the ordination was invalid even though a bishop had been brought. This was because the bishop had not dared to place his hand on Áed's head until Findchán (who had a carnal love for Áed) had first laid his right hand on his head in confirmation.

When this ordination was later made known to the saint, he took it ill, pronouncing thereupon this fearful judgment on Findchán and Áed, now ordained, saying:

‘That right hand which Findchán, against the law of God and of the Church, laid on the hand of a son of perdition will soon grow rotten. It will give him great pain, and be dead and buried before him though he will live many years after his hand is buried. Áed, however, who was ordained unfittingly, will return as a dog to his vomit; he will again be a bloody murderer and in the end, killed by a spear, he will fall from wood into water and die drowning, He deserved such an end to life long ago for killing the king of all Ireland.’

The blessed man’s prophecy concerning both of them was fulfilled. First, the right fist of the priest Findchán became rotten and preceded him into the earth, being buried on the island called Ommon. The man himself, in accordance with St Columba’s words, lived on for many years. Áed Dub, priest in name only, returned to his old wickedness and, being pierced by a treacherous spear, he fell from the prow of a ship into the waters of a lake and perished (Sharpe 1991, 138–39).

In Irish tales of threefold death an offence is committed, there is a prophecy that the delinquent will die in three different ways, and in due course the prophecy is fulfilled. In this short anecdote Aed Dub offends in no less than four ways: he commits regicide, he is improperly ordained, he has a great deal of blood on his hands, and he commits a sexual sin. These offences can be interpreted in term of the Dumézilian functions: regicide and improper ordination are sins in the domain of the sacred; excessive use of physical force is a sin of the second function; and evidence supports the view that falling through the air, being pierced by a spear, and drowning also belong to the first, second and third functions (Sayers 1992; Ó Cathasaigh 1994). This anecdote is interesting in all sorts of ways, but not the least of them is the use of a symmetrical trifunctional anecdote of threefold death as evidence of the prophetic power of a great Irish saint. Colm Cille, as we have seen, is especially associated with confluence of native tradition with monastic culture. It is appropriate that the Life written about a century after his death should contain such a remarkable product of that confluence.

Bibliography

- Ahlqvist, A., ed. *The early Irish linguist: an edition of the canonical part of the Auraicept na nÉces*. Societas Scientiarum Fennica: Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum 73. Helsinki 1983.
- Binchy, D.A. 'The background of early Irish literature'. *Studia Hibernica* 1/1961, 7–18.
- Byrne, F.J. *Irish kings and high-kings*. London: Batsford 1973.
- Carney, J., ed. *The poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan: together with the Irish gospel of Thomas and a poem on the Virgin Mary*, Irish Texts Society 47. Dublin: The Educational Company of Ireland 1964.
- Charles-Edwards, T.M. 'Críth Gablach and the law of status', *Peritia* 5/1986, 53–73.
- 'A contract between king and people in early medieval Ireland: Críth Gablach on kingship', *Peritia* 8/1994, 107–19.
- Dooley, A. & H. Roe. *Tales of the elders of Ireland: Acallam na Senórach*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999.
- Dumézil, G. *Servius et la fortune: essai sur la fonction sociale de louange et de blâme et sur les éléments indo-européens du cens romain*. Paris: Gallimard 1943.
- *Mythe et épopée: l'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples indo-européens*. Paris: Gallimard 1968.
- Gantz, J. *Early Irish myths and sagas*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1981.
- Gray, E., ed. *Cath Maige Tuired: The Battle of Mag Tuired*. Irish Texts Society 52. London: Irish Texts Society 1982.
- Kelly, F., ed. *Audacht Morainn*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1976
- Kinsella, T. *The Táin*. London: Oxford University Press 1970.
- Knott, E. & G. Murphy, *Early Irish Literature*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1966.
- Mac Cana, P. *Celtic mythology*. London: Hamlyn 1970.
- McCone, K. R. 'Werewolves, cyclopes, díberga, and fianna: juvenile delinquency in early Ireland'. *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12/1986, 1–22.
- McManus, D. *A Guide to Ogam*. Maynooth: An Sagart 1991.
- Nagy, J. F. 'Heroic destinies in the *macgninrada* of Finn and Cú Chulainn'. *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 40/1984, 23–39.
- *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1965.
- Ó Briain, M. 'The conception and death of Fionn Mac Cumhaill's canine cousin'. *Celtica Helsingensia: proceedings from a symposium on Celtic Studies*, ed. Anders Ahlqvist et al. Societas Scientiarum Fennica: Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum 107 / 1996, 179–202.

- Ó Cathasaigh, T. *The heroic biography of Cormac mac Airt*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1977.
- ‘Cath Maige Tuired as exemplary myth’. *Folia gadelica*, ed. P. de Brún et al. Cork: Cork University Press 1983, 1–19.
- ‘The sister’s son in early Irish literature’. *Peritia* 5/1986, 128–60.
- ‘The threefold death in early Irish sources’. *Studia Celtica Japonica* 6/1994, 53–57.
- Ó Cuív, B. ‘Ireland’s manuscript heritage’. *Éire-Ireland* 19, 1/1984, 87–110.
- O’Rahilly, C., ed. *Táin bó Cúailnge: Recension I*. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1976.
- Rees A., & B. Rees. *Celtic heritage*. London: Thames and Hudson 1961.
- Sayers, W. ‘Guin & crochad & gólád: the earliest Irish threefold death’. *Celtic languages and Celtic peoples*, ed. Cyril Byrne et al. Halifax, Nova Scotia: D’Arcy McGee Chair of Irish Studies, Saint Mary’s University 1962.
- Sharp, R. Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St Columba*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1991.
- Sjoestedt, M-L. *Gods and heroes of the Celts*. London: Methuen 1949.
- Watkins, C. ‘The etymology of Irish *dúan*’. *Celtica* 11/1976, 270–77.