



A Window on the Iron Age:

The controversy over the
dating of the Ulster cycles

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“Wonder, Wisdom and War”

Essays on Early Ireland

By Brendan Halligan

Chapter Four

“A Window on the Iron Age”

The controversy over the dating of the Ulster cycle

Summary

This essay reviews Professor Jackson's contention that the Ulster cycle represents a tradition of what once existed and provides us with fragmentary glimpses of Celtic life in the Iron Age. It begins by placing Professor Jackson's thesis in the context of scholarship at that time, both popular and academic, and demonstrates his view was broadly consistent with prevailing orthodoxy. Carney is briefly discussed as an exception to the general rule. Jackson's lecture is then analysed, with particular reference to the comparative methodology employed, and it is argued that his conclusions were modestly formulated, prudent and unexceptional.

The cornerstone of more recent scholarship on the Ulster cycle is taken to be best represented by Professor McCone. His book, *Pagan past and Christian present in early Irish literature* (date?), is analysed for the counter-argument that the proper frame of reference for the sagas is early Christian Ireland rather than the preceding pagan period. His rejection of the 'nativist' interpretation of the literature and its replacement by a 'biblicist' approach is assessed, and it is argued that the case is convincing, if overstated. Aitchison and his work on the issue is examined because of McCone's use of Aitchison as a key supporting witness.

More recent criticism is reviewed, especially with regard to the archaeological evidence regarding the material culture of the *Táin*. A brief conclusion argues that the tradition of a tradition lives on in terms of the Ulster cycle offering a glimpse of Iron Age life in Ireland, and that Jackson's window remains of use, even if in need of repair.

Introduction

Professor Jackson's thesis represents what was then (1964), and to some extent still is, an established view on the Ulster cycle. The tales in the cycle were taken as representing a tradition of a society that had existed some four to six centuries before being described in written form. The Ulster cycle was also said to be genuine, in that the tradition had preserved the essential elements of the society in terms of its mores and organisation. Because of this authenticity, the Ulster cycle was regarded, in the modest formulation expressed by Professor Jackson, as a window through which the distant past could be discerned.

Given that the content of the cycle itself was what might nowadays be described as fiction, it was not taken as 'history' in the conventional sense. Unlike Herodotus, Livy or Tacitus, or even Plutarch or Suetonius, who took personalities rather than the broad sweep of historical events as their subject matter, the Ulster cycle was instead regarded as a means whereby the stuff of history could be deduced. For this thesis to stand it required three supporting premises to be confirmed: first, that the sagas actually reflected the society in which they were situated; second, that they had been transmitted orally across the centuries more or less intact in terms of their essentials; and third, that with the arrival of literacy they had then been committed to writing without significant alteration.

Key to this line of reasoning is the premise that an oral tradition existed; otherwise, the content of the cycle could not have been transmitted down the generations. By definition, such reasoning also demanded that the tradition be inherently conservative, in the literal sense. The other two premises were secondary, in that the sagas could not be basically authentic if they had only been constructed *de novo* with the advent of writing (since they would have been a form of historical fiction as distinct from contemporary fiction) or, if essentially authentic, they could not have been recorded at all unless they had been preserved orally.

What is interesting, by way of a point of departure, is that a tradition had developed about the tradition of the Ulster cycle by the time Ireland's literary history came to be popularised in the late-nineteenth century. For example, Douglas Hyde says that were it not 'thanks to her native annalists, her autochthonous traditions and her bardic histories...(Ireland) would have fared badly indeed, so far as history goes...It is towards the middle or close of the fourth century that we come into much closer contact with the Irish, and indeed we know with some certainty a good deal about their internal history, manners,

laws, language, and institutions from that time to the present' (1899: 20, 23). The key phrase here is, of course, 'with some certainty'. That certainty was itself defined by Hyde with a healthy draught of common sense. He added that 'the early Irish writers who redacted the mythical history of the country were no doubt imbued with the spirit of the so-called Greek "logographers" who, when collecting the Greek myths from the poets, desired, while not eliminating the miraculous, yet to smooth away all startling discrepancies and present them in a readable and, as it were, a historical series' (1899: 51).

From this it can be deduced that Hyde believed in the continuity of a tradition, while also accepting that the material had been edited en route so as to conform to the norms of contemporary society. Yet, he perceived a difficulty in this process of accommodating the tradition with the contemporary. Referring to Keating, who wrote a thousand years after the sagas were first composed, Hyde notes that 'from all that we have said it clearly appears that carefully as the Christianised Irish strove to euhemerise their pantheon, they were unable to succeed' (1899: 54). In other words, he had a sophisticated understanding of the tradition and its rendition in writing—it was at once both representative of its origins in a pagan Ireland and of the Christian Ireland in which it was compiled.

In his foreword to *Gaelic literature surveyed*, Aodh de Blácam makes the same point. Uncannily anticipating the words of Professor Jackson, he claimed that 'in the older portion (of the literature written in Gaelic) is found a window into the early Iron Age, wherein European civilisation was founded' (1930: xiii). De Blácam goes on to argue that 'one of the most remarkable traits of Gaelic literature is that it deals, so as to speak, with a continuous historic present' (*ibid.*). More important, from the viewpoint of this essay, is his claim that 'the same life, the same mode of thought, appears in the eighteenth century as in the eighth' (*ibid.*). This assertion quite evidently

confirms what has been styled here as the tradition of a tradition.

In dealing specifically with the tension between paganism and Christianity, de Blácam developed the argument that 'paganism in Ireland rather meant nature unlighted by revelation. It is true that a certain jealousy between pagan scholarship and the Church is traceable during many centuries; but this was the resistance of the natural man to the disciplines of religion. There was little deliberate conflict with the faith... Certainly Christianity caused no setback to Irish imaginative life: for the great stories... gain final dramatic point from Christian additions' (1930: 21). Most critically of all, he added by way of conclusion 'the clergy... were the transcribers and preservers of the heroic tales' (*ibid.*). It is precisely this conclusion which is, of course, contested by modern scholarship (and constitutes the subject of this essay).

De Blácam's theses are worth repetition as they constituted an integrated framework for analysing the sagas that was generally accepted as standard up to Jackson's time, notwithstanding Carney's critique. De Blácam claims that the older portion of the literature provided a window into the early Iron Age; that a continuity in culture, values and mode of thought had lasted throughout a thousand years of literacy; that there had been a tension between Christianity and paganism but that it had caused no impediment to what he described as 'Irish imaginative life'; that this interplay had heightened the dramatic impact of the sagas; and, finally, that the clergy were the 'transcribers and preservers' of the heroic tales. He thus marries three points which later scholars regard as logically inconsistent. The sagas are taken as a window on the Iron Age, but simultaneously are regarded as being an amalgam of the pagan and the Christian, while the literati are reduced to mere transcribers and preservers, a classification that seems inherently incompatible with the imaginative act of fusing two separate and, indeed, competing traditions.

Whether this is so is a question addressed later; for the moment it suffices to note that de Blácam is representative of a view that prevailed halfway between the pioneering work of O'Donovan and O'Curry and current scholarship, a period that was itself marked by a resurgence in Celtic studies, notably by German scholars.

Amongst those who helped in the resurgence of interest, not alone in early Irish but modern Irish as well, was Robin Flower, the English scholar forever to be associated with the Blasket Islands. His final publication, *The Irish tradition* (1947), quite naturally opened with the question of how the written tradition began, and the answer he proposed is, perhaps, the classic of its type. It consists of nine steps:

- 1) old Irish society was intensely aristocratic, it set great store by memories of past achievement so as to enhance the prestige of the dominant class;
- 2) these memories were kept alive by the poets – that was their function;
- 3) when the mnemonic tradition met the Latin tradition of writing it was fixed in a new form that guaranteed a greater permanence;
- 4) the kings and the poets and the clerics worked together to this end;
- 5) in particular, the men of the new learning set themselves the task from an early stage of identifying how Irish history might be fitted into the scheme of universal history which ruled in the Latin church;
- 6) and the monks worked on this with 'an heroic ardour';
- 7) the language was still Latin;
- 8) but 'it is plain from the entries relating to Irish history that much of the epic material which had come down to us in texts of a later date was already in existence, though exactly in what form it would be hazardous to conjecture' (1947: 4–5).

This last point warrants repetition in view of Flower's reputation and the dissent from Jackson's 'window on the Irish Iron Age' that emerged in more recent times. Flower believed that the earliest Latin compositions give evidence of epic material 'already in existence', i.e. in existence in the Irish language and relating to a society predating the advent of Christianity. From this he deduces that 'by the seventh century the monks had accepted the pagan tradition and put it on one level with the historical material which had come to them under the sanction of the fathers of the Church' (*loc. cit.*: 5). Because there was no written tradition in Ireland, unlike Israel, Greece and Rome, it was 'desperately necessary to give a validity to the oral tradition upon which they depended for the Irish events in their chronicle' (*loc. cit.*: 6).

The points of direct interest here are Flower's working assumptions that there was an oral tradition in Ireland, that it had been accepted by the monkish literati as early as the seventh century and that they were intent on incorporating it into the great schema of world history developed initially by Eusebius. The motivation for this vast enterprise was, therefore, retrospective, in the sense of being historical; it was also racial rather than religious in that it sought to endow the Irish with a past no less noble or dignified than other ancient civilisations. In short, this was an exercise in racial aggrandisement and is at odds with the later interpretation that its essential purpose was either the religious preoccupations of the literati or the political demands of the then dominant class, or both synthesised into a new integral ideology.

Finally, as this point will emerge again, it is necessary to note that Flower assigned a pivotal role to the *filid* in transmitting the tradition of the past, for 'it was to them that the monastic historians of the sixth and seventh centuries had recourse for all those memories of the past which they desired to put on record in their new medium of writing' (*loc. cit.*: 4).

At the same time as Flower's final work appeared, Myles Dillon published *Early Irish literature* (1948), with the express aim of providing an adequate account of early Irish literature; none then existed due to O'Curry and Hull being out of print and the fact that de Blácam dealt with the later period. Dillon sought to present 'the imaginative literature of Ireland in a coherent account' (1948: v). This coherent account begins by tracing the arrival of the Celts in Ireland and says that they brought with them 'an aristocratic tradition and a highly organised society. The description which Caesar and Polybius have given of Gaulish customs well fits the old Irish world as we know from the sagas' (*loc. cit.*: xii). This point of correspondence with Jackson is stated with even greater force when Dillon goes on: 'from the heroic sagas...we get a picture of pre-Christian Ireland which seems genuine' (*ibid.*).

It is not a historical picture, of course, but probably a reflection of the 'social and political conditions of the time which they claim to describe, namely the first century before Christ' (*ibid.*). This phraseology is also strongly reminiscent of Jackson, as will become clear later, although it dates the society of the sagas far earlier than Jackson is prepared to accept and at a point which Aitchison dismisses out of hand. In view of the dispute about the existence of an oral tradition, which is so central to McCone, it is noteworthy that Dillon believes that the sagas have 'evidently a long oral tradition behind them' (*ibid.*). Dillon is, clearly, an exemplar of the tradition.

The resilience of the tradition of a tradition can be attested in a remarkable series of essays, based on the Thomas Davis series of lectures, *Irish Sagas*, with Dillon himself as series editor (Dillon, 1968; henceforth *Sagas*). All but one of the twelve authorities gathered for this comprehensive review of the sagas takes the 'historic present' of Hyde for granted. In the Introduction to the lectures, Dillon refers to the

'creative memory' at work in the sagas and states that 'the Irish heroic sagas...preserve, amid much that is pure fantasy, the picture of an old Celtic society such as the ancient historians described as existing in Gaul. Julius Caesar and Strabo and others have described the habits of the Gauls at a feast, their weapons and manner of fighting on the battlefield, and the poetry of their bards. And much of what they tell us is told again in old Irish manuscripts which preserve the Irish sagas, although the sagas are not earlier than the eighth century' (*Sagas*: 9).

The key phrases here are the description of the sagas as 'the picture of an old Celtic society', despite what is termed 'pure fantasy'. Binchy takes oral tradition for granted when he says that 'the rudiments of the story—*ceithre cnámha an sgéil*—of Fergus mac Léiti go back at least twelve centuries, indeed were probably told in court and camp long before Irish became a written language' (*Sagas*: 51).

This reference to stories being told in court and camp 'long before' Irish became a written language is all the more striking for the laconic tone in which it is presented; it is simply taken as beyond dispute. Quin, in writing of the oldest version of *Longas Macc nUisnig*, that found in the Book of Leinster, says the language points to the eighth or ninth centuries and that some of the verse is undoubtedly older by a century or two. He then adds, tellingly, that 'behind this again we have presumably a period of floating traditions' and, later, that it 'may be survivals of really old tradition' (*Sagas*: 59).

O'Brien, takes *Fled Bricrenn* as providing 'two very precious survivals linking the Celts of Ireland with those of Western Europe' (*Sagas*: 78). These are the 'Hero's portion' and the 'Champion's bargain' which he associates with Poseidonius the Stoic, who lived in the last century BC. For O'Brien, this saga, at least, was a window on the world which Poseidonius describes, and which in his own words went back to 'ancient times', i.e. earlier than the first century

BC (*Sagas*: 78). Nora Chadwick is quite explicit in her belief that an oral tradition was the repository from which the sagas were drawn, like water from a well. She recounts how Hua Maiglínni recited ancient deeds of valour prior to the battle of Allen in 722 and uses this fact to claim that 'this standard of memory and of art must have done much to keep alive the history, and the historical conditions of the Heroic Age'. But, as Hyde and de Blácam had done before her, she is careful to nuance this thesis by adding that 'the nucleus of the ancient traditions has been so well preserved that we are in danger of forgetting that the attitude of the story-teller to his subject, and his artistic methods, gradually changed.

At times his own political views colour his presentation of the facts' (*Sagas*: 80). In short, she quite sensibly introduces political motivations into her analysis, as de Blácam had done with the religious. Nonetheless, she subscribes to the 'window' metaphor when she adds that the accounts of Gaulish feasts in Poseidonius are 'so similar to those of ancient Ireland that some of them could be transferred into an Irish saga without causing the least surprise' (*Sagas*: 82). For her, 'The story of Mac Da Thó's pig' is 'a glorious travesty of the Ancient World by one who honoured and laughed at its traditions' (*Sagas*: 89). Here again, there was little doubt about the 'historic present' of the Ancient World; otherwise it could hardly have been satirised as a sort of ninth century 'Bull Ireland'.

Professor Greene had the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* as his subject matter, the broadest possible canvass of the saga-world. He too thinks that the Ulster cycle, in this case the *Táin*, 'like the rest of the Ulster sagas, preserves pre-Christian traditions' (*Sagas*: 95), and regards this to be so self-evident that he does not even examine it as a proposition; instead, he asks 'but of what period?' (*Ibid.*). Speculation as to the answer leads him to pose, in terms of the present essay, the most pertinent. Recalling that writing was little known in Ireland before the fifth century, and writing in Irish not

much before the seventh, he properly says that 'we have to ask ourselves how long we should allow for an oral tradition which would preserve all these archaic features, free from any admixture of Christian lore' (*Sagas*: 96).

The answer is brief, to the point and, mercifully, full of common sense: 'Not too long, I would suggest'. He suggests that the stories about the *Ulaid* (Ulstermen) had possibly become part of the stock-in-trade of the literary class just before the coming of Christianity and writing. Admitting that these stories would not have been popular in the 'first flush of missionary learning' he claims that in no country did 'the new learning' make its peace with 'the old learning as quickly or as thoroughly as in Ireland' (*Sagas*: 97). From this he deduces that the story about the alleged finding of the *Táin* by the poet Seanchán Torpéist in the seventh century was 'just the antiquarians way of saying that it had become respectable to write it down' (*ibid*).

Finally, in line with all of the authorities previously quoted, Greene adheres to the belief that the *Táin* was not just written down but rearranged as well, and he agrees that there is probably a good deal of truth in Thurneysen's suggestion that 'the *Táin* in its present form has been influenced by the Aeneid; the writers were out to provide Ireland with a national epic' (*Sagas*: 98). This formulation of the *Táin* subscribes to the general theory that the content is an admixture of the archaic and the then contemporary and was the product of a cultural truce between the old and the new learning, perhaps more properly described as the dynamic fusion of imaginative elements to create a new cultural compound. But, the twist in the plot is that, for Greene, the purpose of this reaction is to compose 'a national epic' similar to that of a pagan Rome, which had, of course, been based in turn on those of pagan Greece. This is a long way from adapting archaic material for purposes of Christian proselytising; in fact, it is the opposite. As such, it corroborates Jackson's use of the *Iliad* as an analogy for the

Ulster cycle, as he does in the early part of his lecture *The oldest Irish tradition: a window on the Irish Age* (1964: 2-8). Yet, for all that, Greene analyses a passage relating to Cú Chulainn's boyhood and, while stating that it could hardly have been written much before the ninth century, says 'but there is no admixture at all of the classical or ecclesiastical elements' (*Sagas*: 102). In short, the story is one example of what some might describe as an archaic residue to be found in the *Táin*, but which others regard as its very essence.

O'Daly is less personal in her treatment of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and quotes Lucius Gwynn and O'Rahilly as authorities for the argument that the story is part of a 'tradition of a sudden overthrow of an ancient order of things' (*Sagas*: 106), which could go as far back as the third century BC. Gerard Murphy, in treating *Acallam na Senórach*, contrasts the literary traditions of Finn mac Cumhaill and his *fián* with that of Cú Chulainn and the Ulidian heroes of the heroic tradition; the first was a more recent innovation, the other was 'firmly fixed by age-old literary custom' (*Sagas*: 121). For Breathnach, *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Gráinne* 'is a theme that has come out of the deep well of immemorial time in which Myth has its source...it is an elaboration of a half-forgotten, half-remembered thought from the treasure-trove of the Gaelic race's timeless memory' (*Sagas*: 147).

Carney deals with *Cath Maige Muccrime*, a story of the origins of the greatest dynastic kindred that Ireland has known, and is primarily concerned with the power of the underlying myth down to the early twentieth century. His references to earlier traditions are necessarily oblique but, even so, fit into the framework presented by the other contributors. He refers, for example, to 'the remote origins of the contemporary ruling kindred' from which the author of the saga shaped the myth and deduces that 'for certain details' he had drawn upon 'two pre-existing traditions' (*Sagas*: 152-3). The theme of the essay is, itself, a powerful if unwitting

corroboration of the endurance of tradition across the centuries to the point that it still 'has such potency, is so endemic to the soil that it could inspire its recreation in our own time' (*Sagas*: 148).

In the final essay from the Thomas Davis series of lectures, on *Fingal Rónáin*, Greene argues that 'the idea of pure literature, the story for the story's sake, had developed in the three centuries or so since the old oral tradition came to terms with the new Latin learning' This 'old oral tradition' contained 'very old material' which, in the case of this particular story, had a trace of an archaism in that it is 'completely pagan both in spirit and expression' (*Sagas*: 162-3).

Without forcing the thesis too far, it can be said that all but one of the lecturers in the series subscribe in some form to the proposition that prior to Christianity an old oral tradition had existed, had then come into contact with the Latin learning, had been transformed and enriched in the process but, nonetheless, had retained elements of archaism that were completely pagan despite being written down by monastic scribes. Dillon, in analysing the narrative form of the sagas, comprising prose and poetry, concludes that it is the ancient Indo-European form which, in Ireland, 'survived down to the Middle Ages, illustrating what can be shown in various other ways, the great archaism of Irish tradition' (*Sagas*: 13).

It was just prior to this Thomas Davis series of lectures that Professor Jackson delivered his Rede Lecture in 1964. As will be seen, his general approach to the Ulster cycle conforms to that of the ten Irish authorities assembled for the purpose of giving a definitive account of the Irish sagas in the light of contemporary scholarship. That it was to be a definitive account is beyond dispute, for the Thomas Davis lectures were intended 'to provide a popular form of what is best in Irish scholarship and the sciences' (*Sagas*: 5). The lectures, taken individually and collectively, and the general introduction by Dillon as the series editor, thus represent the prevailing view of Irish

scholarship on the sagas at its most authoritative and provide an appropriate context in which Jackson's contemporaneous analysis can best be assessed.

One caveat, at least, is necessary and needs repetition. As previously indicated, the team of scholars assembled by Dillon included Professor James Carney, whose *Studies in Irish literature and history* (1955) had already introduced a line of reasoning which pitted the 'nativist' interpretation of the sagas against what had come to be known as the 'biblicist'. His proposition was that 'there is no Irish saga extant which does not show some sign, however slight, of what nativists would call "monkish redaction"' (1955: 305). He elaborated the point by arguing that 'since literary redaction is an apparent and incontrovertible fact (the sagas are, after all, written) we are not justified in assuming that the "monkish additions" are limited to those cases where they are immediately and accidentally obvious' (306).

His general thesis about the form and provenance of the sagas was expressed with force and simplicity as follows: 'My contention here is that, as in the case of verse, the form and technique of Irish prose sagas have a double line of descent: one line is that of pre-literate oral narration, the other (and perhaps in the case of the better-known sagas, the predominant line) derives from the mixed Christian classical culture of the earliest monastic period' (*ibid.*).

Carney therefore identifies three influences at work: the Irish oral tradition, classical literature and Christianity. In respect of the classical influences he had no doubt 'but that Homer...is the ultimate ancestor' of such scenes in early Irish literature (313). As for the oral tradition, 'without any doubt this [early Irish saga] literature was based in part upon an oral tradition going back to the remote pre-Christian past.

But the traditional element is often a mere nucleus because the Christian authors, in presenting the pre-Christian past, drew not only on native material but on their total literary

experience' (321). Carney in later life tempered this analysis somewhat but, nevertheless, this argument rounds off what was the conventional wisdom of the time in which Jackson delivered his lecture.

Jackson's central argument is that the Ulster cycle, although 'historically bogus' (1964: 44) and superimposed with 'a thick layer of biblical and antiquarian ecclesiastical learning' (46), nonetheless 'provide[s] us with a picture—very dim and fragmentary, no doubt, but still a picture—of Ireland in the Early Iron Age' (5). Jackson sets himself the task of proving that the Ulster cycle provided a window on the Early Iron Age by first sketching out the contours of the picture itself (dim and fragmentary as he describes it) and then attempting to date it.

This seems an unexceptional mission in the light of the then contemporary scholarship, and even more so of the context in which the lecture was given. It was intended for those scholars interested in the early history of the British Isles who, for reasons of their professional interests or specialities, were less aware than they should be of 'this extraordinary archaic fragment of European literature' (1964: 5), and he modestly claimed to be presenting nothing new in the hypothesis that the sagas 'belong in fact to a "pre-historic" Ireland' (4).

The lecture, was, as it were, no more than a primer, an introduction to a relatively unknown subject or, if one wishes, a condensed popularisation of Irish literature, in this case the Ulster cycle, following in the steps of Hyde, de Blácam and others.

Jackson's methodology in arriving at a picture of the society inherent in the Ulster cycle is to compare it with Gaulish and British society prior to their destruction by Rome. A range of classical authors is adduced: Caesar, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, Athenaeus and, of course, Poseidonius (whose lost history served as the primary source for the others), with Aristotle,

Polybius, Livy and Ammianus Marcellinus cited for corroborative detail.

Their descriptions of the way of life of the Gauls, and to some extent of the Britons, in the Early Iron Age are then summarised and compared for parallels with those portrayed in the Ulster cycle. These include (1964: 28–43):

- social organisation
- dress
- diet
- feasting
- clientship
- weaponry
- military mores
(head-hunting, the champion's portion)
- superstitions
- functional roles (*baird*, *filid* and *druid*)
- religious beliefs
- social behaviour and
- group psychology

Based on this comparison, Jackson argues for a 'general agreement between the habits of the Gauls and Britons in the first century BC and those of the early Irish' (1964: 43). Having established a broad correspondence between the three societies, Gaulish, British and Irish, he examines the evidence for dating the Ulster cycle on the basis of the following line of reasoning. The La Tène culture came to Ulster from Gaul via northern Britain in the second century BC, or earlier; the immigrant people retained their identity for some centuries; it follows that the formation of the tradition on which the cycle is based falls between the second century BC and the fourth century AD, as the Ulaid kingdom was broken into pieces in the fifth century; the people of the cycle were pagans and the cycle contains no traces of Christianity; the first recension of the *Táin* is known to have existed already in the first half of the eighth century and may have been in

writing as early as the middle of the seventh; the stories had been handed on previously by oral tradition, probably for about 300 years (*loc. cit.*: 43–55). Surprisingly, Jackson does not put an approximate date or period on the Ulster society of the sagas but, rather, opts for a broader less contentious conclusion that the stories were put together in, say, the fourth century AD, and not earlier.

The two tasks having been completed, Jackson ends by claiming that the account of the life and civilisation depicted in the Ulster cycle (55)

is demonstrably older than the fifth century;

is extraordinarily similar to that of the Gauls and Britons in the couple of centuries before they were absorbed by Rome; and

the reason for this is that the Gauls, Britons and Irish were all living in cultures which were local expressions of a Celtic Iron Age whose common roots lay in Gaul in the third century BC.

Jackson accordingly submits that it is 'not altogether fanciful or without justification' to say that if we want to know what it was to be a late La Tène Celt and what life in the Early Iron Age was like then we can get 'some notion' of it by reading the Ulster cycle (55). This extraordinarily modest formulation rests, of course, on the proposition that an oral tradition existed and it is central to both the picture of the society as conveyed in the cycle and to its dating as about 300 years before first being written down. It does, however, accept that Christian and classical influences were at work and that the content had consequently been modified, altered or nuanced, as had the genealogies (45), although this aspect of the matter is not examined in any detail, being outside the scope of the lecture and the purpose for which it was intended. Taken on its own merits, and within the context in which it was delivered, the central thrust of the lecture is broadly consistent with the scholarship of

the day and makes no claims other than those which could be corroborated by other scholars or disciplines, notably archaeology and classical literature.

The strength of Jackson's argument (but also its potential vulnerability) lies in the comparative methodology employed. If the classical authors are to be taken as credible authorities, then the life and habits of the ancient Gauls and Britons are indeed the yardstick by which the life and habits of the *Ulaid* are to be assessed and, on the basis of the parallels identified, it is surely reasonable to conclude that a striking similarity exists. Furthermore, if that culture or civilisation existed as far back as the first century BC in Gaul and Britain, then it is not unreasonable to assume that it existed too in the Ulster of the sagas at some point either then or later. Jackson opts for a much later period because of his caution regarding the durability of an oral tradition; rather than pushing the date of the sagas back to the traditional time of Christ he urges prudence and, by implication, settles for sometime between the first and second century AD. While this is commendable in terms of scholarship, it raises an intriguing question not discussed by Jackson: if his own dating of the cycle is accepted, what is one to say of the fact that the La Tène culture in Ulster continued unchanged, at least in the essentials identified by him, for some centuries after the classical authors had described it? And what does that tell us of its tenacity in preserving itself, of the means by which it achieved cultural continuity and of the manner in which it would react to an external shock, such as the arrival of Christianity?

One historian offers a view on the durability of tradition, which not only highlights the prudential approach of Jackson but also provides some answers to these questions. Hughes wrote the introduction to Otway-Ruthven's *A history of medieval Ireland* (Hughes: 1968) in which she claims that it was 'the learned class who guarded the traditions of a people...they maintained a continuous tradition intact from the pre-Christian

past' up to the point of the Norman conquest (11). Indeed, on the first page of the introduction she puts Jackson in the shade by asserting that 'Irish civilisation in the tenth century probably still had much in common with that of the Gaulish Celts before the Romans arrived'. What, or how much, was in common is not made clear but she has no doubt that 'the heroic tales of the Ulster cycle... provide a self-consistent and circumstantial account of a pre-Christian society which seems to be similar to that which Roman occupation destroyed in Gaul and Britain' (3). She agrees, therefore, with Jackson that the tales 'provide vivid pictures of pre-Christian Irish society' and is sympathetic to his arguments as to their dating. On the impact of Christianity she tends towards the Jackson position by asserting that the monastic schools were in the main 'sympathetic to secular learning' and as a result 'Christianity gave to secular learning another medium, the written record, and at the same time enriched the intellectual life of Ireland with a new literature and new ideas' (1968: 23-4). Despite this, she persists in describing Irish civilisation up to the Normans as archaic, with its roots bedded deep in a pre-Christian past.

This view of Irish society stretching from the era of the sagas to that in which they were recorded in extant literature (in fact, a millennium, give or take a few hundred years) is contested by what has come to be known as the Biblicist School, of which McCone is the most trenchant representative. In the Prologue to his *Pagan past and Christian present in early Irish literature* (1990), he assembles his cast and marshals his arguments against 'nativist' orthodoxy. The fundamental argument is that 'most extant early Irish sagas bore a clear and deep monastic imprint, whatever their remote origins in pagan oral tradition' (ix). The authority for this is Carney, following in the footsteps of Thurneysen. The next step is to elaborate on the nature of the 'monastic imprint', and for this purpose the authority is Ó Corráin who has assembled evidence, in McCone's words, of 'monastic propagandists and genealogists'

acting as 'ruthless reshapers of the past in the interests of the present' (1990: ix). This Orwellian representation of medieval Ireland is reinforced by invoking a third authority, Ó Cathasaigh, who is said to have shown that the early Irish sagas are 'deliberate literary compositions primarily geared to contemporary concerns rather than antiquarian assemblages, however archaic or traditional the elements so manipulated' (*ibid.*). And, in a coup de grace, Ó Corráin and Breatnach are cited as authorities for the re-evaluation of the early Irish secular law tracts, 'the most jealously guarded of all traditionalist bastions', and are said to have made 'an incontrovertible case for monastic authorship' (*ibid.*).

When these pieces of the jigsaw are fitted together an altogether different picture of medieval Ireland becomes visible than that displayed in the 'nativist' gallery under the curatorship of Dillon in the Thomas Davis lecture series. Early Christian Ireland is transformed from an 'abnormal and stagnant' sideshow into a major production set in 'an early medieval European civilisation'. McCone is certain that this alternative picture of early medieval Ireland amounts to a 'revolution in scholarly attitudes', which successfully marries archaism on the one hand and a contemporary modernism on the other. He offers a provisional synthesis and overview of this revolutionary approach by arguing that despite the diversity of early Irish literature, it is rooted in a 'coherent, far-reaching and flexible construct' forged by 'monastic men of letters' whose 'level of scholarship, intellectual analysis and imagination', when brought to bear upon this 'gargantuan undertaking', blossomed into a dynamic, creative, erudite and cohesive monastically based civilisation from the sixth century AD onwards which, *inter alia*, 'helped to lead Britain and Europe out of the Dark Ages' (1990: ix-x).

This panoramic view of medieval Ireland is not novel, indeed it has a well-established ancestry going back to the 'island of saints and

scholars', through Keating, then via O'Curry and later popularisers, like Hyde and de Blácam, down to such present-day exponents as Cahill with his *How the Irish saved civilisation* (Cahill, 1995). But what is novel in the McCone thesis is the breadth of erudition, the extent of the scholarship, the wealth of references, the scale of ambition and, more particularly, the sustained momentum of the synthesis, which fuses minute detail with broad sweeping conceptual insights. All in all, it is a formidable achievement worthy of what is a revolution in scholarly, as distinct from popular, attitudes.

At its core, the synthesis produced by McCone displaces the nativist orthodoxy of the monastic scribes as tame transcribers of received tradition with the diametrically different role of ruthless reshapers of the past for the political purposes of the present. Instead of being windows on the past, the sagas are a snapshot of the times in which they were composed. They tell us more about the Ireland of the day than a distant past or, if that is pushing the point too far, as much about the world of the monastic scholars as that of the Ulster cycle.

Their essential purpose is propaganda, not history; the aim of the literati is not to conserve pagan traditions intact but to modify and adapt them and thereby establish a new Christian tradition. This reshaping of the sagas is but part of a larger enterprise embracing the genealogies and the law tracts, an enterprise which itself is a reflection of a vibrant, creative, outward looking civilisation and the product of a new culture born by merging the Celtic with the Christian and the classical.

For the synthesis to hold it must disprove the existing orthodoxy, a task which McCone attempts without undue preliminaries. By the second page of his book, for example, he names its high priests (Dillon, Binchy, Jackson, MacCana and Ó Coileáin) and lays bare their broad common standpoint on what he describes as the 'most influential and fashionable approach

to the evaluation of early Irish literature'. The main elements of this approach are identified as a tradition which is:

- 1) conservative
- 2) transmitted orally, in the main
- 3) continuous with a pagan past, and
- 4) rooted in Celtic and Indo-European antiquity.

The two major props of this approach are said to be the Indo-European hypothesis and theories about oral transmission. The nativists also minimised the role of Christianity and literacy in terms of their impact on the secular genres of the literature. These props are to be kicked aside so that the whole 'nativist' edifice comes tumbling down. But, equally importantly, the minimisation of the role of Christianity and literacy is to be corrected by maximising their separate but interdependent, or complementary, functions as the reshapers of the literature.

These, then, are the three broad tasks upon which McCone embarks with commendable vigour and an awesome energy. But the temptation inherent in these tasks is that the ambition to modify the Indo-European hypothesis and recast the theory of the oral tradition may be taken to the point of negating them altogether; the temptation is almost irresistible if the complementary ambition is to maximise the role of the ruthless reshapers, for what is left by way of a credible explanation of early Irish literature if the two props of nativist orthodoxy are brought crashing down? Nothing much, it could be said, other than the role of the clerical literati. It is a temptation that McCone does not altogether resist.

It is extraordinarily difficult to summarise the full sweep of McCone's analysis, for it rages on like a torrent for over 250 pages. But one attempt to encapsulate the logic and content of the argumentation might go like this. The Indo-European hypothesis is first questioned, and one is warned to 'beware of facile assumptions with the Dumézilian system', which had previously

been subject to criticism (1990: 3). No more is heard of it from that point onwards (or so the index would suggest). Then, the attractions of orality to nativist scholars are shown to be misplaced because 'recent anthropological studies of oral traditions have tended to stress the decisive role of contemporary social and political factors in shaping them' (*ibid.*: 4). In short, the process of transmission influences a non-literate society's view of the past. Myth and history merge into one, and elements of the cultural heritage which cease to have a contemporary relevance are discarded, forgotten or transformed.

Consequently, oral traditions are conditioned by the society in which they flourish and, rather than being in stasis, tradition is in a state of flux; in fact, it is not tradition as conventionally understood, but a soon to be forgotten or reshaped version of the past which exists only at a given point in time. It follows logically that there is no way of tracing change back across the generations since, by definition, there is no verifiable documentary record of the past. There is no continuous past, only an ever-shifting present. By way of evidence for this thesis, the findings of Goody and Vansina are quoted (*ibid.*).

This is a stark view of the ultimate meaninglessness of an oral tradition, perhaps too harsh. Nevertheless, Nagy and Slokia are cited to corroborate the argument that pre-Christian Celtic literature was not preserved meaninglessly by the scribes, but rather was appreciated by an audience which understood it 'at some level other than pre-Christian myth', although, *prima facie*, this does not quite substantiate the conclusions of Goody and Vansina. Indeed, Nagy in the introduction to his major work, *Conversing with angels and ancients* (1996), asserts that the literary project of the literati 'resonated with the performative traditions of poetic composition and story-telling that predated the coming of Christianity to Ireland' (1996: x).

He weakens his credibility as a witness for the prosecution, however, when he immediately

goes on to claim that 'these traditions continued to play a vital role in Irish cultural life throughout the medieval period, arguably outliving the literary tradition itself' (*ibid.*). His focus is different to that of McCone; it is what he calls an innovation in the history of western Christianity. His thesis is specific: the Irish saint mediated not only on a religious but also on a literary plane. The *noíob* could rehabilitate and sponsor the recording of a pre-Christian 'native' past discredited in the eyes of a Christian present, sanction the literary preservation of some of the elements of that past, and discover the past anew for a present that had lost touch with its roots (1996: xiii). This thesis is hardly in tune with that developed by McCone, not least when it is applied to the *Táin*, for example. In that case, the role of the saints was 'the untrammelled transmission of the past remembered...working together harmoniously towards the restitution of the past in a modern, written form. Everyone and everything, including past and present, prove ultimately compatible, and so the prize, the *Táin* is won complete' (1996: 311). The restitution of the past, as he described it, does not quite gel with McCone's concept of the past ruthlessly reshaped. In fact, it could be described as the inverse.

Aitchison is, however, quoted by McCone as a substantive rebuttal of Jackson. Aitchison's use of the new approach to oral tradition leads him to conclude that the Ulster cycle tales are 'neither the literary transcriptions of Iron Age oral traditions, nor do they offer a "window" on Iron Age society' (Aitchison, 1987: 87). Nothing could be more definitive than that. Far from being a window on the past, the Ulster cycle is a remarkable potential addition to 'our knowledge of secular and religious affairs in northeastern Ireland during the second half of the first millennium A.D.' (*ibid.*). And this conclusion by Aitchison, which is central to McCone's construct, is used by him to devastating effect: 'It can now be regarded as axiomatic that, assumed oral origins for some of its constituents notwithstanding, the proper frame of reference for early Irish literature is

early Christian Ireland rather than the preceding pagan period' (McCone 1990: 4).

This short sentence is so loaded that it demands careful analysis in order to disentangle its various components and subject them to scrutiny. First of all, Aitchison is taken as having established an axiom, i.e. a self-evident truth. Second, the role of oral tradition is admitted, although heavily qualified by being cast as partial and problematic. Third, the frame of reference for early Irish literature is early Christian Ireland, whereas Aitchison is quite explicit in confining the relevance of the Ulster cycle to its proper geographical location of northeastern Ireland (1987: 105–11). McCone has, as it were, applied Aitchison's conclusion to the whole of Ireland. While this reasoning is logically defensible, being entirely consistent with Aitchison's reasoning, it nonetheless, exposes McCone's enthusiasm for universalising from the particular; temptation is at work.

Where does all this leave Jackson? By this early stage of the synthesis he has already been disposed of by McCone in summary fashion. He is the author of a 'small but influential book' (McCone, 1990: 3): it was, of course, a lecture. According to McCone, Jackson is the representative of the Homeric approach to early Irish literature, which emphasises its 'formulaic oral composition and transmission' and ascribes a 'secondary and essentially uncreative later role of writing' in its survival. He is a believer in the ability of a 'strictly regulated oral tradition to preserve a reasonably accurate, if patchy, record of earlier social and political conditions over a long period' (1990: 3). But this representation of Jackson, fair and accurate as it may be, is not subject to critical analysis on its own terms but is simply taken as a prototype of the school which believes that the picture of the past was 'preserved orally until it entered an apparently equally reactionary written record' (4). This prototype is then engulfed by the scholarly criticism quoted above.

The central pre-occupation of McCone is to remind us that we have no direct knowledge of a presumed oral tradition (as discussed earlier), and that what have come down to us from the early Christian period are exclusively the written products of the monastically educated (a broader term than 'monastic men of letters', those ruthless reshapers of the past quoted in the Prologue to *Pagan past and Christian present in early Irish literature* (1990)). The key point for McCone is that the 'nativist' school puts the cart before the horse in according primacy to the unattested oral tradition and its pagan origins, rather than to clerical and monastic literacy (1990: 5). In order to establish this point, and thereby close the window on the past so that it emits only a chink of light, McCone is at pains to disprove MacCana's thesis that the monastic literati were 'remarkably liberal and sympathetic to pagan tradition' and, most important of all, that had it not been 'for their goodwill and enthusiasm it would have gone the way of most oral tradition in a changing and literate world' (6).

MacCana had accepted that there was censorship in the monastic recording of native tradition, but this does not save him from McCone, who dispatches the former's 'benign ecumenism' model by invoking O'Rahilly. This is only to be expected, but O'Rahilly is a difficult witness. For example, he made the following observations, which would have weakened the McCone argument: 'For the pre-Christian period contemporary record fails us; but fortunately we are not left completely in the dark. In early Christian Ireland the popular memory was extraordinarily tenacious and conservative regarding the various origins of the different strata of the population; and with the help of these popular traditions, which have in part been preserved, it is possible to trace our history, in some of its broad outlines, back to a period antecedent to the Christian era' (O'Rahilly 1946: 263). O'Rahilly was here writing about history, such as the *Lebor Gabála* and the genealogies, as well as the sagas, under a chapter headed 'History or Fable?' (260–85). His view, as

expressed above, seems closer to that of Hughes and MacCana than to that of McCone. Analysing the Ulidian Tales in that chapter he answers the question posed in the chapter's title by stating that they are 'wholly mythical in origin and they have not the faintest connection with anything that could be called history (271).

Despite this analysis, he does state in the Preface of his book that, after criticism has done its legitimate utmost regarding the history of pre-Christian Ireland, 'there remains a modest residuum from which important historical deductions can be drawn'. For that purpose, he claims that for a critical examination of early Irish traditions a 'thorough knowledge of pagan beliefs and myths' is indispensable and makes it possible to 'unravel the origins of the Ulidian and other early Irish sagas' (O'Rahilly 1946: vi). On these grounds he is a somewhat unsatisfactory witness for the case against MacCana, although McCone saves the day by remarking that the presence of supernatural beings and features in the sagas only proves that the 'early Irish clerks are scarcely more convincing as totalitarians than as liberals' (1990: 7).

This conundrum is resolved by McCone in two lengthy chapters. Having previously examined recent trends in the scholarly study of Norse sagas, which conform with, or confirm, the biblicist theory (19), and having established that early Christian Ireland had a 'reasonably typical medieval western European social structure in which Church and state were inextricably linked (24), McCone solves the riddle by first admitting that originally pagan elements found their way into 'a creative interplay of native and biblical models' of literature but were certainly not 'part of a deliberate policy to preserve manifestations of a paganism detested by the church and her associates' (34). On the basis of various studies in the 'vast corpus' of early Irish literature, he argues convincingly that the examples quoted should give us 'some idea of the enormous technical and stylistic variety and sophistication

of early Irish narrative literature' (52) and that, in the words of Carney, the traditional element is often 'a mere nucleus because the Christian authors, in presenting a pre-Christian past, drew not only on native material but upon their total literary experience' (Carney 1955: 321).

This formulation is somewhat harder than those expressed elsewhere by Carney, as has been noted earlier. For example, at one stage Carney says that 'every early saga is complex, containing elements which derive in varying proportions from native oral tradition and from the contemporary literate culture of early Ireland (1955: 278), and again, 'the early Irish author, even when dealing with the remote pagan past... shows signs of being influenced by the early Christian culture of Ireland (279). The choice of quotation by McCone from Carney is, perhaps, another example of over-enthusiasm in making a case which by this stage in the development of his thesis is already well-established. It seems somewhat overdone to talk of 'backward-looking isolationism of the post-war nativist school' (1990: 53).

The technical and stylistic variety and sophistication of the sagas thus knocks over the second prop of the nativist school and opens the way for the final part of the answer to the conundrum of the liberalism and totalitarianism of the literati. They had produced a 'thoroughly integrated hybrid medium in which all extant early Irish literature, history and mythology can be rooted...the matrix continued to be able to adapt and absorb elements from the Bible or elsewhere as the occasion demanded' (McCone 1990: 79). To quote some examples: *Scéla Muicce Meic Da Thó* is a 'deadly earnest, if at times amusing, moral satire...geared by its monastic author to Christian principles' (77); *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Chonlai* are thoroughly Christian allegories (80) and, specifically, the tale of Conlae is 'an allegory of the global and individual conflict between pagan iniquity and Christian virtue...the claims of this world and those of

everlasting life' (82). Accordingly, it transpires that 'mythological, historicising, allegoristic and typological factors could be combined freely and often inextricably together by the early Christian Irish literati to modify pre-existing narratives and generate new ones' (82).

Hence, it follows, that many of the sagas are not the passive transcriptions of a liberal, accommodating, sympathetic monastic class, as with MacCana, but new sagas consciously composed as part of overall control of the *senchus*. To what end? To enable the church and her allies to 'monitor and modulate the values and institutions of the governing class as a whole' while, of course, allowing scope for various political groups to press their own claims (82). And how was this achieved? By allowing native mythological modes of thought and expression to 'resonate happily' with those of the Bible (82).

The upshot was an ideological framework, which bound church and state together and was 'thoroughly in tune with the various spiritual and secular interests of a monastically oriented learned class' (82-3). Clearly, this formulation puts the interests of the monastic class in pride of place and suggests that, whatever reservations may be entertained as to the efficiency of monastic censorship, it had established a form of thought-control not seen again until the Ireland of 1922-90. Presumably, it was this achievement which allows McCone to argue that, for all its peculiarities, medieval Ireland was typical of contemporary society in Western Europe and hence, played a role in its shaping that is as credible now as it was relevant then.

As stated earlier, McCone arrived at these conclusions by taking it as axiomatic that the proper frame of reference for early Irish literature is early Christian Ireland (1990: 4). This set conventional wisdom on its head, as scholars and popularisers had been virtually unanimous in believing that the frame of reference was the preceding pagan period. Aitchison's role in establishing the axiom is so central that his

analysis of the Ulster cycle demands separate detailed scrutiny to see if, indeed, he reduces Jackson's elegant edifice to mere academic rubble. In this task it is helpful to recall that Aitchison was a post-graduate student in archaeology at the time of writing his 'The Ulster cycle: heroic image and historical reality' (1987) and that, not unnaturally, his ultimate pre-occupation was that archaeologists (and historians) should not take the Ulster cycle as a 'source of data from which odd excerpts concerning early Irish society or material culture may be extracted' (1987: 113).

The motivation for this viewpoint related to the role archaeologists had assumed in regard to Celtic scholarship, as exemplified by Jackson. That role was one of subservience to a thesis established outside their own discipline; they had become validators of Jackson and, so, had abandoned their objectivity and impartiality. That seems a fair representation of Aitchison's criticism of his profession for the following reasons. Having described Jackson's treatment of the epic literature as representing the debasement of its contents, Aitchison complains that archaeologists turned to these sources 'in order to give a more vivid, detailed and accurate impression of the nature of Celtic Iron Age society than they believed the archaeological record alone could ever provide' (*ibid.*).

Whether or not this damning indictment is true remains a matter for archaeologists, but it indicates that Aitchison was a man with a mission intent on restoring the integrity of archaeological scholarship. This mind-set needs to be taken into account when evaluating his arguments, especially as it is only exposed at the very end of his article, although, in fairness, he hints at this in his opening when he says that the episodes of the Ulster cycle, and the *Táin* in particular, have exercised a profound influence on archaeologists' perception of early Irish society' (: 88). More particularly, for the purposes of this essay, this background serves as a filter for assessing his criticisms of Jackson. He wishes to liberate

archaeology and, to do so, coins his own version of a liberation theology.

Such commendable zeal has, however, its own pitfalls: it may lead to an unfair, even untenable, representation of the scholarly arguments to be rebutted. Aitchison seems open to that charge in, at least, the following respects. First, it is essential for Aitchison to establish that Jackson implied there was 'a distinct break between the pagan and Christian periods', as the explicit paganism of the literature would then establish it had been composed 'before about mid-fifth century' (1987: 90). But the source quoted from Jackson (1964: 24) contains no such implication. Next, while he properly asserts that Jackson drew parallels between Gaulish and Irish society from the works of Roman writers, Aitchison then adds 'mainly Caesar' (1987: 91). This qualification is biased and misrepresents Jackson's use of the classical authorities (see above). More importantly, Aitchison claims that Jackson (1964: 50) states the archaic culture of the epic literature had 'survived unaltered in Ireland until the advent of Christianity' (1987: 92), whereas Jackson's own words are 'lingered on' (1964: 50), a much more nuanced statement in line with his overall tenet.

Finally, he accuses Jackson of gross inconsistency in using the 'historical-geographic' school of literacy and linguistic study in his approach to the Ulster cycle, and says that this approach is 'essentially no different from that adopted by Ridgeway almost sixty years earlier' in a paper of which he says Jackson is 'highly critical' (1987: 93). On examination, Jackson is seen to be far less categorical, in that he says 'Ridgeway had the right idea, but unfortunately spoiled it all by a slip in his reasoning' (1964: 49), and then corrects this slip in reasoning by amending the date of the cycle from the birth of Christ to the more imprecise and open-ended 'before the fifth century' (1964: 50). This hardly seems like high criticism and, at the very least, exonerates Jackson from the charge of

methodological inconsistency. On the contrary, these examples from Aitchison's use of Jackson demonstrate that Aitchison was too eager to put words in his mouth, so that Jackson could be more easily refuted and ultimately demolished.

Despite these enthusiasms, Aitchison nonetheless offers a well-rounded, tightly knit set of arguments in his critique of Jackson. They fall under seven broad headings; mythology, religious beliefs, society, its social and historical context, early Irish history and archaeology. These are synthesised into the conclusion that the 'early epic literature does not constitute a legitimate source for the study of pagan Celtic society, a "window on the Iron Age"'. Hence, the nature of that social system cannot be discerned, nor can it be confirmed by archaeology (1987: 113). Taking the headings individually in the sequence adopted will help in the ultimate assessment of the conclusion. First, in respect of mythology, Aitchison charges Jackson with underestimating the mythological content of the tales, so that he can strengthen their 'basis in reality' and so provide a 'reliable impression' of the society in which they are situated. In contrast, mythology 'pervades the very fabric of the tales', a prime example of which is the plot of the *Táin* (89) and, because of this, a distinction cannot be made between the realistic and the fantastic (90). This is a statement of opinion, which seems to be unsubstantiated by a reading of Jackson.

On the matter of religious beliefs, Aitchison simply charges Jackson with the belief that the Ulster cycle is devoid of any reference to Christianity and hence was composed in a pagan society. This, of course, has implications for dating its composition, especially as Jackson is further charged with implying a distinct break between the pagan and Christian periods (90). As indicated above, this latter allegation cannot be substantiated. The society argument is, perhaps, more fundamental as it challenges, or rebuts as Aitchison would see it, the use of classical authorities in establishing similarities between

Gaulish and Irish society. Their 'geographical and historical specificity' (91) is adduced (by reference to one study on Poseidonius) and so cannot be employed uncritically 'to form a generalised account of second and first century BC Gaulish society', and certainly not Caesar whose account is 'superficial and ethnocentric' (91). On the other hand, social customs, like the champion's portion, are universalised by Aitchison as 'what might be expected among members of a warrior aristocracy within almost any barbarian society' (91), in order to deny their specificity in the context of the Ulster cycle. Aitchison is having his own champion's portion here, and eating it. Decapitation similarly gets short shrift, as it was 'also practiced in early historic Ireland'; and the use of the chariot is similarly dismissed as evidence for dating (91-2). This is a substantial point, as will be seen later from Mallory (1992a: 147-51). The upshot is that Aitchison can claim that in respect of social structure, ritual practices and material culture, Jackson's argument can be contradicted 'in each case by the culturally and historically specific contexts of the sources which he employs, and by evidence of the existence of those, or similar, traits within early historic Ireland' (1987: 92-3). The second part of this conclusion is the more grounded and constitutes his more enduring contribution to the dating of the cycle.

As to the modes and composition of the literature itself, Aitchison argues that literature is a sociological phenomenon and must be considered as the particular product of specific social and historical circumstances (93). The key question is whether it plays a passive or active part in the dynamics of society. Failure to study the social and historical context in which it was 'composed' has impaired our understanding of the epic literature. As a result, the problem is that while all scholars appear to agree an oral tradition existed, its relationship with extant written texts has been ignored by most of them (93). Aitchison repairs this omission and, having examined various models of composition and transmission,

he concludes that 'the written prose could not simply be regarded as the transcription of oral poetry but rather as literary compositions in their own right'. The character and style of the Ulster cycle sagas give every impression of them having been 'composed in a literary mode' (96). The composition took place within 'the communities of the major monasteries' (99) and 'most probably the late eighth century...seems the most likely date of composition for the *Táin*' (102).

As the last quotation demonstrates, Aitchison's literary analysis is replete with qualifications. Nevertheless, he asserts with a confidence which the methodology does not sustain that the sources for the *Táin* have an 'ecclesiastical provenance' (102). It would be more scientific to argue that what has been advanced is a hypothesis, even if it is plausible in its own terms.

The difficulty, however, with methodology of the sort used by Aitchison is that the conclusions are never any better than the premises upon which they rest, and if these are suppositions or best guesses in the first place, then the conclusions cannot be rescued from a similar fate even if the intervening argumentation is logically coherent and internally consistent. Aitchison would have been better advised to stick to his formula that the sources of the *Táin* 'appear to attest the monastic context and literary mode of composition and transmission' (102), and then to contrast this argument with Jackson's hypothesis that the background to the Ulster cycle 'appears' to be older than the advent of Christianity and provides us with a 'very dim and fragmentary account' of that Ireland (1964: 5). Both are hypotheses. Neither has more scientific validity than the other, and both are open to doubt. The only question is, which 'appears' the more likely?

Aitchison landed himself with a problem of some moment when he located the composition of the sagas in the monasteries, because the themes are 'pagan and secular in character' despite later interpolations (1987: 102). Why should the Church

propagate such literature? Well, the northern literati were different; their use of the vernacular was unparalleled among the monasteries and the productiveness of the region may be attributed to the *núalitrídi*. These were former *filid* recruited into the church and given the role as guardians of their societies' collective memory of the past; they became increasingly active in the study, recording and elaboration of this past (102–3). One waits for the 'ergo', but none appears. This is a tantalising defect in reasoning as it can only be inferred that the monasteries accommodated both secular and clerical literati and allowed both to flourish in tandem. If so, MacCana's benign model makes a surprising return and McCone's holistic model begins to ship some unholy water.

The pursuit of Jackson then takes a turn into history, whereby the political structure of Ulster for his dating of the *Táin* (1964: 47–8) is held to be untrue in a manner that defies analysis (Aitchison 1987: 103–4). Wisely, Aitchison then resorts to archaeology, where he is on surer ground. Now the geographical focus of the Ulster cycle is Emain Macha, and if it did not exist as a political centre at the alleged time of the *Táin*, then the case for dismissing it as in any way representative of that society would be overwhelming.

Aitchison delivers this knock-out blow by stating that 'excavation...has demonstrated that Navan Fort was neither a royal residence, nor a fortified settlement, but rather a religious site' (106). Furthermore, not only was it deserted during the period in which the episodes of the Ulster cycle were composed, but it had been abandoned for generations, even centuries before (106). Its employment within the sagas was a physical evocation of the past and, therefore, of ideological importance in transferring some of its status and prestige as a centre of royal authority onto the monastic foundation of Armagh. All this was done 'during the period of Armagh's claim of primacy from the mid-seventh century (107). In short, centring the *Táin* on Emain Macha was for the purpose of furthering the political aims

of Armagh (107). The relationship between the two was 'a metaphor of the relationship between Christianity and paganism' (108).

This mixture of science and speculation rests on archaeological evidence, for which Mallory is quoted as an authority (Aitchison 1987: 106). Mallory in a later publication (1992a) says that 'the identification of Emain Macha with the modern archaeological site of Navan Fort...is well accepted'. While it is more likely to have been employed primarily as a ritual rather than a fortified site it is understandable how it might nevertheless be understood as a *dún*.

There is evidence that feasting occurred on site. Mallory also adds that we are not certain of the period when Emain Macha was actually abandoned. He is, however, hesitant about certain features described in the *Táin* but, overall, does not come down on Emain Macha with the absolute certainty of Aitchison (Mallory 1992a: 122–3). Nor does Harbison, who first says there is reason to speculate that Navan Fort may be an Iron Age reincarnation of a much earlier henge monument which may—like Navan Fort itself—have served as a ritual centre for the surrounding countryside. Harbison then notes that the houses excavated there represent, perhaps, the early phases of the *Ullaid* rise to power. As for the site itself: 'it is certainly the most important royal site in the early history of Ulster' (Harbison 1988: 157).

Suffice it to say that the archaeological battle over Emain Macha can only be settled by experts in that field, but, even so, Aitchison's categorical certainty seems overstated. It was inspired, as said earlier, by his ultimate ambition of restoring scientific discipline to his own profession. Nevertheless, when coupled with criticism drawn from other disciplines, his archaeological exposé did much to undermine Jackson's thesis of the 'Window on the Iron Age'. Mallory (1992a) developed the archaeological approach further by testing the validity of the *Táin* as an Iron Age or later document against the

evidence of archaeology. But, unlike Aitchison, he warns against the limitations of archaeology, because while there are many portable objects of La Tène type in Ireland, 'we are appallingly ignorant of many other aspects of life in the Iron Age' (1992a: 114). Most of the archaeological 'finds' are what he calls 'obscure shadows' that 'cannot be ascribed exclusively to either La Tène or early Christian periods' (114). Now, this does not prevent him from confidently going through a formidable list of material from the *Táin* which is archaeologically identifiable and of then assessing it under various headings (115–51). Nor does it prevent him from drawing conclusions.

These are based on the primary question for archaeologists of whether the 'world' depicted in the *Táin* reflects that of the Iron Age as suggested by Irish tradition or the early medieval period, when the tales were first given written shape. The answer comes in five parts (151–2):

- 1) where good literary evidence is coupled with decisive archaeological evidence the items identified can, in almost all instances, be identified with the early medieval period;
- 2) in a few instances, there seems to be a better fit with Iron Age material; a number of literary motifs cannot be regarded as Iron Age inheritances (including chariots composed of exotic materials);
- 3) a number of motifs favour the presumption of an Early Christian date; and
- 4) a few items of Iron Age equipment are unaccountably absent from the *Táin*.

Based on this evidence, 'the material culture of the *Táin* is either demonstrably or probably later than the 4th century AD' (1992a: 152). All the versions that have survived were 'most probably fleshed out (if not created) with the material culture of the early medieval period, probably from the 7th century onwards' (152).

In general, no matter what games one attempts to play with the data, it is impossible to make a convincing case for an Iron Age date for the *Táin* (153). Instead, the case made by Mallory is that the *Táin* is historical fiction, even though to some extent it does hold true as a window on the Iron Age for many items of material culture. The Irish literati attempted to portray a world built out of some genuine recollections of what constituted antiquity, popular folk interpretations of the Irish landscape and literary sources from the Dark Ages (153).

It will be noted that for Mallory, the shift from science to speculation is no less rapid than for Aitchison, and no less sweeping in its scope.

Where he sticks to the scientific arguments, Mallory's scholarship in sifting through the archaeological evidence is far more detailed and comprehensive than that of Aitchison. His approach is methodical, and this allows him to accumulate a formidable body of individual conclusions which, taken in the aggregate, point in the direction of an early Medieval background to the *Táin* in terms of its material culture. Furthermore, the evidence is so weighty that it cannot be ignored. This can be seen rather dramatically in respect of chariots, which are a central feature of the life-style depicted in the *Táin*. The archaeological evidence for chariots in Ireland is extremely small, and most items relating to the chariot have so far remained beyond archaeological retrieval. Mallory rightly concludes that this fact casts considerable doubt on the notion that the Iron Age Irish employed chariots similar to their neighbours in Britain or Gaul (1992a: 148). If it were to be taken as a proof, and not just a doubt, then Jackson's 'window' would be reduced to a peep-hole. Mallory makes that leap in reasoning, from doubt to proof, and discovers a quite separate and distinct window which opens on a fictional world that is complex and an amalgam of the past and present. But fictional it is, for the *Táin* is largely devoid of archaeological reality.

In the same publication, Patricia Kelly applies a different form of analysis to the *Táin* (1992: 69–102) by examining its contemporary relevance for the milieu in which it first received its extant form. This technique of exploring contemporary issues by means of narratives set in the past is a new ‘paradigm’ for a ‘new generation of scholars’ (72). It allows her to conclude that the most circumstantial anchoring of the *Táin* in time and place and politico-dynastic context is that of Kelleher (1971), who ‘tentatively’ suggested that it is a political allegory for the struggle between traditional and reforming clergy for control of Armagh in the first quarter of the ninth century (Kelly 1992: 88). She asks, but does not answer, the question: is the *Táin* a novel? The bigger disappointment is that this type of literary criticism does not lend itself easily to the question of whether or not the substance of the novel is based on history; it is primarily focused on its function within the society in which it was first composed. So great is this pre-occupation that Jackson does not get a mention.

That charge cannot, however, be levelled against Koch (1994). His subject matter was, quite specifically, Jackson’s ‘window’ and is of interest because he is openly sympathetic to his former mentor, despite what he calls ‘the now near total destruction of Jackson’s case’ (1994: 229). In an act of *pietas*, Koch immediately declares his belief that the Ulster cycle preserves ‘some traditions from Celtic Europe, in fact, some of the very details for which Jackson made claim’ (229). But this is done by proposing a ‘sharpened, trimmed, leaner, meaner’ version of the ‘window’ (237). The recollections of ancient Celtic Europe are trimmed down to a list of seven examples, which have essentially pre-Christian and oral sources, including the role of Emain Macha as the chief centre of assembly for the power elite of pagan Celtic Ulster. Recent archaeological discoveries at Navan Fort tend to confirm rather than refute the proposition that the Ulster tales are an independent witness to the region’s later prehistory (229). Koch’s version of events is

sharpened by jettisoning Jackson’s use of the Homeric metaphor both as an epic model for the *Táin* and as an analogy for its composition and transmission. The first is a pervasive error (229), and the second a serious misapplication (230).

The meaner version repairs an error of omission by Jackson, namely a consideration of language in terms of its continuity from prehistoric to early Christian Ireland. This is done by way of an elaborate hypothesis for a language shift from old Celtic to old Irish in the fifth and sixth centuries. The stimulus was the advent of Christianity accompanied by Latin learning, because the new religion temporarily destabilised society and replaced Celtic as a standard learned language with Latin. Whole spheres of oral learning disappeared, and the rest of the vernacular had to be refabricated based on foreign models. It is therefore impossible that a sizeable composition like the *Táin* could have survived verbatim from the fourth century to the seventh. On the other hand, popular themes, characters, places, episodes and plot devices survived. These were used by Armagh and her daughter houses in the mid-seventh century to represent the pagan Ireland that preceded their founder. In order to enhance Patrick’s career as Ireland’s apostle, the Armagh propagandists ‘had to create a literary realm of pagan Ireland from the retrospective vantage of a triumphant Christianity’ (Koch 1994: 232–5).

At the end of this remarkable odyssey, Koch has linked arms with McCone, whom he quotes with approval. It is hard to discern in this hypothesis how it serves to revive Jackson by revising him in a 1990s’ version of the ‘Window’; rather, it supports McCone’s theory of the ruthless reshapers, as Koch himself suggests in a footnote: ‘this version of “nativism” is not incompatible with Carney’s anti-nativist manifesto’ (1994: 237). Quite simply, Jackson is left without his Homeric analogy, shown to be deficient in his understanding of language change and ignorant of its impact on the oral transmission of epic

literature. Not too much remains; even his La Tène culture argument is modified. No wonder, then, that Koch believes the 'little book' was so poorly conceived that its only salvageable part is the memorable subtitle (229); all that's left of this particular Cheshire cat is the grin.

Koch's rueful admission of the near total destruction of Jackson's 'window' received further corroboration in *Progress in medieval Irish studies* (McCone and Simms, 1996), in which a number of contributors addressed the provenance of the sagas. Ó Cathasaigh, for example (1996: 56–64), deals with early Irish narrative literature and notes that philologists have argued that Ireland preserved much that was Indo-European in origin by virtue of its social institutions, literary tradition and language. Nevertheless, he emphasises that 'it was the monastic scribes who wrote the earliest of our extant manuscripts...the monastic scriptoria provided them with a setting for their work' (58–9). Ó Cathasaigh then hardens the case for McCone's thesis of an integrated literary class by a reminder that the Church and the *filid* had reached an accommodation of some kind by the end of sixth century, and by assenting to the proposition that the ecclesiastical literati had by then coalesced with the *filid*. The significance of this notion, as he calls it, is that it marks a major departure from MacCana's views on 'the circumstances in which early Irish literature was created' (60–1). In a series of rhetorical questions, he disparages the views of MacCana that the monastic scribes confined themselves to pseudo-history and the *filid* were responsible for all of the narrative which can be traced to that period. Hence, Carney is vindicated, despite some overstatement and later recantation, and there can scarcely be any doubt about Ó Cathasaigh's general contention that the sagas as we have them were indeed composed in a Christian literate community (61).

In the same publication, Breatnach, writing on law (Breatnach, 1996a) and analysing the use of the *roscaid* style, says it is no guarantee on

its own of great antiquity: 'on the contrary, the burden of proof rests on those who would wish to assert that anything written in *roscaid* is either earlier than the seventh and eighth centuries, or in any meaningful way represents oral tradition' (Breatnach 1996a: 113). This is but one further example of McCone's belief that the last bastion of the nativists, i.e. the law tracts, had fallen. Etchingham, also in the same publication, quotes Breatnach as his authority for the argument that the *filid* had been integrated with other learned professionals under ecclesiastical auspices by the Old Irish period (Etchingham 1996: 125).

He expresses his indebtedness to those who recently have 'challenged the traditional perception of the learned professionals' about the contemporary ideology and social fabric of early medieval Ireland. McCone's exposition of the role of biblical models in early Irish literature is noteworthy, and he is held to offer a credible context for 'the persistence of organised paganism in a society the prevalent ideology of which was evidently dominated by the thinking of Christian literati' (*ibid.* 127).

In these circumstances, it is appropriate to leave the last word to McCone himself. His erudite and scholarly analysis of *Echtrae Chonnlai* appeared in 2000, and it allows him to take that saga as a laboratory in which to test the general thesis he advanced ten years earlier. It turns out to be an interesting experiment, with an intriguing set of results. Not unnaturally, there is a reprise of Carney's methodological principle that any text must be viewed as a whole, and that arbitrary excisions for the purpose of finding correspondence with perceived ideas are unacceptable. On this solid footing, earlier interpretations, such as by Dillon and MacCana, are rejected as flawed. But there are differences in the treatment of traditional themes—and these differences pose a paradox (2000: 119). In the earliest surviving texts, traditional themes (relating to sovereignty and the otherworld) 'seem to have been subjected to quite ruthless

Christian manipulation'. This conclusion is consistent with the ruthless reshaping model. But these same themes appear in some later texts 'in what seems to be a more or less unadulterated form'. The honesty of these observations is commendable, since they pose a major problem: they are counter-intuitive. One could expect the earlier texts to be unadulterated, being closer to the origins of the subject-matter, and the later texts to be progressively adulterated, being products of a maturing Christianised society. This reversal of the expected, is, indeed, a paradox.

McCone provides a solution based on ideology, which might come perilously close to Carney's 'preconceived notion'. The adulteration of the earlier texts could be explained by the need of the earliest practitioners of this new craft 'to establish their Christian credentials' and so obviate suspicion and disapproval in certain monastic circles (2000: 119). This would run counter to the argument of the Biblicists, that even by the seventh or eighth century the *filid* had been absorbed into a harmonious literary class. By implication, there is a division between the earliest practitioners of the new craft and certain monastic circles (neither are identified), which requires the practitioners to be more Christian than the Christians themselves, or at least to be as Christian. But when the genre had become established, 'a more permissive attitude may be presumed to have prevailed' (119). This relaxation in censorship, or thought-control, permitted the monastic production of vernacular narrative with a secular social and/or political orientation. In other words, it was either edited in order to restore or recapture the original in some form, or else it was a new secular genre developed with the assent of the clerical authorities; a hidden Ireland was unveiled or a new Ireland created. Whichever may be true, perhaps they both are, there are strong echoes here of MacCana's 'benign ecumenism'.

McCone's methodological rigour exemplifies the great strength of the biblicist school, but the

paradox which he so courageously identified testifies to an analytical weakness yet to be resolved. Unlike the nativist school, which must rely on the scientifically unprovable thesis that an oral tradition existed, the Biblicist School resorts to science and then uses its findings to draw conclusions. But in many cases these conclusions are woven into a complex theory incorporating leaps in reasoning which themselves are unverifiable scientifically. Aitchison jumps from scientific crag to crag without a thought for the gaps between; Mallory appears more cautious but scales the same heights; Koch winds up in a fantasyland of pre-historic language shift; and McCone is forced to the sort of invention he condemns in others. None of this is to argue that they are wrong. Rather, the point to be made is that science alone has yet to replace the straw with which even the most prudent Biblicist must still build bricks.

The 'clerical manipulation of ostensibly secular "tradition" for political purposes', weaving all strands of early Irish literature into a 'vast web...painstakingly and creatively compiled and cultivated' (1990: 255) is the McCone thesis stated at its most dramatic. Certainly the evidence gathered and the manner in which it is organised indicate that it must be taken seriously, and it could well be a new and exciting prism through which to view medieval Ireland. It most surely accords with many other interpretations of that society, but if advanced as a total, or exclusive, interpretation of the society, eschewing all others, then it must be approached with as much caution as enthusiasm. Primarily, the methodology employed is that of literary analysis, which of necessity has a narrow focus. The historian, archaeologist and anthropologist would have different views, and might come to different conclusions. Accepting McCone's argument that medieval Ireland was a creative, dynamic society situated in the mainstream of west European civilisation, and was also outward-oriented (as the missionary period proves), there still seems to be persuasive evidence that, at the

same time, it retained many distinctive archaic features and was socially conservative. McCone is exasperated by the 'nativists' putting the cart before the horse, as he sees it, and wishes to reverse the order. What if the cart is before the horse? There still remains a horse and a cart, the two constitute an integral unity, unless unyoked. There seems to be a suggestion that McCone by times wishes to do this, and then again that he does not. Sometimes, enthusiasm for his case carries him too far; at others, common sense leads him to more rounded conclusions. Should the horse be put before the cart as McCone might in the end wish, it leaves us with a dualist interpretation of Irish medieval society in which the weight of influence is differently distributed from that of the nativists. But both remain, even if in different proportions. It might seem from this that a further challenge presents itself—to reconcile the dichotomy, which so infuriates McCone. Does the double line of descent for the sagas, as identified by Carney (1955: 306) loom as the next great project for Celtic scholarship?

At the end of it all, Jackson's 'window' may be restored for what it was. His modest claim was that the sagas provided a dim and fragmentary picture of the ancient world. Now that that same world, or another, existed in Ireland before Christianity is not in dispute. Neither is the effect of Christianity or literacy on that society. Nor is the fact that the sagas were written down in a monastic-based society which, by definition, was Christian. And, finally, there is no dispute that the sagas are fiction, not history, and an amalgam of a pagan past and Christian present. There is widespread agreement they are great literature. There is enough here for all, nativist and Biblicist. For Gantz, the sagas, quite apart from their literary value, were a valuable repository of information about the Celtic people (1983: 5) and evidence of a culture of extraordinary vitality and beauty (8). That is no epitaph for Jackson, but a fitting commemoration. For Titley, we should imagine some compromise between the monasteries and the native schools of learning, which had neither gone away nor been totally assimilated (2000: 23).

The tradition of a tradition, still lives on. In disputes over the origins of the sagas and the manner of their preservation, the danger is that the uniqueness of early Irish literature can be forgotten and its worth ignored. As Heaney reminds us, there is something to be treasured when it is transcribed and translated, retold and republished, down to our own times (Heaney1994: ix). Jackson would, no doubt, agree.

His 'window' remains of use, even if in need of repair.

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