

Great Exaltation

the beginnings of
writing in early Irish

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“Wonder, Wisdom and War”

Essays on Early Ireland

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Chapter One

"Great Exaltation"

The beginning of writing in Old Irish

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Summary

The essay title is sufficiently broad to be interpreted in a number of ways. It could relate exclusively to the act or art of writing, or to the content of what was written at the beginnings of Old Irish. Equally, it could be taken as a combination of both. Despite the obvious complexity of this latter approach, it is the definition of writing used throughout this essay. And, to fill out the interpretation of the title, Old Irish is taken as the vernacular language from AD 600 to AD 900, approximately.

Consequently, the essay is structured around the following ten themes:

- 1) evidence for literacy in pre-Christian Ireland;
- 2) the impact of Christianity;
- 3) literacy in medieval Ireland;
- 4) the Irish literary tradition;
- 5) the use of the vernacular during this period;
- 6) the sources of Old Irish literature;
- 7) its antiquity; content; and diversity; and,
- 8) finally, a brief résumé of the various genres of Old Irish literature.

Given the wide panorama of issues to be addressed, the treatment is, of necessity, more attenuated than the individual topics deserve.

The main thesis is that the emergence of a vernacular literature was, to quote Carney (1969), something of a miracle. This development went against the grain of medieval European society and can only be accounted for by the astonishing culture and self-confidence of the Irish learned class,

who rapidly absorbed Latin literacy, adapted it to the vernacular tradition and, out of this amalgam, produced the most diverse and sophisticated literature of the period. It is argued that the greatest contribution of Old Irish to European culture is the imaginative literature contained in the sagas and poetry, and its most lasting impact on the Irish people are the histories which shaped the communal sense of self-identity down to the present.

Throughout the essay reference is made to the sources of Old Irish and their rediscovery in the nineteenth century, a story which may reasonably be described as a saga in itself.

Literacy in pre-Christian Ireland

Virtually all authorities on the subject of early Irish literature agree, even if they agree on little else, that it is unique in a number of respects, such as its antiquity, diversity, continuity and content. It is generally accepted that it came into being about AD 600 (Carney 1969: 160). That it did so in the face of the dominant Latin culture, Carney describes as 'a sort of miracle', and this raises the intriguing question as to whether pre-Christian Ireland was itself literate and thus managed to subsume Latin orthography and literary forms into an already existing literary tradition and, out of a dynamic fusion of the two, succeeded in creating a literature which has had a continuous run to the present day (*ibid.*).

Breatnach reminds us that we have no direct evidence for the pre-literate period in Ireland and that reliance on the classical authors is no substitute (1996: 76). There may, however, be indirect evidence in the form of Ogam inscriptions on stone. Stevenson contends that literacy in Ireland 'preceded the establishment of Christianity...possibly by centuries' (1989: 148) and justifies this belief by reference to commercial contact with the Roman world: 'throughout the Roman period Ireland was not a completely isolated island' (132), a point of reference with

which McManus agrees (1991: 41). Stevenson refers to a group of loan-words from Latin into Irish which seem to reflect 'contact in the fifth century, or earlier' (1989: 131).

By way of corroboration of this pre-Christian literacy Stevenson claims that 'the ogams represent independent Irish attempts to come to grips with the phonesis of the Irish language' (1989:144). The orthographic system of the ogam inscriptions confirms that the Irish were familiar with the Latin alphabet prior to the advent of Christianity and spelled Irish 'in line with Latin orthographic conventions' (*ibid.*). As McManus has demonstrated, there was 'no breach between the Ogam and manuscript traditions' (1991: 57), and he reminds us that 'the very act of writing implies a convention of one kind or another' (80).

It would seem that the general thesis of literacy in pre-Christian Ireland has some merit and could be used to explain how Christian Ireland produced a sophisticated literature so rapidly. This can be inferred, to put it no stronger, from McManus when he claims that 'the later monument Ogamists and the early scribes... must have been one and the same people' (1986: 13). The evidence of overlapping and continuity between the two traditions cannot be ignored (Ó Cathasaigh, 1996: 60) and, if the evidence is accepted, then these 'oldest documents of all in the Irish language' (McCone 1996a: 16) could provide the clue to the conundrum of how Irish literacy and literature appeared to spring up so spontaneously after the advent of Christianity. Otherwise we are left without any credible sociological explanation for Carney's 'miracle'.

McManus, in what is now the standard work on Ogam, contends there is a possibility, and he puts it no stronger, that some of the inscriptions may belong to the fourth century AD. He adds that the creation of an alphabet precedes its use as a vehicle for writing by approximately one to two centuries. If so, then the third or fourth century AD would be the likely date for the creation of Ogam; and this possibility takes on force since

it is 'certainly true that by the monument period the alphabet and a conventional orthography were well established throughout the country' (1991: 40). Without wishing to place greater stress on these words than they might bear, they at least raise the possibility that literacy preceded what is conventionally taken as the date for the advent of Christianity in Ireland. It could, for example, have arrived with earlier missionaries or have been imported into small Christian communities already present on the island, such as appear to have existed in the Munster region.

It is disappointing that this question has not been more fully explored. At face value it seems difficult to accept that literacy and a sophisticated literature should emerge *ex nihilo*, with only the arrival of organised Christianity to account for both phenomena. This apparent lacuna is all the more surprising when one considers the sheer complexity of committing a spoken language to paper in terms of, to take but three key examples, phonetic transcription, orthography and a standardised grammar. Given that the Irish language presented problems for which Latin provided few models, such as initial mutations, and that Old Irish grammar was so complex, the challenge to native scholarship was, quite literally, staggering in its complexity.

That the scholars should have succeeded to the point of creating a standardised literary language within two centuries, as the evidence suggests, is testimony either to a pre-Christian literacy, which had already begun to solve these problems, or to a pre-existing learned class with a unique capacity for cultural assimilation and innovation. What could have been a threat was turned into an opportunity – with astonishing results. For that reason it is appropriate to examine the impact of Christianity on pagan Ireland.

The impact of Christianity

With the arrival of Christianity there was 'a real danger that the new Latin learning might have driven out the vernacular tradition altogether, as

happened very largely in continental Germanic literature' (Byrne 1984: xvi). That this did not happen in Ireland is self-evident, but the reasons for the 'cross fertilisation of clerical and lay expertise' (Stevenson 1989: 163) which led to this outcome are hotly contested by scholars. All would agree, at least, that 'since Christianity is a religion of the Book, the early Christian communities must have had scholars among them who were literate in Latin' (Ó Cathasaigh 1996: 59), and few would contest that the pagan society they encountered had a learned class, known later as the *filid*. While there are understandable disputes about the pace of christianisation, and somewhat scanty explanations for the relatively early demise of the pagan priesthood, the Druids, there seems to be broad agreement that from the beginning of the Christian period 'a more or less unitary learned class amalgamating pre-Christian learning with the new importation' was gradually created (Stevenson 1989: 128). She argues that it was members of the learned classes who became the new Christian elite, and the result was 'a fusion and identification of interests' (1989: 160). Consequent upon 'the Church's generally relaxed attitude to the society it served', the most unusual aspect of native culture in a christianised Ireland was the accommodation between them (*ibid.*).

The outcome, according to Ó Corráin (see Ó Cathasaigh 1996: 60), was the emergence of a unified 'mandarin class of literati who ranged over the whole of learning from scriptural exegesis, canon law and computistics to inherited native law, legend and genealogy'. This thesis that Christian Latin learning and native learning had coalesced in Ireland by the sixth century AD is supported by Ó Cathasaigh (*ibid.*), although with some reservations about Ó Corráin's methodology, but is disputed by MacCana (see Ó Cathasaigh 1996, 61), who believes there was a disparity between the two classes, as evidenced by the annals in the pre-Norman period.

This difference in interpretation has been exhaustively explored by McCone, who points out

that 'early Christian Ireland would...have been quite abnormal by medieval western European standards if literacy in Latin or the vernacular had existed there on any scale outside the sphere of her monasteries and their alumni' (1990: 1). He dismisses the 'romantic native dualism' (21) theory in favour of a more complex social model in which the Irish medieval literati produced 'the thoroughly integrated hybrid medium in which all extant early Irish literature, history and mythology seems to be rooted' (79).

McCone's concern, following in the footsteps of Carney (1955: 321), is with the Christian influence inherent in the content of the literature, and the sagas in particular, as the title of his book clearly indicates (1990). But it is possible to step outside this vigorous controversy and identify the common ground on which the contest takes place. Irrespective of whether there was one or two learned classes following the advent of Christianity in Ireland, and irrespective, furthermore, of the Church's role as either a patron or a ruthless reshaper of the pagan tradition, the fact is that the vernacular survived the impact of Christianity. That it was modified, informed and recast by Christianity is beyond question; that it survived is beyond dispute. And that, as Byrne remarked, might not have happened. It was the uniqueness of Irish society in terms of its history and culture that led to an outcome that can only be described as *sui generis*. Perhaps, says Nagy, the most important result of this alliance (however it was configured politically and socially) 'between native knower/performer and ecclesiastic was the creation of a literature in both Latin and Irish' (1997: 9).

Nagy's observation is particularly helpful in that it states the obvious, that most elusive of phenomena. Christianity produced, or helped to create, a literature in two languages. This was fortuitous for our knowledge of Old Irish, as will be confirmed in a later section of this essay. As the outcome of what contemporary historians would describe as the clash of cultures it was remarkable

in that it departed from the European norm, as Byrne has observed. The result was a society in which the learned class was bilingual; indeed bilingualism became the litmus-test of learning. Nagy's commentary, therefore, helps us come to an understanding of the society that began writing (or to write in a new form) in Irish. Bilingualism in a mono-ethnic culture is not uncommon, but when used for literary purposes, as distinct from commercial or conventional communication, it is generally an index of high culture. Nagy is right in defining Christianity's main cultural impact in Ireland in terms of the literature it inspired, aside, of course, from the change in religious beliefs it introduced.

Literacy in medieval Ireland

Nagy's insight into literacy in medieval Ireland was doubtlessly based on the work of earlier scholars. For example, Carney says that literacy in medieval Ireland was 'more widely spread than in any other European country' (1969: 169). We can be sure that there was some degree of Latin literacy in the early-fifth century, even though the earliest extant manuscripts are probably no earlier than the end of the sixth century (Ó Cathasaigh 1996: 59). Literacy in the vernacular was achieved at a relatively early date, as the discussion above on Ogam suggested, and the precise dating is immaterial to the claim that vernacular literacy existed in Ireland at least by the latter part of the sixth century. Binchy, for example, believes that the Latin alphabet 'seeped into the native law schools somewhere in the sixth century' (1961: 12); an important example of the prevalence of literacy in view of the centrality of law to the then Irish social system.

One index for measuring the breadth and depth of literacy in medieval society is the confidence with which the scribes approach the actual craft of writing itself. By this standard it would appear that literacy was well entrenched in Ireland at an even earlier date, possibly by the beginning of the sixth century, as the

extant manuscripts seem to testify. 'The hands of all these ancient books', notes Stevenson, 'are practiced and confident. They confirm the impression given by the earliest Hiberno-Latin authors that literacy was well established in the religious centers by 600' (1989: 153). If it was well established by that time, then it must have been in gestation for two generations or more before then. Furthermore, she claims that in the following half century it is clear that book promotion was quite extensive, further evidence of a developed high culture that would have been maturing over a number of generations. More importantly for the purposes of this essay, she goes on to assert that non-liturgical material was also copied during the period (1989: 170).

Byrne's introduction to O'Neill's *The Irish Hand* examines the art of writing from that period and concludes that 'a series of legends and traditions...all suggest, what seems to be confirmed by the language of our earliest texts, that it was in the 630s that vernacular lore, legal, genealogical and literary, was first committed to writing' (1984:xvi). This would confirm Stevenson's view that the advent of literacy in Irish can be dated as early as the first half of the sixth century, since there is generally a gap between literacy and literature of about a century, or even longer.

The script employed by the scribes, that most essential literary tool, was clearly borrowed from the Latin but went beyond it and seems to have been 'a deliberate creation out of elements of the several scripts inherited from antiquity which the earliest missionaries had brought with them' (Bieler 1966: 17). If so, this implies a knowledge of those scripts and, more critically, a profound understanding of their functionality, neither of which would have been possible without a highly developed literacy throughout the learned class. A tribute to the ingenuity of that class in devising *de novo* a script for the language is that, according to Bieler 'of all the numerous types of Latin script which came into existence during the

early Middle Ages, the Irish script has had the longest life and the widest dissemination' (1966: 15). In short, the script was perfectly adapted to the needs of the language it served and expertly equipped for the task of writing. As such, it was a major achievement in what would now be termed the development of software, and an aesthetically attractive one at that.

On the basis of the above analyses, it is reasonable to conclude that what we refer to as the beginnings of Irish writing took place in a sophisticated, literate society which had moulded the technique of writing to its own distinct purposes and applied it not only to the language from which it had imported that technique, but also to its own language, the Irish of the day. Few contemporary cultures could make the same claim.

Use of the vernacular

This achievement of putting pen on parchment in the Irish vernacular has been attributed by many scholars to a number of sociological factors born out of the country's geography, history and its culture of learning. These combined to create what Stevenson calls 'a unique situation' which, in turn, explains 'the astonishing cultural confidence one sees in the sixth and seventh centuries' (1989: 165). By this she means that the *filid* of early medieval Ireland mastered the craft of literacy rather than allowing it to master them: 'Christianity, with all the new learning and international perspectives it brought with it, did not supersede the native culture, but had to come to terms with it' (1989: 165).

One intriguing example of this accommodation is Carney's contention that what made Ireland different from other parts of contemporary Europe 'was that the vernacular was used as a medium of instruction. The student had to learn to read it, to write it' (1969: 164). This seems clear enough from many of the glosses, among the earliest examples of Old Irish writing (taken here in the two senses of that word), for

they are by nature either the sort of notes that any well organised lecturer would prepare for class, or else the type of jottings that any prudent student would write down for later use (Dillon 1954a: 10). Although Carney placed us in his debt with his insight, he does not explain why Irish should have been the medium of instruction, a far more interesting and significant sociological question. He does, however, use it as a credible explanation for the production of some genres of the literature when he goes on to argue that 'no literary language can be taught without adequate reading matter' (1969: 164), which is true enough. But this is merely a partial explanation since it does not account for the production of other genres, such as law, poetry and sacred material, the existence of which is proof positive of the dominance of the vernacular as the standard medium of communication for many, if not most, secular and sacred activities of the day. And it is this dominance that excites speculation as to why it should have occurred.

Irrespective of the cultural factors at work, which led initially to a vigorous, if unexpected, bilingualism in the centuries immediately succeeding the arrival of Christianity, it appears from the evidence that 'by the end of the ninth century Irish was fast replacing Latin as the chief means of written communication in the monastic schools, and the change is reflected in the annals' (Byrne 1984: xix). This is the reverse, as said earlier, of what could have been anticipated and, perhaps, the real reason is that the arrival of Latin did not go hand in hand with the sort of political, social, administrative and economic convulsion that attended its appearance in what became provinces of the Roman Empire, nor, for that matter, with the cultural earthquake that followed the destruction of the Gaelic order nearly a thousand years later.

In short, the use of the vernacular is evidence of cultural continuity between pagan and Christian Ireland. The society remained more or less intact as it entered the mainstream

of medieval Europe. Latin enriched, but did not supplant, the indigenous culture. In the modern idiom of sociology it can be said that the Latin culture was internalised and became part of a new vibrant integral whole, which was simultaneously national and European. The balance between the two elements was dynamic, with the weight shifting progressively towards the vernacular. Making its appearance 'as early as the seventh century' (Stevenson, 1989: 162), it was fast replacing Latin as the main means of literary communication three centuries later, as was previously noted (Byrne 1984: xix). The literary evidence all points in this direction and seems to be consistent with the analysis offered above.

If, as Carney claims, traditions were written down 'in the earliest period of Irish literature' (1983: 127) and if some of this material can be dated 'to about 600' (125) or, perhaps, 'about 600 AD or earlier' (112) then it is timely to examine 'this substantial body of extremely early Irish, some of which is arguably dated to the fifth century' (Stevenson, 1989: 152).

The glosses

In Ó Cuiv's reckoning there are about 350 manuscripts of Irish provenance from this period, scattered, in the main, across continental Europe. But, of these, only about fifty contain glosses (Ó Cathasaigh 1996: 59). We are thus left with the sobering reflection that, apart from the Ogam inscription, our access to contemporary sources depends, first, on the caprice of history, whereby some manuscripts escaped destruction, fortuitously in sufficient number to provide the requisite bulk of material to reconstruct the language and, second, to the vagaries of human nature which led some scribes or students, but not others, to write down their notes or marginalia on these same manuscripts. The degree of randomness in this whole process is frightening. A combination of chance circumstances, involving the preservation of some manuscripts and the

personal decision of some scholars to write on what must have been precious books (a practice usually discouraged) has left us with the key to Old Irish literature. It so easily could have been otherwise.

As is well known, these glosses were assembled by Zeuss, who in the 1830s, 'conceived the plan of collecting in the libraries of the great Irish foundations abroad the relics of the early Irish language. He searched in Würzburg, in St. Gall, in Milan' (Dillon 1954a: 9) and 'began to work in earnest upon (these) earliest manuscript records of Irish' (McCone 1996a: 12). Because of historical chance playing another beneficent role, he was able to use the Latin texts to decipher their Old Irish translations, ironically reversing the original intention of the glossators. Latin was used to translate Old Irish, something that would have been impossible had not the literati of medieval Ireland been bilingual. The contribution of Zeuss went way beyond the incredible labour of transcribing thousands of glosses, since he then used them to compile his famous *Grammatica Celtica* in 1853 (Dillon 1954a: 9). This in turn allowed subsequent scholars, such as Thurneysen, to develop a deeper understanding of the grammar and to begin the task of translating material which, up to then, had been beyond the capacity of even O'Donovan and O'Curry (Dillon 1954a: 9).

The seminal importance of the glosses is attested by Thurneysen himself in his introduction to *A Grammar of Old Irish*. He notes that for the grammarian the most important sources of Old Irish are those preserved in more or less contemporary manuscripts (1946: 4), the viewpoint to which all scientific scholarship subscribes. And he confirms that the most important of these are in Würzburg and Milan, adding, Turin, Karlsruhe, Leyden, St. Gall, St. Paul in Corinthia, Vienna and Berlin, as well as The Book of Armagh. 'Much of this material was edited and translated by Whitley Stokes and John Strachan in the *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*'

(Ó Cathasaigh 1996: 59), with the following aim: 'to facilitate the study of the interesting and difficult language commonly called Old Irish, and for this purpose to put scholars in possession of trustworthy materials in a convenient and comparatively cheap combination' (Stokes and Strachan 1901: xi).

In this they did indeed succeed. Within the 1200 pages of this magnificent scholarly compilation can be found virtually all of the known examples of contemporaneous writing in Old Irish. This assemblage of fragments is the stuff from which Old Irish has been reconstructed. As McManus says, 'Old Irish, the language of the eighth and ninth centuries, is the earliest period sufficiently well documented to provide for a complete grammar. The manuscript records of Early Old Irish (seventh century) are just about enough to whet the appetite' (1991: 83). Most importantly, there is sufficient evidence in the glosses to permit reasonably accurate dating of material found in later manuscripts which go back to the Old Irish period. By combining this manuscript material with the insights provided by the glosses into Old Irish grammar and vocabulary, it is possible to reconstruct something close to the Old Irish originals of much that survives only in later manuscripts. For that reason it is now appropriate to examine those manuscripts as a source for Old Irish literature.

The manuscripts

'The oldest known manuscript to have contained Old Irish saga material is the lost *Cín Dromma Snechtai* written in the first half of the eighth century' (Byrne 1984: xvi). The Book of Armagh, one of the ten manuscripts from before the year 1000 which have survived on Irish soil (Kenney 1929: 7) is, in fact, 'the oldest manuscript to contain examples of connected Irish prose narrative, as distinct from the disjointed glosses and sentences found in earlier Latin manuscripts' (Byrne 1984: xv). Written in 807 or 808 (Stokes and Strachan 1901: xiv), it contains a transcript

of older documents. But the earliest manuscript 'to contain secular material, prose and verse, in Old and Middle Irish is the twelfth-century *Lebor na hUidre*, written, or at least completed at Clonmacnoise' (Byrne 1984: xv).

There is, therefore, a gap of about three hundred years between the Book of Armagh and *Lebor na hUidre*, causing McCone to emphasise that 'contemporary manuscript sources for the eleventh century are so far virtually confined to a few marginal notes and poems in manuscripts dated to the latter half of that century' (1996a: 35). Thus, the first substantial sources of material are to be found in 'the big three of the twelfth century, namely *Lebor na hUidre*, Rawlinson B502 and the Book of Leinster' (*ibid.*).

This graphically illustrates the problem of dealing with the beginnings of writing in Old Irish. The earliest glosses belong to the eighth century but the earliest substantial continuous pieces of secular prose belong to the twelfth, 'a time when the vernacular was already nearer to Modern Irish than Old Irish' (Greene 1954: 26). Indeed, the problem is exacerbated by the reality that 'much ancient matter survives only in manuscripts from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries...so that when we say that a composition is from, say the eighth century, we mean no more than it is stylistically and linguistically compatible with that period' (1954: 26). In other words, because 'the manuscripts are very often much more recent in date than the composition of the texts they record...the texts will usually have been subjected to varying degrees of revision, modernization and corruption' (McManus 1991: 32).

Describing the text which he chose as the basis for his translation of the *Táin*, for example, Thomas Kinsella says it 'is the work of many hands and in places is little more than the mangled remains of miscellaneous scribal activities' (1969: xi); his description gives a flavour of what actually confronts a scholar in trying to reconstruct an Old Irish text. The manuscripts are therefore a mixed

bag of sources, varying in language, completeness of material, editorial objectivity and, of course, age. More accurately they could be described as a ragbag of history's leavings, which, in a scientific sense, are in no way a representative sample of the whole. They are simply what we have, not what we would choose to have, nor what, as in the case of the Annals of the Four Masters, was carefully chosen for us to have.

This state of affairs mirrors the chance occurrences which determined the preservation of the glosses. They are two sides of the same historic coin, which Kenney describes as being partly due to the ravages of the Vikings, 'the torch of the sea-kings' as he poetically describes them, and due also to what he calls, with masterful understatement, 'later times of trouble' (1929: 9). The combination of these two forces have left us, as said earlier, with only ten manuscripts on Irish soil dating from before 1000, most of which are written in Latin (1929: 9). What does remain in Irish is the result of chance, like the glosses, but in this case a more vengeful and capricious chance. Dillon's account of the discovery of leaves from the Yellow Book of Lecan by Dr. Best, containing the complete text of the Wooing of Étaín (1968: 19), is but one example of how dependent we are on random historical events for access to manuscript records.

It might have been even worse had the Normans not pursued a different policy from that of the Cromwellian planters five hundred years later. Unlike what occurred in Norman England, the Anglo-Normans in Ireland did not bring about 'a complete cultural break with the past...the ancient texts were still copied century after century so that poems of the seventh and eighth centuries have survived in unique copies written nine hundred years later...The vast bulk of early Irish literature in prose and verse...is to be attributed to this fact' (Byrne 1984: xxiv). So, in order to get back to the original texts, copies (of copies of copies) made five hundred years or more later have to be debugged of intervening

corruption. The manuscripts, unfortunately, are no carbon copies or photostats of the originals. But, for all that, they are an authentic source from which a minute, but not necessarily representative, portion of what must have been first written in Old Irish can be retrieved and reconstructed.

Describing the manuscripts as 'miniature libraries', Dillon says that for the most part they are 'miscellaneous collections of prose and verse, sacred and profane. We find legend, history and hagiography, bardic poetry and lyric poetry, medical and legal tracts, Old, Middle and Modern Irish, side by side' (1948: xvii). Thanks to these anthologies, we can sift out Old Irish texts, apply the linguistic analysis developed on the basis of the glosses and be put in direct contact with one of Europe's oldest vernacular literatures. Just how old this literature is has already begun to emerge through the course of this essay so far, but it is necessary, nonetheless, to attempt some definitive conclusions.

Antiquity

The antiquity of writing in Irish has been the subject of vigorous debate among scholars since the discipline first emerged. But the debate can, perhaps, be fairly summarised as one concerning the antiquity of the subject matter, i.e. whether the manuscripts contain the transcriptions of a pre-existing oral tradition or are literary compositions in their own right, first written down in the scriptoria of the fifth or sixth and subsequent centuries. Important as this question may be, it does not detract from the fact that the vernacular literature dates at least from the sixth century onwards in terms of being physically committed to parchment. And if that narrower definition of the origins of early Irish literature is accepted, then what can be stated with confidence is that 'Ireland possesses the most extensive early vernacular literature in medieval Europe, going back to the sixth century at least and perhaps earlier' (Stevenson 1989: 127). Indeed, even

that vigorous scourge of the 'nativist school' (on which more later), Carney, asserts that 'the bulk of early Irish literature has been assigned linguistically to the eighth or ninth centuries, and a small proportion to the seventh, even to the sixth' (1983: 113).

McCone, who has taken the baton from Carney, agrees with this dating: 'In addition to a very substantial Latin literature early Christian Ireland boasts by far the most extensive and diverse vernacular literature in medieval Europe. The period from the fifth to the twelfth century abounds in Latin, Old and Middle Irish and bilingual texts' (1990: 1). So, irrespective of the scholarly stance on the provenance or purpose of the literature, there is virtually unanimous agreement on its antiquity. The dispute, which is so comprehensively addressed by McCone (1990), is really about the antiquity of the content: is it older than the medium in which it is first recorded? The answer constitutes an essay in itself but, for present purposes, it suffices to say that the antiquity of the literature is, per se, beyond dispute. It is the oldest of its kind in Europe.

Diversity and content

Aside from its antiquity, the other distinguishing feature of Old Irish literature is its diversity. McCone lists what he describes as 'a wide range of genres' (1990: 1), while Kenney sets out what he calls 'the chief classes of texts' (1929: 4), both of which cover more than twenty categories of literature. Dillon reminds us, however, that the corpus contains 'no drama and no rhetoric and that, although there is plenty of historical material, there is nothing in Irish that one can set beside Herodotus or Thucydides or Livy or Caesar until Geoffrey Keating compiled his great narrative. In Ireland, as in Wales, poetry and legend are the substance of literature' (1948: xix).

This is too narrow a definition, since it would confine literature to works of the imagination and exclude large swathes of learning generally considered to be an integral part of literature,

such as biography, philosophy, science, law and theology. For the purposes of this essay, the broader definition employed by McCone and Kenney is taken as a more tenable description of the 'substance of literature'.

Nevertheless, Dillon's reference to the centrality of poetry is valuable as a reminder that the diversity of Old Irish literature can be viewed not just in terms of its content or substance, but also in terms of the literary forms employed. The variety of material in verse form in Old, and also Middle Irish, is nearly as extensive as that in prose, and the poetic form was used not just for conventional poetic purposes but as a means for treating material as diverse as law, history and religious topics (Breatnach 1996: 65). Breatnach, in fact, identifies no less than seventeen categories of Old Irish literature in which verse is employed as either the sole or main medium. The literature is, therefore, a rich mix of prose, poetry and a combination of both, ranging across most of the genres to be found in other classical literatures.

If there are notable gaps in the repertoire, as Dillon pointed out, these are compensated for by a more exciting and arresting development of some genres, such as the saga and poetry. Perhaps the saga is the literature's most distinct contribution to European culture, exemplifying, as it does, 'the tension between reality and fantasy that characterises all Celtic art' (Gantz 1981: 1) so that, while it is true that early Irish literature has no Livy or Tacitus, it is equally true that Roman literature has no *Táin*, the Aeneid notwithstanding.

Indeed, one foreign scholar, Nagy, says this corpus of vernacular literature 'is of remarkable diversity and heterogeneity, both antiquarian and attuned to contemporary issues' (1997: 10), as will briefly be attested below. But in an unusual approach to the nature of its content, he also adds that 'arguably no other corpus originating from the impact of Christianity upon a native tradition offers such a spectacular wealth of reflexive analysis' (1997: 7). This assessment reintroduces

that tantalising question discussed earlier: the sudden flowering of a complete and complex literature on the stony soil of illiteracy. What is to be discovered in the manuscripts is 'not the beginning of a literature', according to Watkins, 'but the full flowering of a long tradition' (McCone 1996a: 19). Leaving aside the criticisms which other elements of this passage merit from McCone and Breatnach, it puts the spotlight on one feature of the literature, particularly the sagas, which immediately captures the attention of the reader. This is no adolescent fumbling for literary forms or language; it is already a fully formed adult literature. Now it is, of course, possible that, like Furriskey in Flann O'Brien's *At-Swim-Two-Birds*, the literature was born as an early adult (and, like Furriskey, without a memory of childhood), but this seems unlikely. Even Carney, that benchmark of agnosticism, confesses that the *Táin*, 'as it exists, presents us with the boyhood deeds of Cú Chulainn in a remarkably artistic fashion' (1983: 121), and he admits that the saga as a whole is 'very sophisticated narrative', which has 'no relationship whatsoever to the humble folk tale' (1983: 115).

The remarkable artistry to which Carney was attracted can be seen in the *Táin*, not only in its characterisation and the realism with which it portrays the national politics of the day (Carney 1983: 115), but also in the centrality given to dialogue (Nagy 1997: 5), the pillow talk being the most colourful example. The opening lines could be taken for one of Neil Simon's better scenes in a Broadway hit. The freshness, originality and force of the dialogue have all the hallmarks of an accomplished pen, with an acute understanding of the psychology of women. If Medb's reasons for choosing Aillil as a husband—and it is noteworthy that she did the choosing—can be bettered by any piece from another literature, even Sophocles, then such a piece is not as widely available or accessible as one might expect. The poetry of the period is similarly mature and confident and, despite his many grumblings about the 'fundamental brainwork' being missing

(an echo of Bergin's critique), Frank O'Connor ends up saying that whatever its faults, early Irish literature 'glows by its own light, the literature of a people full of confidence in itself' (1959: xi). O'Connor goes on to describe this literature as one 'of which no Irishman need feel ashamed' (1959: xv); praise indeed from such a bored and worldly-wise savant.

To conclude with a final observation on poetry, that pinnacle of creative literature, Murphy says that 'Irish lyric poetry is unique in the Middle Ages in freshness of spirit and perfection of form', even if modelled on early continental Latin hymn-meters (1956: xiii-xiv). The poetry of Old Irish demonstrates not just a love of nature (as in 'The king and the hermit') or of God, but is shot through with Nagy's introspection about such matters as personal loss ('Liadan tells of her love for Cuirithir'), sacrifice ('King and hermit'), humour ('Ungenerous payment') or just life itself as it is lived ('The scholar and his cat'). Once again, there is a maturity of poetic sensitivity which belies the late arrival of Latin literacy and points to a culture in full flood. It is, to be sure, nothing to be ashamed of; rather it is something to be wondered at. The lyric poetry is unique, and it is testimony, along with the sagas and other genres, to the claim that the beginnings of Irish writing provide us with a literature that stands apart from its European contemporaries in terms of content, diversity and the use of imagination. As MacNeill says of its authors: 'to them the marvellous was the familiar, and their literature did not shrink from it' (1921: 16). Instead, they embraced it.

Varieties

As stated earlier, Kenney (1929: 4) and McCone (1990: 1) between them list about twenty varieties of literature produced in the Old Irish period. Without claiming any scientific basis or logic for the classification, they can be grouped under the broad headings of history (historical narrative and verse, genealogies, origin legends and annals),

law (lay and religious), imaginative literature (sagas and poetry), scientific (topography, grammar and astronomy), sociology and politics (prerogatives of kings and people, customary duties), tradition (proverbial literature) and religious (biblical exegesis, liturgy, lives of saints). Neither this categorisation of genres nor the placing of particular texts under each heading is exhaustive, but such an exercise is illustrative of the enormous output of the period and indicative of a raw cultural energy that quickly mastered so many forms and types of literature.

Because the Irish were, and still are, 'extremely interested in their history, more so, it would seem, than their contemporaries' (Byrne 1965: 38), it is a good place to start. Whatever about the reasons for this interest, the Irish seemed to prefer their history 'in the form of historical fiction' (*ibid.*). Intent for reasons of racial pride, it would seem, on equipping themselves with a historical pedigree no less noble nor ancient than the other great civilisations of the time, they invented a pseudo-history stretching back to the Flood itself. The *Lebor Gabála*, or Book of invasions, is the best known of these inventions. It is typical of what Nagy calls 'etiological narratives in which literature is figured as a means of preserving what society needs to know from and about its past' (1997: 7), and it would seem that the process began soon after the advent of literacy since 'perhaps as early as the seventh century, the Irish monastic network was being employed in the manufacture of tribal origin legends, and, in the process, in the dissemination of secular saga' (Byrne 1984: xviii).

This obsession with history accounts for the preoccupation in early Irish literature with genealogies and the origin legends mentioned by Byrne. These genres immediately stand out as a defining characteristic of the historical literature produced, a feature that lasted in the literature to the seventeenth century and beyond. It accounts too for the annals, which began to be compiled as early as the seventh century. It can

be accepted, on the one hand, that these texts enshrine the traditions and history of the country, but, on the other, one has to be conscious that they were distorted by the annalists and scribes, particularly for the early centuries (Martin 1975: 7). The earliest of the annals may well be 'an Ulster Chronicle', which MacNeill believed to have been compiled in 712 and O'Rahilly in 740 (Mac Niocaill 1975: 19). There seems to be evidence of an even earlier 'series of annalistic notes compiled at Bangor in the course of the sixth and seventh centuries' (Byrne 1984: xvi), although Mac Niocaill describes the evidence for Bangor as 'shaky' (1975: 19). Other known early sources are the Book of Cuana, with linguistic forms later than the early-ninth century, and the Book of Dub dá Leithe (1975: 20).

Notwithstanding the fact that they are a mixture of historical fact and fiction, the very existence of the annals is a literary fact. They are part of the corpus of material produced in the beginning of Irish literature, and they served later scholars as an invaluable repository of early Irish history, which the Four Masters did so much to preserve and Keating to popularise at the very moment the Gaelic order was in its death throes.

As Dr. Johnson once observed, the Irish are a very litigious people and it is hardly any wonder that law played a central role in early Irish society, or that it should have been amongst the first elements of learning to be committed to writing. The sheer scale of the enterprise can be gauged from the fact that Binchy's *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, published in 1978, provides 'a reasonably complete diplomatic edition of the Old Irish and later legal material, amounting to over 2300 pages' (Breatnach 1996a: 109). It is the sheer volume of material here that impresses, whatever its origins – again a subject of vigorous debate among scholars.

It is very likely that the main impetus behind the committal to writing came from the Church, even though the laws are often in conflict with canon law (Byrne 1984: xviii). Indeed, legal

manuscripts use the same spelling system, script, punctuation, abbreviations and illuminated capitals as are found in manuscripts of monastic origin (Kelly 1988: 232). But, as ever, there is disagreement about the authors: were they professional lay jurists or clerics, or both? The debate is well summarised by Kelly (1988: 232–38), and suffice it to say that the evidence points in the direction of clerical authorship. He notes, for example, that Ó Corráin, Breatnach and Breen have drawn attention 'to the extent to which Old Irish law-texts are based on canon law', and that Ó Corráin has concluded the law tracts 'are the work of a single class of learned men' (1988: 233).

As with much of the other material from the Old Irish period, 'the manuscripts in which the law texts are found date mainly from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, but the linguistic evidence shows many of these texts were originally written in the seventh to eighth centuries' (1988: 225). The authors are obviously well informed about the topics with which they are dealing and, in addition to their technical knowledge, show great ingenuity in their treatment of legal problems, sometimes over-ingenuity. In general, they are a sound guide to early Irish legal institutions (1988: 237–38).

The most important of the Old Irish compilations is that known as the *Senchas Már*, the great [collection of] traditional law texts. These texts range in date from the seventh to the eighth centuries, and were probably brought together before the middle of the eighth century (1988: 245). Even though the secular law tracts set down what can be termed civil law, Ó Corráin and Breatnach 'have pointed to a pervasive scriptural, patristic and canonistic influence upon them and made an incontrovertible case for monastic authorship' (McCone 1990: ix). Consequently, McCone believes that all early Irish law 'betrays the Old Testament stamp so typical of the early medieval Irish learned classes' overall outlook' (1990: 102), which contrasts with what Breatnach describes as 'the naive acceptance of the traditional account of

the genesis of Irish law' (1996a: 114).

Leaving aside this question of Church influence on the authors of the law tracts, the approach to legal problems in the texts themselves is fair and humane, within the limits set by the strictly hierarchical structure of the society (Kelly 1988: 236). In this regard, the law tracts tell us a great deal about the society of the day and reveal one that was not just humane, or even advanced on matters such as divorce, but deeply learned and reflective in an area of social organisation, which only a highly developed civilisation can master.

The scientific, religious, sociological and political material of the period is too diverse and copious to permit succinct encapsulation, but, here again, it is indicative of a high state of learning, at least in terms of its own times. In passing, it can also be said that the law texts demonstrate the capacity of the Old Irish language to handle any issue, however complex or technical, in an expert fashion; another example of that tantalising question as to how literacy could have been matched so fruitfully with learning in such a short period of time. The same comment has already been made of the imaginative literature, mainly saga and poetry, which could only have been produced, according to MacNeill writing specifically of the *Táin*, 'in a period of great exaltation' (1921: 16).

Conclusion

Perhaps that insight regarding 'great exaltation' provides the psychological explanation for the rich outpourings of early Irish writings. That this exaltation was produced by a marriage of the native and Latin cultures is something on which virtually all scholars seem united, irrespective of other differences between them. Nobody, it seems, would contest Dillon's claim that the early adaptation of the vernacular tradition by the monks 'is one of the remarkable facts of Irish history' (1954a: 7). Put another way, it was the use of the vernacular to record it that made Irish

history so remarkable. Carney's 'miracle' is to be found, for all who want to travel the road to a new Rome, in the beginnings of Old Irish writing. It is a journey of great trouble, no doubt, but also one of great reward.

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