

Breandán Ó Buachalla's *Aisling Ghéar*: A Belated Tribute

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In his magisterial study of eighteenth century Aisling poetry, *Aisling Ghéar* (1996), Breandán Ó Buachalla deplored the neglect of the genre by scholars hitherto. Volume four of the quasi-official *New History of Ireland* (1986), devoted to that century, provides a case in point. Eight of the twenty chapters are taken up with political history. Society and the economy occupy two chapters apiece. So do music and the visual arts. Ecclesiastical affairs, insofar as they are not dealt with elsewhere, occupy a separate chapter, as does the history of Anglo-Irish literature. *Pro rata*, the fortunes of the Irish language and its literature are allotted a chapter. Here the Aisling is dispatched in a mere two paragraphs and a handful of perfunctory references elsewhere.¹ In contrast, Ó Buachalla's study runs to 662 pages of text, fifty-seven of notes and as many again by way of bibliography.²

Yet Breandán Ó Buachalla's *magnum opus* did not quite solve the problem. Its girth and the fact that it is written in austere, scholarly Irish seem to have deterred all but the most intrepid of students, consigning *Aisling Ghéar* to the fate of many such *magna opera* of being more cited than read.³ What follows is to be set against that background. Its aim is threefold: to mark the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the great work, in doing so; to help bring it the attention of a new generation of students and, finally, on a personal note; to offer a belated gesture of homage to the author at whose feet I had the good fortune to sit when he joined the Department of Medieval and Modern Irish at UCD as a young and enthusiastic junior lecturer in 1962.

The seed from which *Aisling Ghéar* took root, the author tells us in his preface, was planted in the course of a conversation with a colleague about the origins of the Aisling genre and the source of its contemporary appeal. He himself was not persuaded by the received wisdom that ascribed the form to a Latin poem going the rounds in France in the thirteenth century. From France, so the theory had it, the poem somehow found its way into the Irish poetic corpus and lay there dormant until seized upon by the poets of the

early eighteenth century as a paradigm that enabled them to display their technical virtuosity.

Ó Buachalla's objection to that reconstruction was twofold. First, the vision-motif featured in medieval Irish poetry for centuries before the thirteenth and it seemed to him altogether more probable that the origins of the Aisling lay there rather than in a conjectural French borrowing. Second, he was convinced that the view of the Aisling then (1996) current among the *cognoscenti* overlooked the source of its contemporary popularity. This, he believed, was political, not aesthetic. Aisling poetry appealed, not primarily because of the range and richness of its language nor because of its metrical dexterity, but because it preached a message of defiance and hope to the dispossessed and immiserated Irish Catholic community.⁴ The message, being treasonous, was coded to conceal its import from the authorities.⁵ But those to whom it was delivered were well capable of decoding the rhetoric. Thus, as Ó Buachalla shows, in its classical form the Aisling comprises a five-part allegory.⁶ An introductory sequence sets the scene, in which the poet wanders alone and dejected in a tranquil rural setting. A vision sequence follows in which a *spéirbhean* – a beautiful young woman – appears to the poet. He describes her beauty in mildly erotic detail. Then, in response to his enquiry, she names herself pseudonymously as Caitlín Ní hUallacháin, Cáit Ní Dhuibhir, or some such. Finally, she prophesises that the longed for Deliverer is about to return to banish the Gaill and to free Banba (*na Gaill d'ionnabadh is Banba a shaoradh*).⁷

The third and final part of *Aisling Ghéar* provides a fascinating exploration of the mental environment of eighteenth century Ireland that enabled Aisling poetry to flourish, an environment altogether alien to the rational and scientific thought modes of modern times.

The analysis highlights three facets: messianism, the cult of the charismatic leader, hailed as one destined to liberate the Gaeil from foreign bondage; millenialism, the expectation of a golden age of peace and abundance to coincide with the rule of the messianic ruler; and prophecy, the foretelling of the future, usually in the form of cryptic utterances.⁸ This outlook acquired highly subversive connotations when brought to bear on the ideology of Jacobitism, the ideology concerned to vindicate the claim of the Catholic Stuart dynasty, as against that of the Protestant Hanoverians, to reign over the kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland.

Prophecy was invoked to show that the Stuart Pretender was the Messianic

leader. The Jacobite crisis peaked and subsided in Scotland and England with the collapse of the Jacobite rising in 1745-6. However, as Ó Buachalla shows, support for the Stuarts remained unabated in Ireland and continued to be nurtured by Aisling poetry into the late 1760s. Its death knell (*cling an bháis*) was, he tells us, the decision of the Church to find a *modus vivendi* with the Hanoverian regime on the death of James III in 1767 and the Pope's failure, accordingly, to extend the power of nominating Irish bishops to his successor.

Aisling Ghéar concludes: 'However beautiful and imaginative, however inspiring and hopeful that vision may have been, in the light of history as we now see, it was unquestionably a bitter vision'. In fact, in the light of history such an assessment seems unduly pessimistic. For, as Ó Buachalla himself acknowledges, it was the dream of the Aisling that bore the aspiration of nationalist Ireland through the eighteenth century.

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Notes

- 1 Brian Ó Cuív, 'The Irish language and literature, 1691-1845', in T.W. Moody and W.E. Vaughan (eds.), *Eighteenth Century Ireland, 1691-1800* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), pp.374-419 at pp.406-7.
- 2 Breandán Ó Buachalla, *Aisling Ghéar* (B.Á.C: An Cloíchomhar Tta, 1996), pp.x;808.
- 3 A notable exception was Micheál Mac Cráith, who contributed a lengthy article on Ó Buachalla's book to *Eighteenth Century Ireland/ Iris an dá chultúr*, 13 (1998), pp.166-71.
- 4 Ó Buachalla, *Aisling Ghéar*, pp.552-3.
- 5 *ibid.*, pp.293, 323, 333, 347, 390.
- 6 *ibid.*, pp.529-30.
- 7 *ibid.*, p.316.
- 8 *ibid.*, pp.452-5.

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