

Lyric and Nature Poetry

(Week 1,
part 2)



‘May-Day’, anon., 9th century

- Nature poem, lyric poem and saga poem
- Part of the Finn Cycle / Fenian Cycle
- In the persona of Finn mac Cumail
- Composed ‘to prove his poetic skill’



BOOK Early Irish lyrics : eighth to twelfth century

Murphy, Gerard., 1st pbk ed., Dublin :, Four Courts Press, 1998., Total Pages xxii, 315 p. ;

Note: The digitized poem from this volume allows you to see the original Irish alongside the L

Further

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Cétemain, cain cucht,
rée rosaír rann;
canait luin laíd láin
día laí grían gaí ngann.

Gairid cuí chrúaid den;
is fo-chen sam saír:
suidid síne serb
i mbi cerb caill chraíb.

Cerbaid sam súaill sruth;
saigid graig lúath linn;
lethaid fota fraích;
for-beir folt fann finn.

- 1 MAY-DAY, fair aspect, perfect season;
blackbirds sing a full lay when the sun casts a
meagre beam.
- 2 The hardy vigorous cuckoo calls. Welcome to
noble summer: it abates the bitterness of storm
during which branchy wood is lacerated.
- 3 Summer cuts the stream small; swift horses seek
water; tall heather spreads; delicate fair foliage
flourishes.
- 4 Sprouting comes to the bud of the hawthorn; the
ocean flows a smooth course; (summer) sends
the sea to sleep; blossom covers the world.
- 5 Bees of small strength carry bundles of culled
blossom on their feet; the mountain, supplying
rich sufficiency, carries off the cattle.
- 6 Woodland music plays; melody provides perfect peace; dust is
blown from dwelling-place, and haze from lake full of water.
- 7 The strenuous corncrake speaks; the high pure cataract sings of
joy from the warm water; rustling of rushes has come.

- 8 Swallows dart aloft; vigour of music surrounds the hill (?); soft rich fruit flourishes; . . .
- 9 ... ; ... the hardy cuckoo sings; the trout leaps; strong is the swift warrior's ...
- 10 Men's vigour thrives; the excellence of great slopes is complete; every spreading wood is fair; fair every great goodly plain.
- 11 Delightful the season: winter's harsh wind has departed; woodland is bright; water fruitful; peace is immense; summer is joyous.
- 12 A flock of birds settles on land where a woman walks; there is noise in every green field through which a swift bright rivulet flows.
- 13 Fierce ardour and riding of horses; the serried host is ranged around; the pond is noble in bounty and turns the iris to gold.
- 14 The frail man fears loudness; the constant man sings with a heart; rightly does he sing out 'May-day, fair aspect!'

Gnomic poetry : expresses wisdom or truisms (often about human nature) in the form of short maxims

Gwalchmai's 'Gorhoffedd', 12th century

- 'boast', 'high praise', 'delight'
- a poet known to have held land on Anglesey – the village of Trewalchmai is named after him
- a member of a bardic family
- poems addressed to patrons including Owain Gwynedd and Madog ap Maredudd, ruler of Powys
- other poems of a more personal nature

caniad = an (extended) section of
a poem (with single end-rhyme)

cymeriad = a device (other than end-rhyme) used
to link successive lines of a poem

Mochddwyreawg huan haf dyffestin,
Maws llafar adar, mygr hear hin.
Mi ydwyf eurddeddf ddiofn yn nhrin,
Mi ydwyf llew rhag llw, lluch fy ngorddin.

- 5 Gorwyliais nosau yn achadw ffiin,
Gorloes rydiau dyfr Dygen Freiddin.
Gorlas gwellt didryf, dwfr neud iesin,
Gorddyar eaws awdl gynefin.
Gwylain yn gware ar wely lliant,
10 Lleithrion eu pluawr pleidiau edrin.
Pellynnig fy nghof yng nghyntefin
Yn ethryb caru caerwys febin.
Pell o Fôn fain yd fydd twythwal werin,
Esmwyth ysydd irni aserw gyfrin.
15 Ydd endewais enau yn echlysur gwir,
Ar lleferydd gwar gwyry eddëin,
Ac ar lles Owain hael hual dilyn
Dychysgogan, Lloegr, rhag fy lläin!

Sun early-rising, summer speeding near,
birds' sweet sound, delightful bright weather.
I am gold-mettled, dauntless in battle,
lion before a war-band, lightning my charge.
I stood night watches, guarding a border,
foaming fords, Dygen Freiddin's waters.
Bright green the fresh grass, water gleaming,
nightingale loud, familiar lyric.
Seagulls at play on the couch of the wave,
glowing their feathers, clamorous factions.
Far-roving my mind at the start of summer
because of loving a comely lass.
Far from Môn's* slim maid is a host's commander,
gentle girl, my secret enchantress.
I have listened to lips in sure seclusion,
to the soft speech of a distant maid,
and for noble Owain, splendid fetter,
they tremble, the English, before my blade.

(J.E.C. Williams, P.I. Lynch ac R.G. Gruffydd (goln.),
Gwaith Meilyr Brydydd a'i Ddisgynyddion (Caerdydd, 1994))

[*or 'Anglesey's']
(Joseph P. Clancy (trans.), *Medieval Welsh Poems* (Dublin, 2003))

- Start of summer, fine weather:
 - Sun early-rising, summer speeding near, birds' sweet sound, delightful bright weather (first *caniad*).
 - Mild the first month [of summer], bright the day's weather, soft the slope, summer cheerful, delightful (last *caniad*).
- Birds/birdsong
 - birds' sweet sound
 - nightingale loud, familiar lyric
 - I love May's nightingale
 - I listened to the nightingale
 - songbirds busy
 - I love the small bird and the soft sound of a wood's constant song, comely its wings
 - a bird sings in high spirits beside [the wave]

- Productive nature
 - glowing the apple boughs, blossom-clustered
 - when apple boughs burgeon with blossoms
 - delightful fresh grass when days grow long, delightful trees
finely veiled, fair their blossoms
- Seashore and waves (whiteness of gull & foam /
power of wave (both transient and timeless –
evoking memory/longing))
 - seagulls at play on the couch of the wave, glowing their feathers,
clamorous factions
 - foaming is a wave beside Porth WygyrA green wave woke me by
Aberffraw, it assaults tranquil land
 - a green wave woke me by Aber Dau, it attacks the grey bank
 - a sea-wave awoke me in turmoil

- Glowing the apple boughs, blossom-clustered,
trees finely clad, each man's mind where he loves.
I love a comely maiden, noble her ways ...

(*compare*: for a fair one's favour, snow's hue on trees)

- When apple boughs burgeon with blossoms,
foaming is a wave beside Porth Wygyr.
Fervent is a lover, high-hearted a lord.
Dreaming of a maiden, dewdrop's fair hue,
it is rare, the night it spared me.

‘Sadness in Springtime’, anon., ?11th/12th century

Cyntefin, ceinaf amser!
Dyar adar, glas calledd,
Erydr yn rhych, ych yng ngwedd,
Gwyrdd môr, brithotor tiredd.

Ban ganont gogau ar flaen gwŷdd gwiw
Handid mwy fy llawfrydedd —
Tost mwg, amlwg anhunedd —
Gan ethynt fy ngheraint yn adwedd.

Month of May, loveliest season
The birds loud, the growth green,
Plough in furrow, ox in yoke,
Green sea, land cut dapple.

In the fine treetops when cuckoos sing,
My sadness is greater:
Smoke smart, manifest sleep-lack
For my kinsfolk gone to rest.

(see pdf on Moodle)

‘The Old Man’s Lament’, anon. (‘Llywarch Hen’), ?8th-10th century

[Stanza 4]

Baglan brenn, neut kynhayaf.
Rud redyn; melyn kalaf.
Neur digereis a garaf.

Wooden crook, it is autumn.
Bracken red, stubble sere.
I’ve surrendered all I love.

[5]

Baglan brenn, neut gayaf hynn.
Yt uyd llauar gwyr ar [l]lyn.
Neut diannerch vy erchwyn.

Wooden crook, it is winter.
Men shout gaily over the drink.
At my bedside no one greets me.

[6]

Baglan brenn, neut gwa[ea]nnwyn.
Rud cogeu; goleu e gwyn.
Wyt digarat gan uorwyn.

Wooden crook, it is springtime.
Cuckoos hid, clear their grieving.
I’m disregarded by a girl.

[7]

Baglan brenn, neut kynteuin.
Neut rud rych; neut crych egin.
Etlit ym edrych y’th yluin.

Wooden crook, it is maytime.
Red the furrow, shoots are curled.
For me to gaze at your beak is woe.

(J. Rowland (ed.), *Early Welsh Saga Poetry*
(Cambridge, 1990)

(Tony Conran (trans.), *Welsh Verse: Fourteen
Centuries of Poetry* (Bridgend, reprinted 1992))

Incremental repetition = the use of opening lines whose content is largely repeated, but with important changes, at the beginning of each of a series of stanzas

‘Suibne the Wild Man in the Forest’, anon., 12th century (I)

He heard the bellowing of the stag, and he made a lay wherein he eulogized aloud the trees of Ireland, and, recalling some of his own hardships and sorrows, he said:

Young stag, little belling one, melodious little bleater, sweet I think the lowing that you make in the glen.

Home-sickness for my little dwelling has come upon my mind, the herds in the plain, the deer on the moor.

Oak, bushy, leafy, you are high above trees; hazel-bush, little branchy one, sweet-smelling with hazel-nuts.

Alder, you are not spiteful, lovely is your colour, you are not like the prickly hawthorn where you are in the gully.

Blackthorn, little thorny one, black little sloe-bush; water cress, little green-topped one, on the brink of the blackbird's well.

Saxifrage of the pathway, you are the sweetest of herbs; cress, very green one; plant where the strawberry grows.

Apple-tree, little apple-tree, violently everyone shakes you; rowan, little berried one, lovely is your bloom.

Bramble, little humped one, you do not grant fair terms; you do not cease tearing me till you are sated with blood.

Eolchaire mo mhendatain
doralá ar mo chéill,
na lois isin machaire,
na hois isin tsléibh.

A dhair dhosach dhuilledhach,
at ard os cionn croinn;
a c[h]olláin, a chraobhacháin,
a chomhra cnó cuill ...

Translation: K. Jackson, *A Celtic Miscellany* (1951; Penguin Classics 2006), poem 23.

Introductory text and Irish text: J.G. O'Keefe (ed/trans.), *Buile Suibhne* (the Frenzy of Suibhne) (London, 1913), p. 62ff.

(<https://archive.org/stream/builesuibhnethef12okee#page/62/mode/2up>)

‘Suibne the Wild Man in the Forest’, anon., 12th century (II)

Yew, little yew, you are conspicuous in graveyards; ivy, little ivy,
you are familiar in the dark wood.

Holly, little shelterer, door against the wind; ash-tree, baneful,
weapon in the hand of a warrior.

Birch, smooth, blessed, proud, melodious, lovely is each
entangled branch at the top of your crest.

Aspen trembling, at times I hear its leaves rustling and think it is
the foray ...

Translation: K. Jackson, *A Celtic Miscellany*
(1951; Penguin Classics 2006), poem 23.

Recurring themes in relation to Maytime/summer

- birdsong and other melodious things, e.g., running water.
- idea of new life and the productivity of the landscape.
- bustling human activity (farming, military ...).
- association of spring/summer with love.
- a general sense of pleasure and delight (or the opposite, sometimes, where the speaker of the poem is sad or lonely).

Stylistic features and poetic devices

- 'gnomic' statements.
- associating features of the natural world with human feelings (general or specific, or the one leading to the other).
- use of rhyme and alliteration; sometimes poets may make a line more (or less) ornate to provide emphasis or for some other artistic purpose.
- linking devices at the beginning of successive lines or at the start of successive (short) stanzas or (longer) *caniadau*.
- personification, ascribing human characteristics to, for example, a wooden crook or a tree.
- notice how themes are interwoven and recur, and how one idea leads to another.