

An Analysis of Motifs in the First Latin Life of Ciaran of Clonmacnoise.

In 1921 R A Stewart-McAlister published 'The Latin & Irish Lives of Ciaran'.¹ His book contains the three known Latin Lives of Ciaran and a Life in Irish, all translated into English. It also contains the Latin text of the Second Life. For the purposes of this essay I will be looking at the First Latin Life.

This First Latin Life has also been translated by Pádraig Ó Riain in his 'Four Offaly Saints'.² Both authors used the same MS for their translations which is in Marsh's Library in Dublin, namely, Z.3.1.5 (formerly V.3.4).³ Stewart-McAlister, however, translated the Life from the version given in Plummer⁴ and collated this with the MS. Stewart-McAlister gives the date of the MS as the early 15th century.

Stewart-McAlister produces in his volume a harmony of the incidents/miracles; identifying motifs, naming and numbering them, and then noting their incidence across all Four Lives.⁵ I will refer to this schema in the following pages (in Roman Numerals).

In her 1982 thesis Dorothy Ann Bray gives exhaustive cross-referencing and potted biographies of the great majority of the Celtic Saints. I can do no better than to reprise her précis of Ciaran here:

'Ciaran of Clonmacnois':⁶ His birth is predicted by a magician a-Becc mac in the Irish and by SS. Patrick, Brigit, and Columba. As a boy, he performs several wonders. He learns the psalms from the deacon Diarmait at a distance, while he tends herds and the deacon is in his cell. After such manifestations of his powers, he goes to Finnian of Clonard to study, and distinguishes himself there by his miracles and acts of charity. Eventually, he leaves Clonard, following a tame stag which carries his books. However, the place he comes to is not his place of resurrection; he goes to Clonmacnois where he founds a monastery. After a brief career in which he performs many miracles, he foresees his death approaching and prophesies the evils to come on his church. He dies at the age of thirty-three (the same age as Christ was reputed to be when he died). St. Coemgen⁷ arrives three days after his death, yet is given the opportunity to speak with him, and earth from his grave proves effective in calming a storm.⁸

The opening of the First Latin Life of Saint Ciaran sets the tone by telling us that his father was a cart-wright⁹ (or 'rich carpenter' according to Ó Riain's translation¹⁰) subtly placing Ciaran in relation to his father, and his father's trade, as Christ is placed in the New Testament.

1 Stewart McAlister R A, *The Latin & Irish Lives of Ciaran*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, & New York: The MacMillan Company, 1921).

2 Ó Riain, Pádraig, *Four Offaly Saints*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2018).

3 *ibid*, p12.

4 Plummer, C (ed), *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae*, 2 vols, (Oxford, 1910; repr. 1968),

5 Stewart McAlister, pp11-14.

6 I have removed Bray's cross-referencing in Roman Numerals in order to avoid confusion and conflation with the Roman Numerals in Stewart-McAlister's 'Harmony of the Four Lives of St Ciaran'.

7 St Kevin of Glendalough. To clarify: the grave earth used to quell a maelstrom was taken by St. Columba. See Stewart-McAlister p42.

8 Bray, Dorothy Ann, *The Lives of the Early Irish Saints: A Study in Formulaic Composition and the Creation of an Image*, (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Ph. Thesis, 1982), p109.

9 Stewart McAlister, p16.

10 Ó Riain, p13.

Like Christ also his sanctified future is predicted. Compare these words of the wizard of King Crimanthus¹¹;

‘The son in the womb of the wife of Boedus the wright shall be had (*sic*, Ó Riain translates *held*) in honour before God and before men: as *the sun shineth in heaven so shall he himself by his holiness shine in Ireland*’.¹² (my italics.)

...with the words of Simeon on seeing the Christ child in Saint Luke’s gospel;

‘...For my eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people: *a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel*’.¹³ (my italics.)

The Third Latin Life goes further and states that Ciaran was predicted by St. Patrick ‘fifty years before his birth’.¹⁴

In the Latin Life of St. Kevin and angel appears to this mother prior to his birth and declares; ‘Blessed woman you will give birth to a son and you will call his name Kevin who will be dear to God and men...’¹⁵

The prophesying of ‘greatness’ in a gifted child is a fairly common trope. A few pages earlier in St Luke (before Simeon speaks of the Christ child) we have Zacharias the father of John (the future Baptist), inspired by the Holy Ghost to predict: ‘And then thou, child, shall be called the Prophet of the Highest: for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways’.¹⁶

In the life of the Buddha, prior to his birth, we have the brahmins predicting;

‘...O king, the queen has conceived, a male not a female, and thou shalt have a son and if he dwells in a house he shall become a king, a universal monarch; if he leaves his house and goes forth from the world, he will become a Buddha, a remover in the world of the veil (of ignorance)’.¹⁷

It is interesting to note that here also this individual – the future Buddha – in removing a veil is also throwing light upon the world.

The motif extends to the heroes of myths and legends. Richard Cavendish summarises Merlin’s prognostications on the life of his protégé Arthur as follows;

‘The Boar of Cornwall is Arthur and the great hero is here a figure of destiny, whose coming was foretold by a prophet and whose career was planned by unseen forces, guiding events from behind the scenes’.¹⁸

Christ’s first miracle is at the wedding feast at Cana. Occurring only in St John’s Gospel it appears to pit Jesus against his mother Mary. She requests a miracle to produce wine. He asks not to be interfered with but accedes to her request anyway.¹⁹ Ciaran is similarly

11 Unknown in any other source. Ó’Riain, p91.

12 Stewart McAlister, p16.

13 *The Bible with the Apocrypha*, (London: The Folio Society, 2008), p1619.

14 Stewart McAlister, p59.

15 Doyle, Thaddeus Rev., *St. Kevin and the True Story of Glendalough*, (Glendalough: God’s Cottage, 2011), p31.

16 *The Bible with the Apocrypha*, (London: The Folio Society, 2008), p1617.

17 Thomas, Edward J, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*, (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1927), p32.

18 Cavendish, Richard, *King Arthur and the Grail (the Arthurian Legends and their Meaning)*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1978), p28.

19 *The Bible with the Apocrypha*, (London: The Folio Society, 2008), pp1660-1661.

put upon by his mother. In his miracle (IV in Stewart-McAlister's 'Harmony') he changes water into honey²⁰ to please his mother who has complained that he is 'weak and soft'²¹ and does not bring honey²² for his parents from fields etc. like other 'sensible' boys. Stewart-McAlister describes Ciaran's mother as 'a strong personality with a strain of 'thrawnness' in her composition'.²³ She wasn't the most charitable of Christians either. In incident XV²⁴ she refuses water to travellers. Ciaran, incensed, upends all the provisions in the house. This has overtones reminiscent of Christ's cleansing the temple of hawkers and money lenders which is cited in all four gospels. The purpose of the outrage is the same in both cases...to awaken onlookers to pay attention to the real truths of the teaching. In John, after the incident, 'all the people were very attentive to hear him (Christ)'.²⁵ In the case of Ciaran his mother 'became calm, and promised amendment, and many of those who heard were rendered charitable'.²⁶

In incident/miracle XLIV we have a direct parallel with the wedding feast at Cana when Ciaran blesses 'a great vessel full of water; and immediately under his (*Ciaran's*) hands wine of the most excellent quality appeared in the vessel'.²⁷ St Kevin also turns water into wine and at the same time restores meat to the bones of previously consumed animals.²⁸ St Brigid turns water into ale.²⁹ St Columba turns water into wine³⁰ and, in fact, Bray lists no fewer than 14 saints who perform a miracle of this nature in their Lives.³¹

As Bray states, 'It is certain that the Latin Bible was widely available in Ireland and that the Irish hagiographers had extensive knowledge of the Scriptures'.³² It is not surprising therefore to see motifs repeated from the Gospels and the Old Testament. She says of Ciaran;

(T)he Life of St. Ciaran goes to great lengths in order to point out the similarity between Ciaran's life and the life of Christ: both were sons of artisans, both turned water into wine, both died at the age of thirty-three, and both were resurrected three days after death. Ciaran, because he was a herdsman in his youth, is also likened to David, son of Jesse, the shepherd boy who was chosen king of Israel (Ciaran, of course, was one of God's chosen saints).³³

Water has its own innate magical properties in these Lives and is not merely used as the basic ingredient to create something better. There are a great many instances of its

20 Ó Riain notes a similar miracle in St. Patrick's life, p91.

21 Stewart- McAlister, p17.

22 For a discussion on the significance of bees in Ireland at this period, see Kelly, F, *Early Irish Farming*, (Dublin: Early Irish Law Series iv, 1997).

23 Stewart- McAlister, p3.

24 Stewart- McAlister, pp22-23.

25 *The Bible with the Apocrypha*. (London: The Folio Society, 2008,), p1649.

26 Stewart- McAlister, p23.

27 Stewart- McAlister, p38.

28 Doyle, p37.

29 Connolly, S & Picard J M, Cogitosus's 'Life of St Brigit, Content and Value'. *JRSAI*, vol. 117 (1987), pp5-27, p15.

30 Sharpe, Richard (trans), *Adomán of Iona, Life of St. Columba*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991) p154.

31 Bray, pp153-154.

32 *ibid*, p52.

33 *ibid*, p53.

healing ability once blessed³⁴ and of saints walking on water (like Jesus) in Bray³⁵. Columba cures sick people by sprinkling water on them that he has blessed.³⁶ A curiosity in Ciaran XLIII,³⁷ however, relates to its ability to miraculously transport objects. The Druids, of course, famously sent their votive offerings to the gods through rivers, lakes, bogs, etc and as Green notes; ‘Every mountain, river, spring, marsh, tree and rocky outcrop was endowed with divinity’.³⁸ Here Ciaran, wishing to make a gift of a cloak to his elder Senan, and unable to find a messenger to traverse difficult and hostile terrain has the cloak ‘placed in the river Synna³⁹, and (it) was sent alone with the river, and it came dry over the waters to the island of Cathi,⁴⁰ and no one saw it while it travelled thither.’ To cut a long story short Senan retrieves the cloak which is perfectly dry. It is worth noting here the language: the cloak is sent ‘with the river’ not in it. The river is treated almost as an entity...even a divinity. Much is made of Celtic saints and their connections with nature. Perhaps this trait may be pagan in origin? It is also worth noting that a similar idea occurs in the Life of St Winifred: she places chasubles (again, an item of clothing) in a spring which is magically transported to her uncle, St Beuno, in Ireland.⁴¹

In incident/miracle XLV we have a very curious set of events about a boy called ‘Crithir of Cluain (a boy of great wit, but hurtful and wanton)’.⁴² He flees (no reason given but once suspects it is because of his unpredictable behaviour) from St Ciaran of Clonmacnoise to Ciaran of Saigyr where he upsets drink over the consecrated fire at the monastery. Thus angering Ciaran of Saigyr the boy flees again. He is attacked and killed by wolves but – apparently – not consumed ‘after the likeness of that prophet who was killed by a lion’. (This is a reference the First Book of Kings, Chapter 13.)⁴³

Ciaran of Clonmacnoise visits Ciaran of Saigyr seeking the return of his young monk. Once the former Ciaran miraculously restores the consecrated fire Ciaran of Saigyr prays to God ‘for the youth slain by wolves, and straightaway he arose from cruel death, with the scars of the wolf-bites visible upon him.’⁴⁴

Ó Riain notes that Plummer (*Vitae*, i, 212n)⁴⁵ takes ‘crithir’ to mean ‘spark’ but suggests himself that ‘crithir’ could mean ‘tremble, quake’ and leaves it at that.⁴⁶ In modern Irish ‘ag crith’ means to shake or to tremble⁴⁷. The suffix ‘ir’ is comparable with ‘er’ in English. Thus carpenter is ‘siúinéir’, painter is ‘péintéir’, farmer is ‘feirmeoir’, hunter is ‘sealgair’, and soldier is ‘saighdiúir’...as examples. ‘Crithir’ could quite reasonably be translated as ‘shaker’. I would suggest – given the description of the young man and his ‘accidents’ – that he has epilepsy. The incident mirrors that in the Bible in Mark Chapter

34 *ibid*, p164.

35 *ibid*, p157.

36 Sharpe, Richard (trans), *Adomnán of Iona, Life of St. Columba*, (London: Penguin Books, 1991) p159.

37 Stewart- McAlister, pp35-36.

38 Green, Miranda J., *Exploring the World of the Druids*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), p29.

39 The Shannon.

40 Where Senan is living, seemingly at the mouth of the River Shannon.

41 The Legend of St Winifred and her Holy Well, <https://zteveteans.wordpress.com/2016/08/17/the-legend-of-saint-winefride-and-her-holy-well/>, accessed 19th April 2024.

42 Stewart- McAlister, pp36-37.

43 *The Bible with the Apocrypha*, (London: The Folio Society, 2008) pp443-445.

44 Stewart- McAlister, p37.

45 Plummer, C (ed), *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae*, 2 vols, (Oxford, 1910; repr. 1968),

46 Ó Riain, p97.

47 Maclellan, Malcolm, *Gaelic Dictionary*, (Stornoway, Acair Ltd., 1992), p106.

9 where Jesus ‘heals’ an epileptic boy.⁴⁸ In this case also the boy dies but is brought back to life. It is a passage where Jesus emphasizes the power of prayer and belief, and contains the famous quote ‘all things are possible to him that believeth’. In Matthew the boy’s father gives a fuller description of the boy’s condition; ‘...he is a lunatic and sore vexed: for oftentimes he falleth into the fire, and oft into the water.’⁴⁹ The boy Crithir cannot be trusted near fire or water either.

Epilepsy is a theme which occurs frequently in the lives of the saints. St Kevin, lagging behind his fellow monks while they are out walking comes across a dead man and is unable to bury him as he would need the help of his fellow monks to do that. Instead he decides to pray to God to bring the man back to life. The man starts to shake and is restored to life, telling Kevin that he had ‘suddenly suffocated to death there’.⁵⁰ Again, to the modern reader this reads very much like a seizure. The Epilepsy Society states on its website; ‘There are more than 40 named ‘epilepsy saints’ including John the Baptist who was known to heal people from spasms or seizures. The only other illness with as much saintly association was the plague.’⁵¹

A recurrent trope in these Lives is one of animals that are eaten or devoured and are subsequently restored to life. Ó’Riain notes that the revival of a horse is a common motif.⁵² In IX Ciaran gives a calf to a starving hound who consumes it.⁵³ Ciaran’s mother is unhappy about this as she notices that the mother of the calf is distraught. She persuades Ciaran to act telling him that ‘the mother’s heart is sore vexed’. He gathers the bones of the deceased animal ‘into his breast’⁵⁴ and lays them before the ‘bereaved’ cow, and ‘the calf arose before them all’. (Ó’Riain notes the same trope in the Life of Columba.)⁵⁵ There is an episode in the Latin Life of St. Kevin which – with a twist - directly parallels this story. Here Kevin encounters a female wolf ‘wasting away with thinness’ and tells the wolf to eat a new-born calf. A hermit named Beoan acts the same role as does Ciaran’s mother above and asks Kevin ‘why have you wretchedly broken the mother’s heart?’ In this story, however, Kevin persuades the wolf ‘to become like a calf to that cow whose calf you have eaten.’ The wolf does so ‘although it may be against nature’.⁵⁶

Ciaran (516-549) and Kevin (498-618) were contemporaries. There is roughly a hundred miles between their respective seats of Clonmacnoise and Glendalough. Doyle notes ‘there was always a very close link between Glendalough and Clonmacnoise with a pilgrim path from Clonmacnoise to Glendalough’.⁵⁷ In the above the specific reaction of the mother cow which is exactly the same in both accounts suggests a story lifted from Ciaran and slotted with minor variations into the Latin Life of Kevin, or vice versa. Doyle’s version dates from c. 1200.⁵⁸ As noted above Ciaran’s dates from early 1400s, latest.

48 *The Bible with the Apocrypha*, (London: The Folio Society, 2008), pp1601-1602.

49 *ibid*, p1570.

50 Doyle, p43.

51 Epilepsy Society, <https://epilepsysociety.org.uk/blog/link-between-saint-valentine-and-epilepsy#:~:text=Did%20you%20know%3F,saintly%20association%20was%20the%20plague>. Consulted 12th April 2024.

52 Ó Riain, p91.

53 Stewart-McAlister, p18.

54 This is a significant motif in itself but space prevented me discussing it further here.

55 Ó Riain, p92.

56 Doyle, p38.

57 *ibid*, p56.

58 *ibid*, p29.

Cows with above average milk-yield appear frequently – if not regularly – in the lives of Celtic saints. Ciaran (XVIII) takes a cow with him when he goes to the School of Findian⁵⁹. (Again, his mother does not wholly approve of this.) He blesses the cow and she follows him. This cow ‘Ciaran’s Dun’ used to have ‘the greatest store of milk’ which was ‘daily divided among the school, and sufficed for many’.⁶⁰ We read in Cogitosus that St Brigit too had a cow which she milked three times in a single day and obtained ‘what it normally took three of the best cows to produce’.⁶¹ St Kevin also had a cow which followed him and ‘that cow had an incredible abundance of milk’...such that ‘the women (milkers)’ admired ‘the milky fountains from that cow’.⁶²

The centrality of cattle to Irish culture is evidenced by the epic, ‘Táin Bó Cuáilnge’⁶³ often translated as ‘The Cattle Raid at Cooley’⁶⁴, and described as ‘the Irish Iliad’. The cow appears in many cultures as a symbol of plenty. Indeed she is deified; as for example in the Egyptian goddess Hathor. Her worship in India is well-known. Our English words such as ‘pecuniary’ and ‘impecunious’ come from the Latin ‘pecunia-ae’ meaning money which stems from the Latin ‘pecus -oris’ meaning cattle. This concept, however, is not unique to the West. In Tibetan the word for cow/cattle is *phyugs* but its variant *phyug* means wealthy⁶⁵. *phyugs can* meaning ‘possessing cattle’ or livestock is often used simply to mean wealthy. Furthermore, in one of the Hindu/Buddhist idealized schema for the cosmos the world is envisaged as a circle of several oceans divided by mountains with Mt. Meru at its centre. This universe is then ‘peppered’ with all of the desirable things man could have. These include a variety of items among which is a ‘herd of wish-fulfilling cows from whose every pore springs anything you desire’.⁶⁶ Ciaran through his famous cow ‘Ciaran’s Dun’ (whose hide after her demise ‘by the grace of god’ continued to work miracles)⁶⁷ can be seen as someone who despite his life of abstinence and poverty is nevertheless always provided for by his God. In a sense he inhabits a ‘land flowing with milk and honey’.⁶⁸ Such is his confidence in this Divine Providence that when he was angered (XV) and ‘the milk he poured on the ground, the butter he mixed with sheep’s dung,’⁶⁹ he felt no compunction in doing so.

Wolves, boars and other wild animals, including brigands, roam freely and frequently in the lives of these saints. Fortunately the holy men in question are always delivered from their clutches. In V Ciaran is delivered from a wild hound which has been set upon him by ‘worldly men, cruel and malignant’.⁷⁰ In X ‘certain robbers, coming from a foreign region’⁷¹ are struck blind and incapacitated in limb until they repent. In the case of St. Kevin when he makes the sign of the cross (a frequent precursor to miraculous

59 Finnian.

60 Stewart- McAlister, p24.

61 Connolly, S & Picard J M, p15.

62 Doyle, p36.

63 This was even copied by Celtic monks, see <https://markfisherauthor.com/2016/09/celticmonks-partiii/> , 11th Sept, 2016, consulted 21st April 2024.

64 There are several of these cattle raid stories in Irish Literature.

65 Chandra Das, Sarat, *A Tibetan-English Dictionary with Sanskrit Synonyms*, (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1902.) p838.

66 Kongtrul, Jamgon, *The Torch of Certainty*, (Boulder, Colorado: Shambala Publications, 1977), p100.

67 Stewart-McAlister, p24.

68 *The Bible with the Apocrypha*, (London: The Folio Society, 2008), p69.

69 Stewart-McAlister, p23.

70 Stewart-McAlister, p18.

71 Stewart-McAlister, p19.

occurrences) ‘against an attack of dogs’, he subdues them and they begin to ‘lick the feet and clothes of St. Kevin with their tongues and to sniff with great delight.’⁷²

But along with the calves mentioned above Ciaran also brings other animals back from the dead. A horse in III⁷³. And, like many saints, Ciaran has no hesitation in giving livestock away to the poor and needy. In XI he gives away a calf and two cows (against his mother’s wishes) and the next day is gifted four cows.⁷⁴ In XIII he gives away an ox. The next day he is presented with four.⁷⁵ When it comes to the poor he will give away anything he can lay his hands on regardless of the consequences (and oblivious to the fact that it is not his property to dispose of). In XIV he gives the king’s vessel away and ends up being the king’s slave until a well-wisher turns up with two vessels and Ciaran is freed.⁷⁶

Giving items etc. away with the result that they are returned twofold, threefold or even fourfold is a common motif in the Lives of these Saints. St Kevin gives away four sheep but ‘when they were counted at home, by the gift of God, the number was found to be complete.’⁷⁷ St Brigid loses as many as seven sheep to a ‘mischievous boy’ only to find that ‘astonishingly’ the herd was ‘complete, in accordance with the original tally, without any of it missing.’⁷⁸

In XXVII Ciaran gives away a cow, a robe and a frying pan as soon as he has received them. ‘Now in that hour’ he receives ‘a cooking pot of three-measures’ in lieu of the frying pan, twelve robes and twelve cows. That is rather a good result. It is interesting in this regard to compare his ‘circumstances’ with that of St Kevin who craves the outdoors and the life of a hermit. Ciaran appears to have – or chooses to have – a relatively easier life. And this leads us to a discussion of asceticism. Perhaps this is the greatest recurring commonality in all of these Lives: the eschewing of all of life’s comforts for an anticipated post-mortem eternal comfort. Unlike Patrick and Kevin who lived for 120⁷⁹ years, Ciaran’s ‘migration’ to eternal bliss occurred fairly early at the age of 33, mirroring the life of Christ and joining him in heaven.

Similar miracles are indicative of similar lives. Heist opines when speaking of hagiographers;

‘These gentlemen...do not as a class seem to have been gifted with remarkably inventive imaginations, nor to have been particularly eager to use them when they could find ready-made miracles that would serve them in the lives of other saints.’⁸⁰

To be a monk or nun (a saint) living an ascetic life in the middle of the first millennium was to lead a life of utter simplicity; prayer, frugal meals, farm work, copying, cooking and cleaning.⁸¹ They lived in nature to an extent which is alien to the modern world and the miracles the saints produce and the faithful witness fit into that milieu. What would

72 Doyle, p55.

73 Stewart-McAlister p16.

74 Stewart-McAlister pp19-20.

75 Stewart-McAlister, p20.

76 Stewart-McAlister, p21.

77 Doyle, p33.

78 Connolly, S & Picard J M, p15.

79 Ó’Riain, Pádraig, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), p149.

80 W.W. Heist, ‘Myth and Folklore in the Lives of Irish Saints’, *Centennial Review* 12 (1968), pp181-93, (p182)

81 Columbanus’s Rule

be the use to the new followers of Christ to be treated to wonders such as a magic carpet ride or a magic mirror that tells them whether or not they were the fairest in the land. As Bray notes;

‘The saint's prestige and powers allowed him to influence key persons and events, which he tended to do by virtue of the authority earned for him by his conduct as an ascetic, a healer, a provider, and an intercessor, rather than by birth-based authority, still less by force of arms, as king heroes and martial heroes do.’⁸²

And this is what followers wanted from their saints; healing, provisions, and a channel to heaven or to the local rulers in whose gift they lived. Through asceticism they accepted that their saints could deliver this. And if it was delivered miraculously so much the better.

A good deal of the First Latin Life of Ciaran concentrates on his time herding at home. He is often ‘alone, reading beside his herds’.⁸³ When he attends the school of Findian (Finnianus) he brings his own cow in spite of the fact that his mother tells him none of the other boys have one. Other Saints at the School – Brendan and Columba among them – would grind their own corn. But the ‘angels of God used to grind for Saint Ciaran...’⁸⁴ This is not to say that he does not engage in ascetic practices. (Yet there is always a sense in this Life that his path is easy.) Later in his Life in XLIX we learn that he has a stone pillow and ‘when he was growing weak, he would not have the stone removed from him but commanded it to be placed at his shoulders, that he should have affliction to the end, for the sake of an everlasting reward in heaven.’⁸⁵ Again, we have the trope of mirroring the martyrs...suffering now in sympathy with Christ’s passion for eternal bliss in the hereafter. Dying young his suffering is curtailed. Kevin on the other hand has a long life in which he prefers;

‘...to be clothed in the roughest garments, and to lie on the bare ground without a bed, and to engage in excessive fasting, not eating anything except herbs and a little water, and keeping continuous outdoor vigils without a roof or fire.’⁸⁶

It is quite striking that such acts of piety were widely embraced by so many men and women in a culture that was formerly Druidic. The eschaton must have appeared looming and the promise of bodily salvation and bliss imminent. McGinn sums up the situation perfectly;

‘Christians (as they came to be called when they spread outside Palestine into Gentile areas; see Acts 11:26) were those who affirmed that the invisible God worshipped by the Jews had become present in a final and unsurpassable way in Jesus of Nazareth, a wandering Jewish preacher⁸⁷, briefly active around the year 30. Though Jesus had been executed by the Roman authorities (one of the few facts about his life on which there is no disagreement), his followers believed that he had manifested his divine power by rising from the dead and ascending into heaven. These events had inaugurated the new aeon of the kingdom of God, which was soon to

82 Bray, Dorothy Ann, *The Lives of the Early Irish Saints: A Study in Formulaic Composition and the Creation of an Image*, (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Ph. Thesis, 1982), p180.

83 Stewart-McAlister, p19.

84 Stewart-McAlister, p25.

85 Stewart-McAlister, p40.

86 Doyle, Thaddeus Rev., *St. Kevin and the True Story of Glendalough*, (Glendalough: God’s Cottage, 2011), p53.

87 Yet not primarily an ascetic.

become universal when Jesus would return to earth manifesting his divinity in a great *parousia* (literally, 'presence' or 'advent'). During the interim period between the resurrection and the second coming, it was only in and through belief in Jesus who had become the Christ, that is, the 'Anointed One', or messiah that saving contact with God was possible.'⁸⁸

Bray adds;

'Christianity did bring about a change in the pagan Irish outlook on the world. The Christian afterlife was one of reward, whereas the pagan Irish Otherworld (as far as we can gather) was not governed by the same principles.'⁸⁹

This, however, may not fully explain their actions: Ciaran is truly devout and at pains to identify with the transcendent. When he is being taught the gospel of Matthew he reaches the middle of the book and comes across the lines, 'All the things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, so do ye unto them,'⁹⁰ he declares; 'Father, enough for me is this half of this book which I have read, that I may fulfil it in deed, verily this one sentence is enough for me to learn.'⁹¹ In XXIII he repeatedly refuses to eat because the food is not blessed.⁹² Stewart-McAlister comments; 'there must have been a well-established tradition of *Christ-likeness* of character in the man, for such parallels⁹³ in detail to have taken shape.'⁹⁴

Ciaran leads a sedate life. He hardly stirs from his seat. It is a mere 70 miles from Clonmacnoise to the Arran islands, as the crow flies. This area of Ireland is his abode. Not for him the bombast of St. Patrick, the evangelizing of St Columba, the peregrinations of St Brendan or the visions of St Kevin. The visitations from angels and visionary dreams which are common in many Lives are non-existent in his. It is something he has in common with Christ who only ever encounters a single angel, unnamed, who comforts him very briefly in the Garden of Gethsemane⁹⁵.

Some of the Celtic saints – notably St. Patrick and St. Kevin – are subject to these visions but, as noted above, Ciaran, untroubled by visitations from the other world, is humble and even self-effacing. ('In manners, the saint is said to have resembled John the Apostle.')

⁹⁶ His sole experience in this regard is a 'marvellous vision' of 'a great and fruitful tree on the bank of the river Synna in the middle of Ireland'.⁹⁷ This he sees after 'dwelling in hard service' for a time. So it could be argued that the visions etc. that are often repeated in these Saints (see the Latin life of St. Kevin⁹⁸) are due, in part at least, to these deprivations – fasting, lack of sleep, hunger, thirst, continual prayer – that they –

88 McGinn, Bernard, *The Presence of God: a history of Western Christian mysticism. Vol. 1: The foundation of mysticism*, (London, SCM Press Ltd, 1992), p62.

89 Bray, Dorothy Ann, *The Lives of the Early Irish Saints: A Study in Formulaic Composition and the Creation of an Image*, (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Ph. Thesis, 1982), p47.

90 Stewart-McAlister, p26.

91 *ibid*

92 Stewart-McAlister, p26.

93 i.e. parallels with the life of Christ.

94 Stewart-McAlister, p4.

95 The angel only appears in Luke (22:43-44), see *The Bible with the Apocrypha*, (London: The Folio Society, 2008), p1653.

96 Ó'Riain, Pádraig, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), p170.

97 Stewart-McAlister, p28.

98 Doyle, pp31-70.

admittedly willingly – endure. Again, it is when Christ is under considerable duress that he sees an angel and his encounter with the Devil is after 40 days of fasting⁹⁹.

The male saints also deprive themselves of the company of women. There is a sort of ‘anti-trope’ to this as it is certainly something Christ didn’t do. Over and above his mother, Jesus was very open to women. See, for example, references to Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna in Luke.¹⁰⁰ In both XXVI and XXVII Ciaran frees a woman from servitude without any direct contact with her¹⁰¹. In XIX Ciaran is tasked with the spiritual education of a young lady. When asked about ‘her manners and her virtue,’ he replies;

‘Verily, I know naught of her virtues, of manners or of body: for God hath known that never have I seen her face, nor aught of her save the lower part of her vesture, when she was coming from her parents: nor have I held any converse with her save only her reading.’¹⁰²

In Kevin’s Latin life a monk called Berchan is accosted by a desirous woman, naked from a river bathe, whom he then proceeds to beat ‘with his staff along the back and sides.’¹⁰³ Kevin remonstrates with him and pleads ‘Be compassionate...and do not whip the wretch.’¹⁰⁴ Women are to be avoided whether virginal or otherwise. It is telling that Ciaran is almost terrified to look at a woman. (Cuimmín’s poem asserts that Ciaran never looked at a woman from the time he was born.)¹⁰⁵ Kevin – despite his leniency with whipping – regards a woman who eschews virginity as a ‘wretch’.¹⁰⁶

Finding and dwelling in one’s ‘place of resurrection’ is a common occurrence. In many saints lives an angel leads the saint to his place of resurrection.

‘The theme of finding one’s place of resurrection is especially important to the saints; it stems from the belief that on the Day of Judgement all souls will be resurrected in their bodies, all bodies will rise from the grave.’¹⁰⁷

Bray notes 10 saints that have an angel lead or advise them on their place of resurrection. A typical examples is Cainneach who is in Italy and is told by an angel that he must return to Ireland.¹⁰⁸ Ciaran doesn’t have to travel any such distance. He leaves what is most likely one of the Aran Islands (Inis Angin) and travels to Clonmacnoise where he declares; ‘Here will I live: for many souls shall go forth from this place to the kingdom of God, and in this place shall be my resurrection.’¹⁰⁹ His decision is independent of any angelic intervention, typical of his easy-going approach to his ministry.

Beheading and the subsequent realigning of the bodies and their miraculous restoration to life is such a common occurrence in the lives of these saints that their own resurrection may have appeared entirely plausible to them. In the Second Latin Life of St. Ciaran,¹¹⁰ for example, he

99 *The Bible with the Apocrypha*, (London: The Folio Society, 2008), p1551.

100 *The Bible with the Apocrypha*, (London: The Folio Society, 2008), p1629.

101 Stewart-McAlister, p27.

102 Stewart-McAlister, p25.

103 Doyle, p66.

104 Ibid.

105 Stewart-McAlister, p126.

106 Doyle, p66.

107 Bray, p56.

108 Ibid, p108.

109 Stewart-McAlister, p34.

110 NB. This incident does not occur in any of the other Lives of St. Ciaran.

restores to life three monks who are beheaded by thieves.¹¹¹ In the Life of St Mochoemóg, St Íta tells a widow to find the body of her deceased husband and restore the head. This done, the man revives.¹¹² Kevin aligns the severed heads of ‘two daughters of the grandsons of Dallayn’ with their bodies. He restores them to life through prayer.¹¹³

Ciaran’s resurrection is unusual in that it occurs three days after his demise (L), in direct imitation of Jesus himself. ‘And on the third night after the death of Saint Kiaranus, the most holy abbot Coemhgenus¹¹⁴ came...to the burial of Saint Kiaranus: and Saint Kiaranus spake with St Coemhgenus...’¹¹⁵ This is a motif which could possibly be considered as bordering on the blasphemous. It is compounded in XLV where Ciaran of Saigyr, the elder of the two Ciarans, calls Ciaran of Clonmacnoise ‘son’ and the latter reciprocates with ‘father’. They then agree to make ‘a compact and brotherhood in heaven and in earth’ such that, in the future, any of their followers who ‘should wish to name or beg aught for one of them, he should name them both and ask, for they would hear him.’¹¹⁶ There are overtones here of God the Father and God the Son being prayed to as a single entity.

Continuing to mirror the last days of Christ, Ciaran has a Last Supper, actually referred to as such in XLIV.¹¹⁷ Described as ‘most generous, excelling all others that were made in the monastery of St. Kiaranus...’ it nevertheless, with the passage of time, becomes the subject of debate as to how good it was. A boy (at the time of the supper) now – seemingly – a man, who drew the wine for the ‘feast’ now invited doubters to sniff his thumb which had been repeatedly in the wine as he doled it out. They do so and conclude; ‘Truly much better was the feast whose odour remains on a finger most sweet for so long.’¹¹⁸ There is an echo here too of Thomas who must prod his finger into the wound in Christ’s side in order to be convinced of the Resurrection (John 20:27).¹¹⁹ This episode concludes with Jesus’s famous words ‘blessed are they who have not seen, and yet have believed’, a reflection also on those who did not believe in the superior quality of Ciaran’s Last Supper until they could sniff a sweet thumb.

The dates of the Latin Lives of Ciaran range from the first half of the thirteenth century to the early fifteenth century¹²⁰. Thomas of Celano wrote his biography of St Francis in 1229. Much is made of the Celtic saints’ love of nature and animals, a trope – among others – that occurs in the life of St. Francis. It may very well be that elements in the Lives of Ciaran owe a good deal to the hagiographical traditions that existed on the continent at this time;

‘It has been suggested that the Dominicans, and more particularly the Franciscans, to some extent modelled themselves on the itinerant missionaries and preachers of seventh and eighth-century Ireland. It may be that Francis visited, and was influenced by, monasteries in northern Italy which still retained some of the distinctive features and ethos of their Irish founders. There are certainly parallels in both missionary approach and asceticism between the wandering Celtic monks and the medieval Dominican and Franciscan friars...’¹²¹

111 Stewart-McAlister, p48.

112 Bray, p125.

113 Doyle, pp31-70.

114 St. Kevin of Glendalough.

115 Stewart-McAlister, p41.

116 Stewart-McAlister, p37.

117 Stewart-McAlister, p39.

118 Stewart-McAlister, p39.

119 *The Bible with the Apocrypha*, (London: The Folio Society, 2008), p1689.

120 Stewart-McAlister, pp6-8.

121 Bradley, Ian, *Celtic Christianity, Making Myths and Chasing Dreams*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p66.

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