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Legend as Critic

DONNCHADH Ó CORRÁIN

Sed ego qui scripsi hanc historiam aut uerius fabulam quibusdam fidem in hac historia aut fabula non accomodo. Quaedam enim ibi sunt praestrigia demonum, quaedam autem figmenta poetica, quaedam similia uero, quaedam non, quaedam ad delectationem stultorum.

Twelfth-century scribe of *Táin Bó Cúalnge*, LL 104b.

We imagine that we remember things as they were, while in fact all we carry into the future are fragments which reconstruct a wholly illusory past.

John Banville, *Birchwood* (London, 1973), chap. 1.

The term legend in the title is meant to name a kind of discourse in narrative form which seems, to me at least, to stand in an intermediate position between myths (the greater and more remote — in a sense, primary — narratives which purport to emplot cosmologies, recount theomachies, provide the aetiology of human character, and the like) and 'ordinary' or common-or-garden fictions, close to the reader's own time and experience (perhaps one should say mentality) that make no pretence at 'philosophical depth' or 'wisdom' and, consciously at least, have nothing much to say about 'public affairs', 'the historical process', or similarly weighty matters. These distinctions (if they may be so called, for I make no claim that they are inherent in the narratives themselves), are working demarcations rather than categories, and may be useful props in attempting to present some reflections, of a kind historians tend to be preoccupied with, on certain kinds of narratives in early Irish literature. At the least, they may be useful to the extent of allowing one to set up some kinds of opposition between myth, legend, and 'ordinary' fiction.

These legends, essentially narratives produced by the early Irish mandarin caste, must be denied the name myth, if myth is the fabulated origin of the ultimate things, because christianity in the form of an economically

highly developed and intellectually richly articulated ecclesiastical culture, provided the all-embracing mythology of society and one that — as I hope to show — mediated and subsumed the pagan past.

Neither are these legends 'ordinary' fictions, as described above, for they deal in kings and kingship, the legitimisation and the norms of political power, the origins of institutions, the nature of law, the function of the scholarly caste, the role of the hero within settled society and without, the relationship of the (often very largely folkloristic) otherworld to christian society, the bond of lord and vassal, and similar group, public, and political matters. Besides, their authors and shapers are learned, very self-conscious as a caste, and capable of a high degree of reflection on their role and their products.¹

Again, they cannot be called 'historical texts'. Old-fashioned scholarship, on its own terms, denies them historicity: they do not report what happened, and to the degree to which they do report it, they do not do so in an appropriate way; hence their 'mythologizing' and 'legend-building' is formally opposed to history.² But other scholarly fashions also exclude them. Hayden White's dictum:

I will consider the historical text as what it most manifestly is — that is to say, a verbal structure in the form of narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model or icon of past structures and processes in the interest of explaining what they were by representing them³

does not, I think, save them for 'history'. They are 'narrative prose discourses', they do use 'models or icons of past structures and processes', but what they purport to be (or to do) is quite another matter. One cannot assert that they confine themselves to explaining the past in one way or another, or even that they purport to explain the past at all. Some, as we shall see, appear to be a commentary on the present while others are models for action in future time while framing their arguments in terms of the past.

The case for keeping the term legend is somewhat strengthened by the early Irish term for this kind of literature, *légend*, *léigenn*, a derivative of latin *legendum*, the primary meaning of which is written literature and literate scholarship. The principal medieval exponent of the type of literature we are discussing is the *fer léigind*, often rendered 'lector' and translated into Latin by the learned John Colgan in the seventeenth century as *scholasticus*.

The legends are often described as belonging to 'tradition' or being the product of 'tradition', and since that term will be used here, it is only right that I should offer some explanation of the value I attach to it.

Communities, it seems, define their present identity and political awareness by choosing their past, for the constituents of the past and the past itself are not 'found' or 'uncovered', but constructed. From a very wide range of symbols, the members of a community choose a past which, once chosen, is to them a single and ineluctable reality, an absolutely valid historical interpretation. Yet they choose their past from many possible pasts and the choice itself is conditional in that it is constantly reaffirmed (and reaffirmation must imply its opposite), adjusted, or radically revised to meet the conscious and unconscious needs of the community as a living organism. The choice is not necessarily nor usually a homogeneous one nor is it constructed of non-conflicting constituents. Some groups within the community at varying levels and for various reasons of group solidarity, geographical contiguity, segmentary identity and the like, interpret the group's past in their own way and thus choose a somewhat different identity which can (and does) issue in conflict. Conflict management in a given community — the achievement of a subjectively tolerable level of social and political consensus — is the management of cultural politics, the control of the past. The handiest term to name the cumulative reality of the making of such choices, the methods by which they are carried on, the materials of 'memory' from which they are continuously made, and their consequences is tradition. However, tradition, though it points to ways, is not the dead hand of the dead nor is it a pre-determining code (like a biological one) which cannot be changed (at least consciously and in conscionable time) but a series of sets of *possible* options which allow the community to interpret and re-interpret its past and thus choose its present in terms compatible with its own internal rhythm of continuity and change. If tradition is understood in this way (and not as mindless repetitions of a static model of the past, which seems to be the view of the majority of Celticists), then the legends are traditional.

Reference has been made above to the materials of 'memory' from which the past is chosen and it may be useful to look a little more closely at it here. Memory of the past alone makes criticism of the present possible. In absolute terms, the kind of memory — whether Rankean state-of-the-archives reports, Wordsworthian 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', the achievements of twentieth-century historiography, or the traditional legends of medieval Irish mandarin managers of the past — is not the fundamental pre-condition, for any or all of these can bring about the necessary conjunction of past and present. However, the quality of the memory and the manner of its management by its keepers and its reception by its consumers and users, determine its effects. In general, the more

extensive, varied and subtle the 'record' of the past (the imagined past, if you prefer), the more complexified by rhetorical discourse, symbolic realization, logical analysis and self-conscious (though not necessarily logical) reflection, the greater the potential range of criticism of one's society and of one's present in it, and the more varied the means of communicating it. The converse also holds good. That potential may or may not be realised: it is enabled or disabled by other factors, and the most important of these has to do with the identity and purpose of those who have control of the past. In the present case, who chooses the early Irish past, who 'keeps the memory', and controls its expression?

The keepers of the past were a very self-aware, highly educated mandarin caste. Whatever hereditary oral-learned classes that may have survived from the pagan past (and this inheritance has, in my view, been greatly overstated) had been christianised at an early date — in any event, long before the surviving texts were written — and had merged with the clerical literati who brought with them much of the learning and culture of christian late antiquity, not only in the matter of content but of form. The channels of communication were kept open with the Latin West and somewhat later works, such as Isidore's *Etymologiae*, reached Ireland quickly and were avidly read and assimilated.⁴ The ecclesiastical scholars, grammarians (of Latin and Irish), poets, canonists, 'secular' lawyers and historians formed a single mandarin caste whose writings, in Latin and in the vernacular are the products of a single, if latitudinarian, ecclesiastical culture. The members of this caste modelled themselves consciously on the tribe of Levi and saw their position in society as being similar to the priestly/levitical caste in the Old Testament. In fact, this is a very perceptive reading of Old-Testament history in combination with a high level of self-awareness in regard to their own society and the function of their own caste within it: the model works. As the Latin and vernacular law tracts show, this caste of hereditary (sometimes quasi-hereditary) scholars quite self-consciously held themselves in high esteem and filled roles of very considerable political and social importance. As early as the seventh century, they reduced the Irish past to a system, fitted Ireland's pre-history into the story of the nations as told in the Old Testament and in the works of the ancients, and traced the origin of the Irish in an unbroken line of ascent to Noah and to Adam. With the passage of time, the text grew more elaborate and in the eleventh- and twelfth-century version, 'In Lebor Gabála', won universal acceptance. The learned tradition became the anchor in time and space of a vast web of kinship, expressed in most elaborate genealogical tracts, linking the Irish kings and nobility to one another, to their

ancestors, and ultimately to world history, to the patriarchs and Adam. Here, literature, in the sense of extended narratives, lies close to genealogy in its origin, for while pedigree may be enough to prove the race, aetiological narrative is needed to legitimate the dynasty, to emplot statements of right, claims of precedence, assertions of destiny or divine right, and the like. The mandarin caste itself, quite apart from being ecclesiastical in culture, was recruited from the discard segments of royal and aristocratic kindreds and shared, therefore, many of the values of noble society.⁵ Hence its latitudinarianism and artistic tolerance, amply evidenced in the literary *corpus* and the subtle treatment of the pagan past in legal as well as literary texts. Hence, too, the profoundly aristocratic system of values in Irish traditional legends, whether hagiographical or 'secular', where only the saint and the scholar (or their conventional literary equivalent, the druid) are on the same footing as the king and the aristocratic hero.

The texts we possess, whether of law, saga, dynastic legend or genealogy, are the work-books of these mandarin specialists. We are, so to speak, looking over their shoulders and this has its own dangers, for we see their raw materials without their explanatory discourses — the lecturer's notes are not lecture.

Take, for example, the following problem. The received framework of Irish history and pre-history was, as we have seen, elaborated in 'In Lebor Gabála' and related legends. These texts linked the Irish with sacred history and brought them into contact with Mosaic Egypt. Side by side with this general historical explanation, however, are explanations of particular phenomena. I instance two.

The Irish lawyers, in the seventh century and later, were well aware that much of their legal material was borrowed though not slavishly from the Pentateuch, and there evidently was much debate in Irish learned circles as to the nature of the law in use in pre-Christian Ireland and the relationship between inherited and borrowed elements in Irish law. Non-narrative discussions in the Latin and vernacular laws indicate that these questions were posed at a sophisticated level. The following tale, which, as it stands, is no later than the eleventh or early twelfth century, occurs as one of the introductions to the law tracts:

The first author that ever was in Ireland was Aimirgin Glúingeal the poet. He was a foster-son of Caí Cainbrethach, one of the 72 disciples of the school of Fénus Farsaid. It was that Caí who learned the Law of Moses before he came from the east and he gave judgements according to the Law [of Moses], and thus that matter is related. When Fénus sent his 72 disciples to learn the many languages throughout

the world, it was Caí who went to Egypt, though he was a Hebrew by origin, and he learned the Egyptian language. He told Pharaoh about the dispersal of the school throughout the world and it was with Caí that the messengers came from Pharaoh asking Fénus to come to him. And the reward he gave them was that Scot, daughter of Pharaoh, was given as wife to Nél son of Fénus. Hence the Irish are called Scotti. When the school and their teacher had come to Pharaoh they learned Egyptian with Caí. This is the time when the great signs were wrought in Egypt i.e. the plague *et ailia quae in lege scripta sunt et cetera*. When Fénus and all the scholars saw the great judgements which were performed *per seruos Dei* they went to learn with them for they considered that it was through superior knowledge and application that the Israelites outdid the Egyptian druids and performed the many signs. When the Israelites went in flight, Caí went with Moses. The school fled in terror of the signs already mentioned, did not go on the hosting with Pharaoh, and for fear of Pharaoh and his reproach on his return, Fénus put to sea. Caí remained in the company of Moses at this time and he was with him while crossing the desert and he parted from them [the Israelites] after he had learned the Law of Moses. He did not go to the Promised Land but to Greece and he lived in Thrace. . . . Caí came with the fleet which came from Thrace to meet his own people and he showed them his achievement since they parted viz., the Law of God for men and His judgements. After that Caí was judge for the whole fleet.⁶

Another and somewhat earlier version of this legend occurs in conjunction with an account of an ordeal which appears to be a transposition into imagined pagan terms (since the events are placed in the pagan past) of the famous ordeal described in Numbers 5:11-28 by which a woman clears herself of the suspicion of adultery:

That is a proof which they used at that time to distinguish between truth and falsehood, namely, Waiting at an altar, that is, to go nine times round the altars and afterwards to drink water over which a wizard's incantation had been uttered: Now if he [the accused] were guilty the sign of his sin was manifest upon him but if he were innocent it [the water] would do him no harm. Now Caí Cainbrethach — the pupil of Fénus Farsaid, the twelfth or the seventy-second disciple of the school which Fenius dispersed from Greece in order to learn the many languages throughout the countries of the world, — it was that Caí who brought this ordeal from the land of Israel. He came to the Chosen People (*Tuath Dé*) and he learned the Law of Moses, and it was he that delivered judgements in the school after it had been gathered from every side and it was he that ordained the 'Breth Caí'. It was the same Caí moreover who first ordained in Ireland the law of the four tracks [= Cetharslecht Athgabála], for only two of the school came to Ireland: Aimirgin Glúneal the poet and Caí the judge. And Caí remained in Ireland until he had outlived nine generations, in consequence of the righteousness of his judgements, for the judgements which he used to deliver were judgements of the law of Moses,

and therefore the judgements of the Law [of Moses] are very abundant in Irish law (*fénechas*). These were judgements of the Law which served Cormac.⁷

A very much earlier and briefer account of Caí occurs in Cormac's Glossary and in the law tracts:

Aliter, quod uerius est: Cai Cainbrethach, dalta Feniusa, iss e in deiscibul rosiacht Maccu Israheil fri fogloim n-ebra, 7 is he ba brithem la longus Mac Miled. 7 is aire asberar Cai Cainbrethach de, fobith it bretha recta nobeired, 7 is aire it imda issin berla 'Another version, which is the truer one: Caí Cainbrethach, the pupil of Fénus, he is the disciple who went to the Sons of Israel to learn Hebrew, and he was the judge with the fleet of the Sons of Míl [the ancestors of the Irish]. And the reason why he is called Caí Cainbrethach [C. of the good judgements] is that he gave judgements of the [Mosaic] law and that is why they are abundant in Irish law'.⁸

This traditional legend is part of the extensive development of interpretative materials concerning the origin and nature of law and can be understood in a number of ways. It is a defence of the Irish legal system as a whole in different times and circumstances and a justification of the practice of law, especially by clerics, but it is much more. It projects the Irish legal tradition backwards in time to venerable antiquity, to what was conceived to be the very beginning of Irish history, and it provides a framework within which to justify legal rules and practices which self-evidently did not derive from the authoritative source of law: revelation, and the interpretation of revelation by the Fathers and other christian authorities. These texts are witnesses to a lengthy concern (within an unbroken literary tradition stretching over many centuries) with the problem of the nature of inherited native law and its relationship with natural law and the Mosaic law. The problem is approached consciously and in clearly defined terms, the interpretation is expressed in the form of a dramatic narrative. The tales cited above and the famous story of the encounter of St Patrick, king Loegaire and the poet-jurist Dubthach moccu Lugair and the resolution of the conflict between christianity and pre-christian law⁹ are examples of the genre.

I doubt whether the scholars who wrote and re-wrote these narratives believed them to be literally true, that is, believed them to be accounts of a sequence of events which actually took place in the real world. I imagine rather that these tales are discourse in symbolic form within a well-practised genre familiar to the intended readership or audience. Like the New-Testament parables and the figurative meaning of all of Scripture within some exegetical modes, which we can take to have been well known

to the mandarin caste, they are narrative devices by which abstract ideas are conveyed and may be understood on a number of different levels, varying with the degree of understanding and intention the reader or hearer brings to the text. The narratives in Genesis are the best-known stories in Scripture, the whole pre-historical construct (from which the whole web of genealogy hangs) is already spliced to some of the most dramatic events described in these narratives: does it not make good pedagogical sense to expound the complex (and current) problem of the relationships between legal systems in the same terms? The clever may read it as a symbolic representation of an abstract problem and its solution, the dunce may cling to the story as explanation and mnemonic. The level of authorial consciousness and the precise relationship of their scholarly creators to the tales are no doubt complex — as complex as that of the modern historian to his interpretative hypotheses?

A very similar narrative is used to explain the origins of the Irish language in a remarkable text of the Old-Irish period, *Auricept na n-éces*:

The authors of the Irish say that the reason for the invention of the Irish language was a strange and unlawful deed that took place in the world, i.e. the construction of Nimrod's Tower [Gen. 11:1-9].

Who invented this language and in what place was it invented and at what time was it invented? Answer. Fénus Farsaid invented it at Nimrod's Tower ten years after the dispersal from the Tower; and those who went from the Tower to settle in their territories were men of common language, not of common kin, as for instance Caí Cainbrethach, one of the 72 students of the school. He was of the Hebrews, and he was sent to Egypt. And Fénus himself remained at the Tower and lived there until the school asked him to extract for them out of the many languages a language that only they, or somebody who learned it from them, might speak. It is there that the language was extracted from the many languages, and it was assigned to one of them and the language is called by his name. And Goídelc [Irish] is so called from Goídel mac Angin mic Glúnfhind mic Láimfhind mic Agnumain of the Greeks . . . this language was there given its rules: what was best, fullest and most beautiful was extracted for Irish . . .¹⁰

Much the same kind of epistemological question arises here and both traditional legends evidently derive from the same intellectual milieu. It seems to me that the modern scholar, in silently imposing his own categorization of genre, is likely to misinterpret the texts and malign their authors. One could make the argument that the medieval scholar, using modes of discourse different from his modern successors, makes a series of important comments on the conflict of law and his perception of his own vernacular — in other words, he uses traditional legend (and its resonances

and associations for his hearer) to make critical comments on the nature of law and language.

The mandarin managers of the past are their best when they engage in polysemic discourse on the nature of kingship, its possession and legitimation. Among the texts dealing with the Uí Néill occurs the following aetiology of the supremacy of the descendants of Niall amongst those dynasties who claimed his siblings as their dynastic ancestors and eponyms — Uí Briúin, Uí Fiachrach and others.

Eochu Mugmedón was king of Ireland. His wife, Mongfind daughter of Fidach bore him four sons: Brian, Fiachra, Ailill and Fergus. He had a fifth son, Niall, son of Cairenn Chasdub, king of the Saxons. Before Niall's birth, Mongfind treated his mother harshly. She bore Niall in the field and none would come near mother and child for fear of Mongfind who was a great witch. (i) Tórna Éces, the poet/druid took the little Niall to his breast and his future was revealed to the poet who foretold in verse that Niall would be a great warrior, that he would be king of Ireland for 27 years and that all the kings of Ireland would descend from him. Tórna fostered him in secrecy until he was old enough to be king and came with him to Tara. He clad his mother in purple clothes and the men of Ireland chose him as king to succeed his father. (ii) Mongfind said angrily to Eochu: "Adjudge between you sons as to which of them will succeed you". The king said that Sithchenn, the druid/smith, should do so. He sets fire to a forge in which the sons are. Niall emerged with the anvil and its block: "Niall vanquishes", said the smith. Brian emerged with the sledgehammer: "Brian is your warrior", said the smith. Fiachra came with a pail of beer and the bellows: "Fiachra has your beauty and your gifts", said the smith. Ailill came with the weapon-chest: "Ailill to avenge you", said the druid. Fergus came with the firewood: "Fergus the withered", said the smith, and there was no good of his seed but one. Mongfind was furious because of this judgement and she has the smith supply them with arms. (iii) The smith gave the best arms to Niall and the rest to the others: "Now hunt and try your arms". They went hunting and they went astray. They kindled a fire and roasted some of the quarry and ate. Now they were thirsty from eating. "Let some one go for water", they said. "I will go", said Fergus. He found a horrible old woman guarding the well. She was black from head to foot, half-bald with a grey bristly mane, long green teeth, covered in pustules etc. etc. She was guarding the well and would allow him to take the water on condition he kissed her. He refused. So also did Brian. Fiachra came and asked for water. "A kiss for it", said she. "I would give a few kisses for it", said he. "You will visit Tara", said she [and that came true for two of his issue took the kingship of Ireland, Dathí and Ailill Molt and none of the issue of the others did]. Fiachra returned without water. Then came Niall whom she asked for a kiss. "I will lie with you as well as kiss you", said he and he threw himself upon her and kissed her. When he looked upon her she was the most beautiful woman in the world, white as the melting snow, with plump and queenly arms and long fingers, pearly teeth and lips

red as rowan berries. "I am the sovereignty", said she, "go to your brothers and take water with you and the sovereignty will be yours and your children's forever save only two of the children of Fiachra, Dathí and Ailill Molt and one king out of Munster, Brian Bórama. You have seen me loathsome, bestial, and horrible at first: and then — beautiful. So also is the sovereignty for it is seldom gained without battles and conflicts but everyone finds it beautiful and goodly afterwards. (iv) However, do not give your brothers water until they grant their seniority to you." They granted him their seniority and he bound them by oath never to oppose himself or his descendants. They return to Tara and Niall narrates their doings. "Why is it not Brian the senior who tells these tales?", said Mongfind. "Because we have conceded seniority to Niall", said they, "for the water". "Ye have conceded it forever", said Sithchenn the smith, "for henceforth his children will always have the dominion and the sovereignty of Ireland".¹¹

This is an extremely complex piece of narrative exposition which can be understood on different levels, some of which will correspond directly to the objects of modern academic disciplines. Quite evidently, structural social anthropologists could see the text globally as normative, as a cautionary commentary on the problem of sibling rivalry among royals in a patrilineal polygynous society and the potential evils of maternal influence and rivalry. That interpretation is very likely to be correct but it does not exhaust the meaning of the text. Historians of magic and popular belief might be impressed by serious references to witches and divination and by the appearance of the pagan goddess of sovereignty in a clerical royalist text which, as it stands, is no older than the eleventh century. They might conclude that the belief-systems of the mandarin caste (or their royal masters?) were partly christian and partly pagan or — more likely, given the simplicity of many historians of this kind — lightly christianized paganism. That interpretation is very likely to be wrong. The Irish mandarins, as copious evidence shows, never intellectually despised nor historically rejected their pagan past. In fact, they treasured its memory, idealized its conventions in the sagas (and did so with such success that the use of their testimony as evidence for pagan practices is a perilous undertaking) and saw it as another human world in past time, different but not essentially opposed to theirs, rather as the Old Testament relates to the New. Its people, on some occasions at least, could be the object of God's saving grace. Here the witches and the divination are dramatic narrative devices (tropes if you prefer), which carry a highly encoded commentary on the nature and legitimacy of political power and the pre-ordained privileges of the royal dynasty. It can, indeed, be read as a statement on the ambiguity of the moral role of kingship as an institution of the natural

order and an office achieved by violence, as the goddess herself is made to observe. And yet we have not touched on the particular (as distinct from the general) meaning of this text, this individual assemblage and particularization of certain narrative constituents which are to be found as discrete elements or differently assembled motifs elsewhere. For that, we must examine the text in its own context of dynasty, time and place. This will require some detailed historical exposition, largely of dynastic politics.

The main elements of the plot are clear: of the five sons of Eochu — Brion, Fiachra, Ailill, Fergus and Niall — the last is destined to succeed his father and found a lineage which will provide the kings of Ireland. The others, despite the machinations of their mother, are excluded. The tale, which establishes the pecking order between the Uí Néill and those who claimed to be their cousins — Uí Briúin, Uí Fiachrach, Uí Ailella and Uí Fergusa — is placed in what modern historians know to be pre-historic time, and what their medieval forebears knew to be 'long ago'. Niall's destiny is articulated in four separate incidents, cast in a linear chronological form, as the hero passes from childhood to young manhood, and the cumulative effect is impressive: (1) Tórna Éces reveals it on seeing the infant; (2) Sithchenn, the druid/smith divines it by burning a forge over the sons and interpreting the significance of the weapons with which each youth emerged; (3) the narrative motif of the 'Loathly Lady', a common allegory of kingship, is then used to re-affirm Niall's destiny;¹² and finally, (4) on the advice of the hag-goddess, he has his brothers formally concede him precedence. On internal evidence, the tale is Uí Néill dynastic propaganda of the eleventh century, though some elements which make it up are as old perhaps as the eighth century.

A related text which occurs side by side with the first in two manuscripts, 'Aided Crimthainn', may be used as a co-text of the first and helps to establish the probable dynastic context. Following on the first, it sets out the aetiology of the superiority of Uí Briúin within Connacht — and here one notes that the action of the royals' mother, her divinatory dream, is successful and the social anthropologist would perhaps point out that the influence of the mother on the siblings who are her offspring is not fraught with such serious potential for conflict within the royal dynasty. The plot is as follows:

Eochu was married to Mongfind daughter of Fidach who bore him four sons: Brian, Fiachra, Ailill and Fergus. She dreamt a dream of them thus: that they passed into the shape of four hounds — Brian took the form of a lion, Fiachra that of a greyhound, Ailill that of a beagle, and Fergus that of a cur. And they were tearing and fighting each other. Every second time the greyhound beat the lion but

eventually the lion triumphed over the other three and they surrendered to him timidly and obediently. Mongfind related this dream to Síthchenn the druid. "Truly", said he, "Brian, and his race after him, will be a greedy and wrathful lion and a virulent weapon against the angers of every other one. Fiachra, and his race after him, will be a hound of battle and rapine. These two will attack each other and the kingship will be divided among their children. However, the race of Brian will prevail over all the rest and they alone will have the sovereignty. Ailill will be a hunter seeking territories and gaining an abode for his brothers. As for Fergus, his descendants will be only a miserable peasant of his seed and his descendants will scarcely be known at all."¹³

This text is an explanation of the pecking order among the royal races of Connacht, that is, the existing historical situation and the known historical record are realized in a traditional narrative, which is both explanation and commentary, in terms of the aristocratic and military values of twelfth-century Ireland (and in terms, too, of the mandarin literary vocabulary of praise-poetry and the clichés of contemporary verse histories). Next, the text concedes overall sovereignty to the descendants of Niall in a general way. However, the precise current political point of the text becomes evident only towards the end when it engages in tendentious and brutally explicit political claims against the southern neighbours of Uí Briúin. Thomond, it declares, belongs as of right to Connacht for the province of Connacht extends from Bundrowes in the north to Limerick in the south; the land on which the men of Thomond are settled to-day is the cause of contention, warfare 'and of every mutual destruction that was wrought between them'; this is the land which Lugaid Menn son of Óengus Tírech ('the Landed') seized by force and because of that it is known as 'the Rough Swordland of Lugaid of the Red Hand'; it and Ossory are the two territories which the Munstermen have seized by force.

The nature of these claims becomes evident when we turn to the kingdom of Dál Cais (Uí Briain). The statement that Connacht extends from Limerick to Bundrowes leaves no room for that kingdom. Further, the Uí Briain claimed that their ancestor, Lugaid Menn, had conquered Thomond in remote antiquity, they stressed that he had taken it by heroic force and conflict, and they claimed that no king in Ireland but the king of Dál Cais had any rights over it.¹⁴

This text belongs to the reign of the greatest warrior-king in twelfth-century Ireland, Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair, king of Connacht (1106-56) and claimant to the kingship of Ireland (his dynasty was Uí Briúin), and very probably it belongs to the period from 1114 to 1130 when he was busily destroying the power-base of Uí Briain, the dynasty that had dominated

Irish politics for most of the previous century and forced even the Uí Néill framers of traditional legend to admit their ancestor, Brian Bóruma. Here, the Uí Briain dynastic claims are deleted and their right to the heartland of their own kingdom of Thomond is rejected, and it is evident from the precision of the rejection, that the Uí Briain 'charter', a traditional legend which had been in service for two centuries or more, was carefully considered and the rejection framed accordingly.

It is possible that these two texts, taken together, form part of the dossier of claims of Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair, part of the work-book of his mandarin interpreters of the past, who cast their work in the form of traditional legend, but within the wider context of the traditional legends of the Uí Néill, whose siblings the Uí Briúin were considered to be in the overall genealogical schema and in the narratives. There is, however, an apparent contradiction: the second expresses his claims eloquently, but the first appears to boost the Uí Néill at the expense of Uí Briúin. A relatively satisfactory interpretation of this apparent contradiction is possible on a number of levels. In the first place, the kingdoms of the Uí Néill were by now much reduced and Ua Conchobair could concede the shadow when he had the substance. More important, the Uí Néill had been the dominant dynasty in Ireland for many centuries and had attracted to themselves the traditional legends of royal sovereignty: in order to be credible and in order not to do violence to that world of the imagination which accompanies, answers to, and justifies the real world of politics, that association had to be gently unhitched. As the literature shows, that process was complete and the contradictions resolved by about the year 1190. In a poem belonging to that period the matter of both texts is skilfully wedded.¹⁵ The poet declares that 'the era of the Uí Néill is over as the Sovereignty herself ordained'. He then proceeds to rehearse the encounter with the hag-goddess; once again, only Niall copulates with her and she reveals the future of his lineage, but now with one striking limitation — when fifty of his descendants have reigned the kingship will return 'to the foremost of Brian's generous offspring'. The political world and the world of traditional legend are now at one, and the trimming of the past to fit the present is done with consummate skill.

That twelfth-century repertory of aristocratic and chivalrous tales, *Acallam na senórach*, throws a good deal of light on the methods of the mandarins. The warrior Finn, who is regarded as a contemporary of Cormac mac Airt, is now, like a number of the ancestors of leading dynasties, represented as having knowledge of the true faith:

"Maith, a anam, a Chailte", ar Patraic, "ar chreideabairse do rig nime 7 talman no an fetubair a beith ann etir?" Freccaidh Cailte sin: "rofitir in flaithfeinnid", ar

Cailte, "or ba drai 7 ba faidh 7 ba flaith, 7 do thuicemarne uile cu raibhi Dia ann . . ." "Well indeed, Cailte", said Patrick, did you believe in the king of heaven and earth or did you know that he existed at all?" Cailte answers that: "the royal warrior knew", said Cailte, "because he was a druid, a prophet and a lord, and we all understood that God existed".¹⁶

Later, an even bolder claim is made for the success of Patrick's mission: that the king of the *síd* submitted to Patrick and believed.

7 ni cian do badur ann co facadur in n-aenoclach da n-indsaigid 7 leine do thsroll rig ria chnes, inar maethsroill taisri 7 brat corra corrtarach uime, 7 delg oir issin brut ossa bruinne 7 claidem orduirnd ina laim, 7 cathbarr oir ima chenn, 7 iss e do boi ann .i. Donn mac Midhir, 7 tuc a chenn a n-ucht Patraic, 7 tuc comus Tuaithe De Danann do, 7 ro slechtsat uile do Patraic. Conid ann do chreidset Tuatha De Danann do Patraic "and they were not long there when they saw a single warrior coming towards them, a shirt of royal satin next his skin, a tunic of smooth satin over it, and a purple fringed cloak about him, a golden brooch in his cloak over his breast, a gold-hilted sword in his hand and a golden helmet on his head. Donn son of Midir it was, and he laid his head in Patrick's breast and he gave him power over the Tuatha Dé Danann, and they all submitted to Patrick. It was then that the Tuatha Dé Danann believed in Patrick's teaching."¹⁷

Acallam na senórach is a lengthy text cast in the form of a dialogue between St Patrick (who represents the world of christian and clerical values, though in a sophisticated and tolerant way) and Cailte (who represents the world of past martial prowess and pagan virtue). In a sense, these are surface distinctions, for it is possible to interpret the whole text as an imaginative realization in narrative of a normative doctrine of knightly chivalry that answers to the ideals and aspirations, if not the realities, of twelfth-century Irish aristocratic society. In many ways, Irish society resembled, in structure and values, the contemporary societies in western Europe, and there are predictable similarities in the literatures of these societies. On another level, the texts from the *Acallam* cited above, betray an anxious preoccupation of the makers of traditional legend: their world, of reality and imagination, was under attack. When Domnall Ua hÉnna († 1098), the old-style bishop of Killaloe, wrote to Lanfranc, archbishop of Canterbury, on certain theological problems, he also solicited the archbishop's opinion on certain literary matters. The archbishop's philistine reply survives:

Quaestiones saecularium literarum nobis solvendas misistis: sed episcopale propositum non decet operam dare huiusmodi studiis. Olim quidem juvenilem aetatem in his detrivimus; sed accedentes ad pastorem curam, abrenunciandum eis decrevimus.¹⁸

In the face of reformers of this kind (and they were to gain the upperhand in the twelfth century), the clerical mandarins, who effortlessly had mediated the worlds of past and present, came under intellectual pressure. The *Acallam* is a rich record of their ambivalent position and response: they present St Patrick, the highest traditional ecclesiastical authority in the land, as approving enthusiastically of the cultivation of a literature which speaks lovingly and nostalgically of the pagan past (the imagined past of generations of composers of traditional legends). In the narratives cited above, the mandarins make a further concession: they mediate the conventional oppositions in that literary world, make Finn, the archetypal pagan warrior, a precocious deist (if not christian), and have the king of the Otherworld and his folk, submit to St Patrick and become true believers. In the world of traditional legend, the past is 'understood' and history becomes intelligible by being constantly re-created — not simply as paradigm of the present, but as a complex and subtle critical and imaginative commentary on life. In the colder climate of late twelfth-century Ireland this kind of commentary seems to have become more difficult. *Sed ego qui scripsi hanc historiam aut uerius fabulam . . .*

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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4. J.N. Hillgarth, 'Ireland and Spain in the seventh century', in *Peritia*, iii (1984), pp 1-16 (a most valuable survey of recent literature).
5. D. Ó Corráin, 'Irish origin legends and genealogy: recurrent aetiologies' in Tore Nyberg et al. (ed.), *History and heroic tale: a symposium* (Odense, 1985), pp 51-96; id., 'Nationality and kingship in pre-Norman Ireland' in T.W. Moody (ed.), *Nationality and the pursuit of national independence* (Belfast, 1978), pp 14-19; id., 'The early Irish churches: some aspects of organisation' in D. Ó Corráin (ed.), *Irish antiquity* (Cork, 1981), pp 328-31.

6. Binchy, *Corpus*, pp 1653-54 = *Anc. laws Ire.* i 20-22.
7. Whitley Stokes (ed.), 'Irish ordeals, Cormac's adventure in the Land of Promise and the decision as to Cormac's sword' in *Irische Texte*, 3. Ser. 1. Heft (Leipzig, 1891), pp 192-93. The Cormac in question here is Cormac mac Airt, the paragon of Irish kingship, who is elsewhere represented as being made privy, in pagan times, to revelation and refusing to be buried with his pagan ancestors at Brug na Bóinne (R.I. Best and O.J. Bergin (ed.), *Lebor na hUidre* (Dublin, 1929), pp 127-33).
8. Kuno Meyer (ed.), 'Sanas Cormaic: an Old-Irish glossary', in O.J. Bergin, R.I. Best, Kuno Meyer and J.G. O'Keeffe (ed.), *Anecdota from Irish manuscripts*, iv (Halle a.S., 1912), p. 14; Binchy, *Corpus*, p. 1311.
9. Binchy, *Corpus*, pp 339, 877, 1650; McCone, 'Dán agus tallann', pp 32-42.
10. George Calder (ed.), *Auricept na n-éces: the scholar's primer* (Edinburgh, 1917), pp 6-9, 174; Anders Ahlqvist, *The early Irish linguist: an edition of the canonical part of Auricept na n-éces*, *Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum* 73 (Helsinki, 1982), pp 47-48. In the interest of simplicity, my translation (though based on Dr Ahlqvist's text and translation and much indebted to his) is very much freer.
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16. Whitley Stokes (ed.), 'Acallam na senórach', *Irische Texte*, 4. Ser. 1. Heft (Leipzig, 1900), p. 41; for a re-iteration of this claim, *ibid.*, p. 148.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
18. James Ussher (ed.), *Veterum epistolarum Hibernicarum sylloge* (Dublin, 1632), ep. XXVIII, repr. in Elrington Ball (ed.), *The whole works of James Ussher* iv (Dublin, 1847), p. 497.