



REVIEW

Gablánach in Scélaigecht. Celtic Studies in honour of Ann Dooley, ed. by Sarah Sheehan, Joanne Findon and Westley Follett (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), xiv + 282 pp. ISBN 978-1-84682-386-2.

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This collection of sixteen essays by various contributors has been put together in honour of Ann Dooley, formerly professor of Celtic Studies at the University of Toronto. The chapters of the volume, which cover a range of topics in the fields of medieval Irish and Welsh literature and history, are preceded by a list of the dedicatee's publications and an introduction by the editors, the latter of which outlines Dooley's career and offers a brief summary of each contribution in the book. The volume also contains an index, but lacks a general bibliography. The subjects dealt with in the individual chapters fittingly reflect the scholarly interests of the dedicatee, who is known in particular for her contribution to the study of the late-Middle-Irish text *Acallam na Senórach*, of which she produced the first complete English translation, in collaboration with Harry Roe, for the Oxford World's Classics series in 1999.¹ Indeed, it is to this tale in particular that the title of the volume makes reference: for the exclamation *as gablánach in scélaigecht sin* ('that storytelling is intricate') is the reaction of one of the *Acallam*'s chief protagonists, St Patrick, to a rather complicated narrative of romantic entanglement amongst supernatural beings recounted to him by the Fenian warrior Cailte.² As the editors themselves note (p. 1), the word *gablánach*, which literally means 'forked' or 'branching', is equally well suited to many other texts dealt with in the volume, the manifold intricacies and ramifications of which are highlighted by the contributors so as to leave readers with much food for thought.

The editors' arrangement of the essays is sensible. The volume begins with discussions of early medieval Hiberno-Latin sources and Irish religious

¹ Ann Dooley and Harry Roe (trans). 1999. *Tales of the Elders of Ireland* (Oxford: University Press).

² Whitley Stokes (ed). 1900. 'Acallam na Senórach', in *Irische Texte mit Übersetzung und Wörterbuch*, Vol. IV.1, ed. by Whitley Stokes and Ernst Windisch (Leipzig: S. Hirzel), 104, lines 3666-7.

literature, followed by two essays on the late-twelfth-century text *Acallam na Senórach*, several articles on medieval Irish pedagogical, literary and historical works, and finally three contributions on Welsh material. In the opening chapter (pp. 9-25), Michael Herren revisits the thorny question of Saint Patrick's life and career as it is reflected in his own writings, the *Confessio* and *Epistola ad Coroticum*, as well as in later hagiographical accounts. Herren argues the case that Patrick's missionary programme in Ireland was inspired in part by his prior experience in Gaul, where he may have gone to seek episcopal consecration after he had been refused this ordination by his British *seniores*. The author also suggests that Patrick's experience may have influenced Gildas' attack on the dubious practices of British clergy in his *De excidio Britonum*. Two notes by John Carey (pp. 26-37) then serve to bridge the transition from Hiberno-Latin to vernacular Irish literature. The first of these considers a number of parallels for Eriugena's metaphorical comparison, made in the opening to Book 4 of his *Periphyseon*, between the adventure of metaphysical inquiry and a voyage on the ocean. Among the Irish texts examined by Carey are the works of Columbanus, the voyage-tales *Nauigatio sancti Brendani* and *Immram Brain maic Fhebuil*, and Muirchú's seventh-century *Life of Patrick*. In the second half of his chapter, Carey compares an episode in the version of *Vita sancti Brendani* known as the *Vita Oxoniensis*, in which a sinner sacrifices himself to ravenous mice, to the much-discussed illumination on folio 34r of the Book of Kells, which depicts two mice holding a Eurcharistic wafer in their mouths.

The next two chapters focus on aspects of early Irish religious literature. Pádraig Ó Riain (pp. 38-52) revisits the group of nine saints' lives from the early fourteenth-century *Codex Salmanticensis* known as the 'O'Donohue Lives', the assemblage of which has been previously dated to the period 750-850. Ó Riain instead argues in favour of a date no earlier than the twelfth century for these texts, and suggests that the apparent archaisms found in them may constitute evidence of an attempt to give the works a semblance of antiquity. Westley Follett (pp. 53-68) then builds on his previous detailed analysis of the works associated with the *céli Dé* of early medieval Ireland, in which he disputed the long-held view that these anchoritic figures had headed a reform movement intent upon countering a general decline in Irish monastic discipline.³ Here Follett examines two anecdotes from the ninth-century *Tallaght Memoir* in which an abbot interacts with a woman whose flesh is pricked in an effort to draw blood. He argues convincingly that the anecdotes are not simply representative of early Irish religious attitudes towards women,

³ Westley Follett. 2006. *Céli Dé in Ireland: monastic writing and identity in the early Middle Ages*, Studies in Celtic History 23 (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer).

but rather that they are illustrative of the more fundamental ascetic problem of desire. An interesting aspect of Follett's analysis is his citation of several passages from the ascetic works of late antique Christian authors that identify an excess of blood in the body as the cause of desire, clearly deriving from the Hippocratic theory of the four humours.

The next two chapters turn our attention to the aforementioned Middle-Irish prosimetric text *Acallam na Senórach*. In a detailed contribution to the study of place-names in the *Acallam*, Anne Connon (pp. 69-102) charts the physical context for an episode in the text, referred to by her as 'the Mayo sequence', that is concerned with one of the journeys made by Patrick through Connacht in the company of the Fenians. Connon draws attention to a recurring emphasis in this part of the *Acallam* on the ecclesiastical and secular interests of the Muintir Roduib, originally lords over territory in central Roscommon, and posits that this may reflect their involvement in the production of the text as it survives in its present form. In the following chapter, Harry Roe (pp. 103-15) seeks to situate the *Acallam*'s presentation of a 'literary Patrick' (as opposed to the Patrick of history and hagiography) within the wider history of Christian conversion outside of Ireland.

One of the most elaborate examples of a medieval Irish text that might be characterised as *gablánach* is the heavily glossed and commentated grammatical compilation known as *Auraicept na nÉces*, which is discussed next in a chapter by James Acken (pp. 116-30). Drawing on his previous doctoral work in this area, published in 2008,⁴ the author focuses here on 'assembling and untangling the ideas that surround how the *Auraicept* conceives meaning and terminology' (p. 116). This is introduced as an attempt to redress a preponderance of scholarly studies that 'focus on the light that [the *Auraicept*] sheds on the linguistic culture of Ireland rather than the poetic' and on how the text 'reflects on the Latin tradition as it stood in Ireland rather than the vernacular, even though the two traditions clearly held independent places in the estimation of the scribes who copied it' (ibid.) One might be wary of placing too much emphasis on distinctions of this nature, however, particularly given the essentially propaedeutic nature of the *Auraicept*'s glossing and commentary, which seems to have been added to the text over a fairly extended period of time and therefore may not always reflect consistent interpretative paradigms. It is also often quite difficult to dissociate the terminological apparatus of this commentary from its Latin models, even in instances where linguistic concepts are discussed in emphatically comparative terms. Thus while it is certainly a worthwhile exercise to explore the shades of meaning that can be gleaned from the commentators' explanatory methods,

⁴ James Acken. 2008. *Structure and Interpretation in the Auraicept na nÉces* (Saarbrücken, VDM Verlag Dr. Müller).

Ackens' tendency to disregard Latin parallels in his assessment of some analytical terms occasionally runs the risk of presenting the vernacular text as more theoretically exceptional than it is. For example, his discussion of terms such as *cenél* 'kind' and *gné* 'species' as a paradigm that 'define[s] respective relationships of a common radical inheritance and mutual exclusivity' (pp. 119-20) makes no mention of their semantic affinities with the Latin terms *genus* and *species*, and thus their probable origin in the logical vocabulary of Aristotelian predicables. Likewise, vernacular terms such as *coitchenn* 'common', *díles* 'proper', *ruídles* 'peculiar' and *indles* 'improper' may well reflect, as Erich Poppe has suggested in a previous study of this material, the use of terms such as *communiter*, *proprie* and *magis proprie* in a standard school-text on logic such as Boethius' Latin translation of Porphyry's *Isagoge*.⁵ The influence that this wider intellectual framework might have had on the exegetical methods of medieval Irish glossators is surely an important aspect to consider when seeking to understand their objectives in the analysis of linguistic concepts, poetic or otherwise. Parallels with the interpretative vocabulary used in legal texts, for example, may provide important clues to whether or not the *Auraicept* should be considered primarily or exclusively as 'a kind of beginner's guide to composing bardic poetry', as stated by the editors in the Introduction to the volume (p. 4), or whether the compilation may have also served a wider learned audience at various stages in its evolution. Ackens' study also (understandably) draws only on the two most accessible versions of the *Auraicept*, namely those which formed the basis for George Calder's 1917 edition of the text. As Anders Ahlqvist has shown, however, that contribution does not adequately reflect the complexity of the compilation's manuscript transmission and accreted commentary.⁶ Readers should thus heed Ackens' concluding warning that 'the development of these interpretive paradigms and their relationship to the wider corpus of early Irish literature over the course of the Middle Ages requires further investigation' (p. 130). To what extent we can identify distinct layers of glossing and commentary in the *Auraicept*, for example, or whether the unedited witnesses of this text reflect a greater or lesser emphasis on concerns specific to the training of professional poets, are questions that certainly warrant further discussion.

⁵ Erich Poppe. 1996. 'Die mittelalterliche irische Abhandlung *Auraicept na nÉces* und ihr geistesgeschichtlicher Standort', in K. D. Dutz and H-J. Niederehe (eds), *Theorie und Rekonstruktion. Trierer Studien zur Geschichte der Linguistik* (Munster: Nodus Publikationen), 55-74, especially 65-70.

⁶ See George Calder (ed. and trans). 1917. *Auraicept na nÉces. The Scholars' Primer* (Edinburgh: John Grant), and Anders Ahlqvist (ed. and trans). 1983. *The Early Irish Linguist. An Edition of the Canonical Part of the Auraicept na nÉces, Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum 73* (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica).

The saga-literature of the Ulster Cycle is the chief focus of the next four chapters. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh (pp. 131-53) explores the manifold ways in which the human body is depicted in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, including aspects such as the violent encounters of warriors, the promiscuous use of sex by Aillil and Medb, the portrayal of physicians and even the scribal conception of the *Táin*-text itself as a *corp* ('body') that can be distinguished from its various prefatory tales. The wide-ranging nature of Ó Cathasaigh's discussion will no doubt render it a useful comparandum for studies of this motif in other medieval Irish literary texts. Joanne Findon (pp. 154-70) examines the role of women and the characterisation of Conchobar mac Nessa in three inter-related Ulster Cycle tales with strong links to the *Táin*, namely *Compert Conchobuir*, *Longes mac nUislen* and *Tochmarc Luaine ocus Aided Athairne*. While highlighting the importance of an intertextual analysis for gaining a clear picture of Conchobar's kingly career, she also touches on aspects of the later manuscript context of these tales, and suggests – albeit rather speculatively – that we might view their emphasis on Conchobar's failure to reach his potential as a ruler through the lens of late-medieval audience expectations regarding kingship. Sarah Sheehan (pp. 171-86) answers Dooley's call for 'uncomfortable examinations of the political underpinnings of the history of our own discipline' (p. 171) with a survey of past critical approaches to Queen Medb of Connacht. Her concluding illustration of Medb's depiction in a recent graphic novel adaptation of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* forms a logical transition to the following chapter by Connell Monette (pp. 187-97), who likewise addresses the theme of the *Táin*'s contemporary resonances in its analysis of the 'Monstrous Hero' motif. Monette draws upon a wide range of figures from both modern film and medieval literature that might be seen as simultaneously powerful and attractive, yet also inherently dangerous, while paying particular attention to the depiction of Cú Chulainn in early Irish sources.

Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (pp. 198-219) offers a valuable contextual analysis of the twelfth-century Irish genealogical poem *Eól dam seiser cloinne Cuinn*, a work of 50 stanzas published here in full from the copy in NLI MS G 131. The poem claims to be concerned with the descendants of Conn of the Hundred Battles, but is in the main an account of the ancestry of Toirrdelbach Ua Conchobair. An equally important contribution to the volume is the following chapter by Brent Miles (pp. 220-37), who examines an intriguing facet of medieval Irish adaptations of Classical literature through his analysis of the text *Don Tres Troí*, a late-Middle-Irish account of the refoundation of Troy by Hector's son Astyanax in the generation following the events depicted in the better-known *Togail Troí* ('The destruction of Troy'). *Don Tres Troí* survives complete in only a single manuscript, and is of interest in part because it reflects a range of ancient and medieval traditions that in some cases differ significantly from

those reflected in Continental sources. Miles offers a detailed survey of accounts relating to a 'third Troy' in Latin, Greek and French, and highlights the difficulty of placing the Irish *Don Tres Troi* firmly within any classical or medieval tradition of writing on this subject. His account of this text as an example of 'the intellectual thoroughness and independence of mind of Irish scholarship' is persuasive, and his promised edition of the work (p. 220 n 1) is to be eagerly anticipated.

The final three essays in the volume are concerned with Welsh themes. Patrick K. Ford (pp. 238-52) looks at the episode in the Fourth Branch of the *Mabinogi* in which Gwydion, in the guise of a poet, visits the court of Pryderi seeking the latter's otherworldly pigs as a gift. Ford seeks to place this scene in its social context by examining literary evidence relating to the performance of poetry and music in the medieval Welsh court, viewing Gwydion's request through the lens of traditions relating to the *canu gofyn* ('asking poems') and *canu diolch* ('thanking poems') addressed to a patron by a poet on circuit when an exchange of gifts was in question. This is followed by Karen Jankulak's assessment (pp. 253-64) of the evidence for Irish settlement in medieval Ceredigion, which highlights the difficulty of drawing firm conclusions from sources such as Ogam inscriptions, place-names and saints. Jankulak focuses in particular on the fragility of the evidence provided by fragmentary literary references to the early Welsh leader Cunedda. The social context for the activities of medieval Welsh poets is then further addressed in the final chapter of the volume by David Klausner (pp. 265-75), who discusses two versions of the 'Statute of Gruffudd ap Cynan', a set of bardic regulations, associated with two sixteenth-century *eisteddfodau*, that specify the duties and curricular requirements of students of poetry (*cerdd dafod*) and music (*cerdd dant*) at various levels. As Klausner observes, 'the principal difficulty addressed by the Statute was lack of training, which was dealt with by the institution of a strict schedule of degrees of education and specific requirements for each of these levels, based most probably on long-standing bardic traditions'. Indeed, one might readily note parallels between the portions of the Welsh statute concerned with the training and remuneration of such artists and the bardic curricular requirements outlined in the much earlier Irish text known to modern scholars as *Mittelirische Verslehren II*.⁷ However, the Welsh text also contains an interesting set of regulations pertaining to the moral conduct of poets and musicians, and Klausner persuasively highlights the immediate social context from which such requirements probably arose during the sixteenth century,

⁷ Rudolf Thurneysen (ed.). 1891. 'Mittelirische Verslehren', in *Irische Texte mit Übersetzung und Wörterbuch III:i*, ed. by Ernst Windisch and Whitley Stokes (Leipzig: S. Hirzel), 1-182, at 29-66.

namely ‘a growing association between travelling poets and “vagabonds, rogues, and sturdy beggars.”’ (p. 272).

The essays in this collection cover a wide range of material, but a reading of the volume in its entirety brings to light several recurrent themes that underscore the fundamental inter-connectedness of many areas of early Irish and Welsh literature, from Hiberno-Latin and vernacular texts to historical, didactic, religious and literary sources. One might quibble that these various strands of thematic coherence – and occasional instances of critical dissonance – could have been accentuated somewhat more by way of cross-referencing in the chapters themselves, or by means of a more detailed introductory exploration of the over-arching questions and scholarly desiderata to which they give rise. It may well be, as is often the case for collections of this nature, that many readers will seek out the volume for only one or two specific contributions. For those who wish to read it cover-to-cover, however, the lack of a general bibliography is something of a pity, as this would make it easier to retrieve references listed in the footnotes to individual chapters. However, such minor criticisms should not in themselves overshadow the high standard of editing to be found throughout the volume, which contains very few typos; nor should they detract from the inherent interest of many of the topics discussed in the various essays. And indeed, what is perhaps the most important unifying theme, given the clearly articulated purpose of the volume as a whole, is readily manifest across many of the chapters: namely the great scholarly debt, admiration and appreciation that the various contributors, both colleagues and former students of Ann Dooley, feel for the volume’s dedicatee. Their essays collectively form a warm tribute to her career as a professor of Celtic Studies, and much of this volume’s contents will be of considerable interest to scholars both of that discipline and of medieval literature and history more broadly.