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The life and work of Cuán ua Lothcháin

CLODAgh DOWNeY

There is much mystery surrounding the life and death of the medieval Irish poet Cuán ua Lothcháin, but to judge by surviving annal collections, our most important source for medieval Irish history, two things at least that we may be sure of are the date of his death, and his pre-eminence in Irish literary circles of the period. We may furthermore infer that Cuán led an interesting and colourful life, if the intriguing but frustratingly brief accounts of his death are anything to go by. This is how the major annal collections record his death in 1024:

**Annals of Ulster**


Cuán ua Lothcháin, chief poet of Ireland, was killed in Tethba by the men of Tethba themselves. The party that killed him became putrid within the hour. That was a poet’s miracle.¹

**Annals of Inisfallen**

Cuán Hua Lothcháin, ardhbile Herend, senebaid, a marbad do feraib Téthba; ocs in fer ro mmarb do marbad fo chéitfoin, i.e. Gillai Ultain m. Roduib.

Cuán Ua Lothcháin, chief poet of Ireland and a historian, was slain by the men of Tethba; and the man who slew him, i.e. the son of Gilla Ultain, son of Roduib, was killed forthwith.²

**Annals of Tigernach**

Cuán Hua Leochan primsbenchaibdh Erenn, a priomolach do marbadh a Téthba, bréaind i n-oen[uar] in lucht ro marb*, as firt fiedl sin.

Cuán Hua Leochan, chief-historian of Ireland and her chief sage, was killed in Teffia, and those that killed him became putrid in the same hour, and that is a poet’s miracle.³

That a learned man should die by such a violent death is interesting in itself, but his posthumous revenge by putrefaction certainly makes
Cúan a poet to remember. These annalistic references are the only surviving account, as far as I am aware, of the circumstances surrounding Cúan’s death, and allusions to _firt fiedl_ “the poet’s miracle/spell” are very rare in our annals for this period.\(^4\) However we may read these tantalising snippets, they throw up intriguing and probably unanswerable questions about why Cúan was murdered and what really happened to his killers. The _Annals of Inisfallen_ have perhaps the most sober of all the annalistic entries and furthermore provide a name for Cúan’s killer. John Carey has suggested that Gilla Ultán mac Rodub may have been a member of the Tethba family of Muinter Maelshinna, who lived in the present-day barony of Kilcummin West, Co. Westmeath.\(^5\) As to Cúan’s own background, Eugene O’Curry stated that “the _O’Lothcháin_ were a family of distinction, and chiefs of the territory of Gailenga Mór, or Great Gailenga; (situated in Meath and Longford, and now known in the former county as the barony of Morgallion); but they were first settled in the district of Eile, (in Tipperary and King’s County)).”\(^6\) Unfortunately I have been unable to trace the source of O’Curry’s assertion. James Henthorn Todd claimed, furthermore, that he was murdered by his own kin, though none of the annal entries actually state this explicitly. Todd seems to have arrived at this conclusion by conflating information from a genealogical table drawn up by Eugene O’Curry based on the genealogical collections of ÓClerigh and Mac Hibrigh with the information from the annals about Cúan’s murder. O’Curry’s genealogical table of the descendants of Ailill Ólom (a Munster ancestor figure) includes a personal comment by him that Cúan descended from Tadg mac Céin,\(^7\) but I have not been able to find any information to this effect in ÓClerigh’s and Mac Hibrigh’s genealogies themselves. The notice of his death in the _Annals of Ulster_ cited above may contain an implication that Cúan was of Tethba himself, but is not an explicit statement to this effect.

Uncertainty about Cúan’s family background is not helped by the varying forms of his name in our sources. The standard form is _ua Lothcháin_, indicating an ancestor Lothcháin, but I have not come across any other example of this name in medieval Irish sources, apart from Cúan’s surname. Other forms of his name that are found include _ua Leochadáin_ (or Leochadáin), _ua Leocatáin_ (or Leocatáin) and _ua Leobain_ (or Lócháin). O’Curry’s statement that Cúan was of the Gailenga may reflect confusion with _Ua Leocáin_ family of Gailenga, one member of which, at least, seems to have consorted with the Southern Úi Néill high-king Mael Sechnaill mac Domnaill (died 1022).\(^9\) If Cúan was indeed of this family, then this would not only afford us valuable information about his own background, but could also provide an insight into the relationship he may have had with the king Mael Sechnaill, an aspect of his life that has been prominent in discussions about him and his work. However, I am not sure that we have solid evidence that he was of this family, nor even if the annalistic notices of his death enable us to be certain about where he was from, although it has been claimed that he was from “Westmeath”,\(^10\) and “of a North Meath family.”\(^11\) Perhaps a more reliable indication of where Cúan came from can be found in the subject matter of the poetry attributed to him. Edward Gwynn adverted to the superb local topographic knowledge that Cúan displayed in his poems, and this could certainly be seen as a fair indication, although not a proof, of his own background.\(^12\) In one of the poems attributed to Cúan, beginning _Tri croind Èirenn oiregdb_ (“The three outstanding trees of Ireland”), the poet identifies himself as _is mé Cúan o Caerdrum_ “I am Cúan from Caerdrum (Usneach/Tara)”.\(^13\) Although I have questioned the attribution of _Tri croind Èirenn oiregdb_ to Cúan in a forthcoming edition of this poem, the identification of the poet’s name and homeplace may yet be factually accurate.\(^14\)

Medieval Irish sources, by their nature, are more interested in the literary output of a poet than in providing us with detailed accounts of his life. It is to Cúan’s poetry, then, that we should turn to gain a deeper understanding of him. One aspect of his poetry in particular, namely, material dealing with Mael Sechnaill mac Domnaill, has often been seen as a manifestation of his social position and professional concerns, and as affording evidence for Cúan’s putative position as Mael Sechnaill’s chief poet. We are fortunate that at least eleven poems survive that are attributed to Cúan, whether explicitly ascribed to him in a manuscript copy of a poem, or whether his authorship is inferred in other ways.\(^15\) Such inferences are often made on the basis of an incomplete ascription in a manuscript (e.g. _Cúan cecinn_ “Cúan sang”), or of an authorial signature within the poem itself, such as that cited above from _Tri croind Èirenn oiregdb_. The frequent medieval practice of fathering poems on more prominent poets means that these authorial signatures, and indeed, explicit scribal ascriptions, are not always authentic. In particular, the literary corpus of poets of such high profile as Cúan would be expected to attract accretions as lesser-known poets hoped
for a better life for their work with their adoptive fathers. It is not always possible to prove or disprove particular authorship of a poem, but even in cases where we are doubtful that a poem was indeed the work of the poet it is ascribed to, such attributions will at least testify to his stature among poets at the time of composition.

The majority of poems ascribed to Cúán is found in the collection of literature known as *dindsbenchas Éirem* ("the lore of the notable places of Ireland") and concerned with explaining the origin of place-names and with recounting the traditions associated with particular famous places.16 Most of Cúán's poems deal in detail with places in the midlands, and his area of interest is a fair indication of his own home ground. As well as demonstrating his knowledge of the traditions of these places, Cúán's role in the transmission of the *dindsbenchas* corpus illustrates his interest in antiquarian and historical matters in general. While the poetry of the metrical *dindsbenchas* sometimes reveals contemporary concerns, through allusions to recent events or panegyrical verses to patrons or potentates, the overriding impetus behind the compilation of the *dindsbenchas* was a passionate interest in the historical and literary traditions of the past. Such an interest lay behind the composition of each of the individual items in the extensive *dindsbenchas* corpus, but what motivated the compilation of these texts into one thematically-unified corpus must have been a broader and deeper interest in the history of the island as a whole, and in the preservation and transmission of that history.17 Tomás Ó Concheannainn has suggested that Cúán may in fact have been responsible for the original compilation of the *dindsbenchas*, which, if true, shows him to have been in the vanguard of major cultural developments at the turn of the millennium.18

Temair toga na tulach "Temair noblest of hills" ("Temair III")
The poem beginning *Temair toga na tulach* ("Temair [Tara] noblest of hills"), entitled "Temair III" by its editor, E.J. Gwynn,19 is concerned with Tara and traditions associated with it. The 47 quatrains that it contains cover a wide range of themes, beginning with Cormac mac Airt and his connection with Tara. As well as one of Ireland's most prominent prehistoric kings and renowned for his paradigmatic kingship, Cormac was an important ancestor of the Uí Neill, the most powerful dynastic grouping in medieval Ireland. The emphasis on Cormac's connection with Tara has the effect, then, of associatively reinforcing Tara's connection with the Uí Néill as a whole, and, therefore, with the Uí Néill high-king of the day. Cormac, the paragon of wisdom in Irish tradition (as eloquently illustrated by the quotation on the title page of this journal), is furthermore closely associated in the poem with the "Psalter of Tara":

Cormac, rochlaí cáicait cathb; Cormac, who gained fifty fights, robhilaig Saltair Temhrich; disseminated the Psalter of Temair iùn Saltair sin a thà a n-as dech sund senbusa. in this Psalter there is all the best we have of history.20

Pádraig Ó Riain has argued that the so-called Psalter of Tara never existed, but was an invention by Cúán that was designed to provide the Uí Néill ruling class with their answer to the Psalter of Cashel, a now lost Munster miscellany that Ó Riain would date to the early eleventh century.21 In the quatrain quoted above, Cúán alludes to the authority of the Psalter of Tara with respect to *senchais* "traditional history", and he goes on to briefly represent the testimony of the Psalter with regard to the hierarchy of the kings of Ireland, the delimitations of the five provinces and the rights of the provincial kings vis-à-vis the king of Tara. This betrays a political intent behind the narration of traditional history in the poem: Cúán has a point to make about the primacy of the Tara, that is, the Uí Néill, kingship. Although it now well known that the institution of the high-kingship of early medieval Ireland did not entail absolute national sovereignty,22 the promotion of this doctrine was central to Uí Néill claims of supremacy over Ireland, and Cúán similarly demonstrates a distinctly "national", or island-wide, interest in this part of the poem. This is in contrast with many other *dindsbenchas* poems, including others on Tara, which are, by their nature, localised in their outlook.

The poem then proceeds to enumerate and briefly describe the many monuments and important landmarks in Tara. This list constitutes one of the most important sources that we have for the medieval topography of the Tara landscape, and for the names of the monuments and physical features therein, many of which may otherwise have been lost forever.23 As well as advancing our knowledge of the toponymy of the Tara area, Cúán also alludes to the origins of many of these names. Although these allusions are necessarily quite cursory, given the metrical constraints on the poet, they nevertheless provide valuable detail about the stories behind these places. The poem, then, functions to a considerable degree as a kind of historical map in words of the landscape of Tara. The assembling and
transmitting of this body of historical information was probably not intended purely for the edification of readers a thousand years after its compilation, but was likely to have been a response to a perceived threat to the preservation of these traditions at the time, as well as probably fulfilling a political purpose. Many of the monuments may not have been much more visible at the time this poem was composed than they are today, and traditions about them may similarly have fallen into decline amongst the population of the tenth and eleventh centuries.

The poem then moves from its gazetteer of sites at Tara to listing the attendees of the king's house and establishes a kind of hierarchy among them by naming the various royalties that they were entitled to there. Although Tara was uninhabited at the time of the poem's composition, and had been so for a long time, this section gives us a wonderful insight into the poet's understanding of the structure and procedure of the king's court at Tara, and indeed perhaps, of kings' courts in general. The poem then ends with a pious dedication to Christ, a feature of compositional style that Tomás Ó Concheainn has considered to be an element of Cúan's authorship, and which he uses to argue for Cúan's authorship of other dindsenchas poems which have come down to us without ascription.46

**Temair, Tailltiu, tir n-óenaig “Temair, Tailltiu, land of assembly” (“Temair V”)**

The central role of Cúan in the compilation of the dindsenchas collection, as proposed by Ó Concheainn, may be discerned in another of the poems ascribed to him, beginning **Temair, Tailltiu, tir n-óenaig “Temair, Tailltiu [Teltown], land of assembly”**, according to Ó Concheainn.47 Although its editor, E.J. Gwynn, gave the poem the title “Temair V”, little of its contents relate directly to Tara, and most of the poem (16 out of 20 quatrains) is comprised of alliterative lists of names of places from all around Ireland. The final four quatrains contain an assertion of Tara's primacy over all the other kingdoms in Ireland and proclaims the right of Mael Sechnaill mac Domnaill to hold that kingship and the wish that it remains in his family forever.

The strongholds of Erin after these I have left - I say without shame - to someone else that shall be wiser, who may traverse them unto Temair.

**A chóeimn criché Cuid chain “O nobles of the land of comely Conn” (“Tailltiu”)**

Another place that is mentioned in the first line of “Temair V” is the subject of a poem in itself, also ascribed to Cúan ua Loithain. **A chóeimn criché Cuid chain “O nobles of the land of comely Conn”, entitled “Tailltiu” by Gwynn, contains 59 quatrains and is a mine of historical information and legendary knowledge. The poem as we have it begins by explaining the origins of Óenach Tailten (the Fair or Assembly of Teltown). The Óenach Tailten was apparently originally an annual event (though in abeyance for considerable periods of time), held around the important festival of Lugnasad (around the beginning
of August), and perhaps lasting a week, in which the Uí Néill and representatives from their subject kingdoms assembled. The business of such assemblies has been outlined by D.A. Binchy thus: “besides the exchange of goods and the holding of games, horse-racing and various athletic competitions, the ‘public business’ of the tāthb, including important lawsuits between different kindreds and the issue of special ordinances, was transacted”. In “Taltiu”, Cuán explains the origin of the Óenach Táith. The place Taltiu was named after a woman called Taltiu, a member of the legendary Fir Bolg, who died after her great exertions clearing the plain of Brega ("the plain of Brega", covering parts of present-day counties Meath, Louth and Dublin). Her dying wish was that the men of Ireland should hold funeral games to lament her, and these games became the origin of the annual institution:

Roráid si riu 'na galur, She told them in her sickness (feeble she was but not ciarb ànairt nírb anamhur; speechless) that they should hold funeral games to aru ndentais, dichra in mod, lament her – zealous the deed. cluiche cainteibh dia cainted.

Im kalaind August atabth, About the Calends of August she died, on a Monday, dia theain, Loga Lugasad; on the Lugnasad of Lug; round her grave from that imman leith on lian ille, Mon forth is held the chief Fair of noble Erin.

príom-óenach befrénd éime. Duraígrugert fáitseine fir Taltiu tóch-gel ina tir, White-sided Taltiu uttered in her land a true prophecy; airet nusfaimead echl flaithe that so long as every prince should accept her, Erin na bhiad h-Eruin cen og-naite. should not be without perfect song.32

Cuán goes on to describe the ideal Óenach Táith: affluent, refined, peaceful, safe, decorous and entertaining. He also makes a point of noting St Patrick’s endorsement of the Óenach, despite its pagan origins. The function of the Óenach site as a cemetery is emphasised, and the poem implies that honouring the dead was also part of the activities of the Óenach.33 As in "Temair III", the poet shows a deep interest in the relative ranking of the kings of Ireland under the king of Tara in “Taltiu”, this time through a depiction of their seating arrangements at the Óenach. This is not to be taken at face value, but should be seen in its proper context as part of the propagandistic representation of the Uí Néill over kingship as overkingship of Ireland. The poem’s depiction of the Óenach Táith as a national institution is further manifested by its reckoning of the kings who had convened it:

Dù réidhbet rig rodauch, Two score of kings held the fair, by four kings it was la ceathar rig doridach, dedicated: all the noble line of kings was sprung from ò Niall uile ind rígraid ran acht Allill a gearnair. Niall except Allill alone.

Óen ri ó Lóegaire íle, One king from Loegaire descended, one óen ri ó chenial Chairpre, of the race of Caípre, nine princes of the seed of noble ò Niall leá thiri Aed a dín, Aed, seven princes of the family of Colman.

seacht flaithe clainne Colmáin. Sé réidh dèc ar Mide amach, Sixteen kings out of Meath sprung from Eogain ó Eogan isin Óenach, were at the Fair, and ten kings – these came from ocus díchig rig, dorchath so the territory of Conall, O nobles35 a crích Conaill, a chreoime.

The main branches of the ruling Uí Néill dynasties are represented in these verses by their eponymous ancestors. The reckoning found here echoes the doctrine found elsewhere in literary, genealogical and pseudo-historical sources that recounts the kings of Ireland. This doctrine admits only one non-Uí Néill king in its list of high-kings before Brian Bórama (Boru), namely Allill Molt, grandson of Fiacra, the ancestor of the Uí Fhiachrach branch of the Connachta and brother of Niall Nóigiallach ("of the nine hostages"), eponymous ancestor of the Uí Néill.36

The poet also alludes briefly to various traditions connected with Taltiu, some of which are found in other sources also, and lists many names of sites at Taltiu. It seems that Cuán wished to include allusions to a comprehensive collection of material relating to Taltiu in this poem, from the legends about the origin of its Óenach to the sundry stories that later grew up around it. He is also clearly anxious to affirm the church’s endorsement of the Óenach Táith, as he makes references to certain saints and underlines its divine sanction:

Ciambad tarmac Taltiu ar thréas Though Taltiu was a sanctuary for the flock, tuc Dia deordea dhiobh, gave friends to guard it, Patrick, Brigit, white Becán, Pátríc, Brigíth, Becán bain, Mac Eirc, Eithne, Adhamán.
A significant demarcation is evident in the poem between the narration of the legendary history of the Óenach and the next section, which is concerned with contemporary matters and specifically with eulogising Máel Sechlainn mac Domnaill and praising his reconvening of the Óenach. As Gwynn suggested, the poem was probably put together to celebrate the revival of the Óenach Taltiun by Máel Sechnaill in 1007, as witnessed by the annals, after a break of some 80 years since its last convening. 

**Annals of Ulster**

Athbuddh aenagh Thailltean la Mael Sechnaill. Ferdonnach i comarbus Colum Cille a comurle fer nErenn isin oenach-sin.

The assembly of Taltiú was revived by Mael Sechnaill. Ferdornach [was installed] in the successorship of Colum Cille by the counsel of the men of Ireland in that assembly.

Máel Sechlainn is praised effusively in this section of the poem, and the poet emphasises his famous generosity, hospitality and piety, and celebrates the prosperity and peace of his reign. The poem is a striking example of the deep and genuine interest that medieval Irish poets had in the past, as well as of the skill with which they judiciously wove together elements of the past with contemporary concerns in their poetry, using the past to validate and lend authority to the often pragmatic purposes that certain poems were designed, at least in part, to serve. Informing his audience about the legendary history of the Óenach Taltiun, while casting that history in an organised and readily transmissible (and therefore preserveable) poetic form, was clearly a valid reason in itself for Cuán to compose this poem; using this history as a background and endorsement of Máel Sechnaill’s actions facilitated the accomplishment of a more immediate and practical task. The reconvening of the Óenach Taltiun by Máel Sechlainn occurred within a hiatus in his high-kingship; Brian Bórama had taken hostages from Mide, Máel Sechlainn’s home kingdom, in 1002, which was tantamount to Máel Sechlainn submitting the high-kingship to Brian. Máel Sechlainn may have been dispossessed of anything approaching real, island-wide power, but he was still in a position to capitalise on the symbolic power of the Óenach Taltiun as an integral institution of the kingship of Tara, a kingship that was promoted as a kingship of all Ireland. The poem may therefore reflect an effort to rehabilitate Máel Sechlainn’s overkingship, and illustrates the importance of poetry in effecting such an aim.

**Druim Criaiich, cétie cét cuan “Druim Criaiich, meeting-place of a hundred bands” (“Druim Criaiich”)**

Another poem ascribed to Cuán that similarly combines the narration of traditional legend with topical references to Máel Sechnaill begins Druim Criaiich, cétie cét cuan “Druim Criaiich, meeting-place of a hundred bands”. Druim Criaiich was identified by Gwynn as Drumcree, in present-day Co. Westmeath, between Kells and Mullingar. The juxtaposition of past and present worlds is a crucial element in the overall structure and raison d’être of this poem, as was also seen in the case of “Taltiú”. The poet relates two different stories about military encounters at Druim Criaiich, one from traditional legend and another from events close to the day of composition.

The first one tells of the contention between the king of Tara, Eochu Feidleich (according to other sources, Eochu reigned about the time of Christ’s conception), and his three sons, known as the Tri Fnd Emnna (“the three Finns (or “fair ones”) of Emann”). The Tiri Fnd Emnna mustered armies to help them treacherously and dishonourably dethrone their father. They were in the first place doomed to failure by their sister, who seduced them, in order to jinx them with their sin of incest and thereby thwart their evil plan to kill their father. The poet describes the events around the battle, and the deviousness of the king’s sons’ tactics. Eochu, however, stoutly defends his kingship and defeats his sons. This incident, the poet tells us, was the impetus for Eochu to institute a new political principle, namely, that no man should take possession of the throne at Tara in direct succession to his father without an intermediary reign by another king.

The statement of this principle links the first story told in the poem with the second, as the poet goes on to describe another incident that happened at Druim Criaiich, this time in the Christian era. In fact, if Gwynn is correct in identifying this incident, then it would have been, in Cuán’s lifetime, a very recent memory indeed. The story as told in the poem tells of Máel Sechnaill’s banishment of Domnall from Mide after he had laid it waste. Gwynn has suggested that the Domnall of the poem is in fact Domnall ua Neill, who preceded Máel Sechlainn in the high-kingship. Domnall was of Cennsal nÉgain, the dominant branch of the Northern Uí Neill at this time, and which shared the high-kingship with Clann Cholmáin, Máel
Schlaimn’s family, in an often tense and fractious arrangement of alternation. The principle that a son should not directly succeed his father in the kingship of Tara would have obvious resonances in that context. In 971, while Domnall was high-king, the *Annals of Ulster* tell us that he was driven out of Mide by Clann Chomlán, and this may be the incident that is referred to in the poem. In another apparently contemporary reference, the poet describes the conflict between Máel Sechnaill and the Úi Dubáin family, who were the hereditary holders of the land of the church of Colmán mac Luacháin of Lann (Lynn, present-day Co. Westmeath). Edel Bhreathnach has suggested that a disagreement between Máel Sechnaill and the Úi Dubáin regarding this land and taxes prompted the hostile attitude to the Úi Dubáin in the poem.

Máel Sechnaill’s defence of Mide is portrayed in the poem as spirited and courageous as he strove to protect his homeland against its attackers. In another parallel with the story of Eochu Feidléach and his sons, Máel Sechnaill was outnumbered three to one, but overcame this unfair imbalance by dint of his greater bravery and superior prowess. The poet concludes the poem with a narration of Máel Sechnaill’s pedigree back to Eochu Feidléach, thus again neatly and adeptly tying up the thematic threads of the two main stories in the poem. This talent for smoothly interlacing past with present, thereby simultaneously discharging his professional duty to disseminate the historical traditions of Ireland, serving the immediate political purposes of his king, and creating a structurally and thematically coherent narrative, is one of the remarkable strengths of Cúan’s work.

*Atá sund Carn uí Chathbhall “Here stands the Carn of Cathbad’s grandson” (“Carn Furbaide”)*

The poem ascribed to Cúan beginning *Atá sund Carn uí Chathbhall “Here stands the Carn of Cathbad’s grandson” (“Carn Furbaide”)* tells the story of the origin of the cairn identified by Gwynn as located on top of Sliebh Cairpre in the north of present-day Co. Longford.

There is some connection between “Carn Furbaide” and “Druim Criaich” in terms of associations between the characters in each poem. The eponymous Furbaide was in fact, a grandson of Eochu Feidléach (through his mother, Eithne, a daughter of Eochu), and another important character in the poem, Lugaid Trí Riab nDerg (“Lugaid of the three red stripes”), was the son born of the incest of the Trí Finn Emma and their sister, and thus a cousin of Furbaide.

While Eithne was pregnant with Furbaide (whose father was Conchobar mac Nessa, the famous king of the Ulster Cycle), she was killed by Lugaid and her unborn son was cut out of her womb by him. We are not told in the poem what Lugaid did with Furbaide, but seventeen years later Furbaide has grown up to be a famous warrior and sets out to avenge his mother. He does so by killing Lugaid’s mother, upon which Lugaid sets out to avenge his own mother, and kills Furbaide. A cairn was then built, made up of a stone for each man who shared in the spoils of the fighting, and was named after Furbaide. Cúan demonstrates a keen interest in “Carn Furbaide” in the origins of places and names of places, an interest that is of course a fundamental inspiration behind *dindsenchas* literature in general. As well as explaining how Carn Furbaide gets its name, he also includes in his narration of the story an explanation of how Furbaide got his nickname, Fer Benn (“man of horns”), and of why the river Eithne (the Inny) was so-called.

*Sid Nechtain sund forsín tsbléib “Sid Nechtain is the name that is on the mountain here” (“Board I”)*

Rivers form the subject of two other poems ascribed to Cúan. One of these, beginning *Sid Nechtain sund forsín tsbléib “Sid Nechtain is the name that is on the mountain here” (“Board I”), deals with the Boyne, how it got its name, and other traditions associated with it. The poem begins with a section which sets out to provide fifteen different names belonging to the river, whether referring to particular stretches of the river, or alternative names for the river as a whole. It does not confine itself to the physical extent of the Boyne itself – many of the names given as alternative names for the Boyne are in fact names of other major rivers in Ireland and other places, such as the Bann, the Severn, the Jordan, the Euphrates and the Tigris. The poet describes the course of the river in a logical manner, from its source (in Segais) to its termination in paradise, which is represented in the poem by the river Tigris.

This poem contains a wealth of local toponymic knowledge and it is worth quoting in full the section on the names of the different stretches of the Boyne:

Segais a baínn issin tsbléib / ria canain daít in cach thbr: / Sruth Segai a baínn otá-sín / co Tobar Mocháin in clóirig. Segais was her name in the Sid to be sung by thee in every land: River of Segai is her name from that point to the well of Mochaú the cleric.
The river then undergoes a series of transfigurations, making its way from the sea, where it is called Tretnah-Tond ("Stormy Wave"), northwards through Cooley towards Lough Neagh, as the river called Struth Findseull ("River of the White Hazel"). It then becomes the river Bann and flows from there to Scotland under the name Drumbla Dilem ("Roof of the Ocean"). The poem goes on to list major international rivers in whose guise the Boyne makes her way to paradise: the Lunnand in Scotland, the Severn, the Tiber, the Jordan, the Euphrates and, finally, the Tigris in paradise. From paradise then, we are told that the river goes back co srotadh na side-se to the streams of this Sid, that is, back to its source, thus completing its journey. What we seem to have in this section is a very valuable collection of local toponymic traditions combined with a forging of an association of the Boyne with major international rivers, both from the eastern world and from closer to Ireland. Kay Muir, in an article on water imagery in early Irish literature, sees this part of the poem as containing important cosmogonic ideas, and observes that, as Bòand I has it, "the sea, and the holy rivers of Ireland and the world, are linked together in one circular motion".

After the section listing the various transformations of the Boyne, the poem goes on to narrate the story of the supernatural Nechtain mac Labrada and his wife Bòand, and how the river was made in the first place. There was a well on Nechtain’s land that would cause the eyes of those who would look into it, apart from Nechtain himself and his three cupbearers, to burst out of their head. But the proud Bòand decided to test the power of the well, and as she walked around the well three times, it burst forth, choking and mutilating her. She fled so that no one would see her disfigurement, but as she rushed towards the sea, the water followed her, and became the river Boyne. The poem also offers an alternative explanation of why the Boyne is so called:

Sáer-aimn Sinna saigid dún “The noble name of Sinann, search it out for us” (“Sinann I”)

The other river that Cuán celebrated in verse was the Shannon, in a poem beginning Sáer-aimn Sinna saigid dún “The noble name of Sinann, search it out for us” (“Sinann I”).32 The story of the origin of the Shannon as told in the poem bears some resemblance to that of the Boyne. It also features a supernatural woman, Sinann, who drowns in the river and gives her name to it. With its account of the well of Segais (which was also named as the source of the Boyne in that origin story), it is an interesting and valuable witness to the very old tradition of the magical hazelnuts that fell into the water, producing the essence of poetic inspiration that this well is intimately associated with:

Topur co mbhrá buáine ar ur aha induaire, feib arslumnet a clotha, ambrunnet veti prim struatha.

A well with flow unfailing (?) is by the edge of a chilly river (as men celebrate its fame), whence spring seven main streams.

Immas na Segs sa dait co fénsa fond fhir-thiprait: oí topur na tond trisrach fail coll n-éisi n-illcelach.

Here thou findest the magic lore of Segais with excellence, under the fresh spring: over the well of the mighty waters stands the poets’ music-haunted hazel.
Siltaí sopur na Sogha
for topar na tréin-chonna,
ó thuirit cóini Crinnoid cain
fóra ríg-broid réil roglain.

In téine-fioccht n-a tuile thrummm
turacht uile don chéim-chrumn,
duile ocus bláth ocus més,
do cháb uile ni bandess.

Is amraid-sin, čen gòe nlé,
tuitht n-a ró dorís
for topar sográid Sogha
fo chomdáil, fo chomfhebsa.

Teataí co bhúais, na gním nglé,
súcht srotha, bhúais čen bháidre,
dorís isin topar the
dian uíoc coél-eisce.

The spray of the Segais is sprinkled on
the well of the strong gentle lady,
when the nuts of fair Crinnoid fall
on its royal bosom bright and pure.

Together in plenteous foci
shot forth all at once from the good tree
leaf and flower and fruit;
none of them all is unlovely.

In this wise, clear without falsehood,
they fall afterwards in their season
upon the honoured well of Segais
at the like hour, with like excellence.

Nobly they come, with bright activity,
seven streams, in an untroubled gush,
back into the well yonder,
whence rises a murmur of musical lore. 52

Temair Breg. baile na fían “Tara of Brega, home of the warrior-bands”

The remainder of the surviving poetry ascribed to Cuáin is not found within the dindsbenchas collection, although it could be said to share a comparable interest in providing a history of certain venerable traditions, as well as a deep regard for the stability and continuity of such traditions. The poem beginning Temair Breg. baile na fían “Tara of Brega, home of the warrior-bands” tells the story of how Niaill Noigiallach earned the right to the throne at Tara. 48 The poem begins as a paean to Tara, acclaiming both its outstanding physical structure and location and the antiquity of its glorious past. Cuáin then recounts the story of Niaill’s birth: his mother, Cairenn, was of noble birth but had been captured from Britain by Niaill’s father, Eochaid Mugmedón, and was subjected to a life of servitude by Eochaid’s jealous queen, Monghind. When Cairenn gave birth to Niaill, Monghind had the naked infant cast out to die. Niaill was rescued by the poet, Torna Êices, who fostered him until he was nine years old. Niaill then returned to Tara to liberate his mother from her slavery and to claim his rightful place as his father’s son. Cuáin gives a long, laudatory description of Niaill’s physical beauty; and tells us that as Niail rode his horse past them, the watching crowd wondered at his handsomeness and horsemanship. Torna introduces Niaill to them as Eochaid’s son,

and Eochaid, despite anticipating an adverse reaction from Monghind, announces that he has recognised him as such. Niail then succeeds in freeing his mother, having first overcome Monghind’s resistance. After affirming Niaill’s noble ancestry and establishing his extraordinary precociousness, the poem goes on to address the issue of the kingship of Tara and who will be king after Eochaid. Niail and his four older brothers, all sons of Monghind, go on a hunt together and kill a wild boar. They then set out in turn to look for a well where they might get water. The first brother to find a well encounters a hideous crone guarding it, who demands a kiss in return for water. He flees in disgust, and pretends to his brothers that he had not found the well. One by one, Monghind’s sons discover the well, but only one deigns to comply with the hag’s demand, and even he manages only a very hasty kiss. He is then told that his descendants will visit Tara (in other words, will possess the kingship), but that this visit will mirror his kiss in its transience. Niail is the last of the brothers to go to the well, and his response to the challenge at the well is in deliberately sharp contrast to his brothers’. He shows no antipathy to the hag, and not only kisses her, but enthusiastically sleeps with her. This perspicacious act causes a transformation in the woman: she immediately turns into a radiantly beautiful and noble young girl. She tells Niail that he is destined for the kingship of Tara and makes some instructive pronouncements about kingship. She also advises him as to how he should assert his primacy over his older brothers.

Although the poem does not explicitly identify her as such, this woman is a literary representation of the so-called “sovereignty goddess”, a character that can be traced back to some of the oldest surviving records of Celtic peoples, and that endured in Irish tradition up to the 18th century, most notably in aíshing poetry. This figure was a personification of a kingdom, and represented the fertility and well-being of that kingdom. In some of the earliest manifestations of this theme, this territorial goddess was ritually married to the king in a ceremony which has been compared to the bieros gamos or “sacred marriage” of other early cultures. 53 A rightful and harmonious partnership between king and goddess, according to this allegorical myth, was reflected in a prosperous, peaceful and just kingdom. The opposite was also the case: crop failure, social injustice and anarchy were represented as symptoms of bad kingship or misplaced power.

When the brothers return to Eochaid’s court, it is recognised that the right to succeed Eochaid had been ceded to Niail. The incensed
Monghind tries in vain to provoke her sons to kill Niall, and another test is set to determine supremacy between the brothers. This test involves sending the five brothers into a burning forge, and they are then assessed according to the implements that they succeed in rescuing. Predictably, Niall again proves himself the worthy winner, having saved the anvil, the heaviest and most important implement in the forge, as well as many other tools. The truth of Niall's superiority is then incontrovertible, and the poem closes with Eochaid's formal proclamation that Niall will be king.

This story, set in a time some six hundred years before the poem was written, is not only an important piece of Irish literary and cultural tradition, but also served a very contemporary and practical function. It explains the origin of Úi Néill ("descendants of Niall "Noigiallach") domination of the throne at Tara, and more importantly, depicts their continued power as having been bestowed and authorised by a preternatural, and therefore unquestionable, source of authority. When we consider the political situation at the beginning of the eleventh century, the implications of this promotion of Úi Néill sovereignty in literature come to light. As noted above, Mael Sechlainn mac Domnaill had effectively lost the high-kingship to Brian Bórama in 1002, and while he recovered the throne after Brian's death in the Battle of Clontarf in 1014, these were clearly unstable times for the Úi Néill, and, as it turned out, Mael Sechlainn's reign marked the end of Úi Néill dominance in Ireland. Poems like Téimair Breag, bai le fán and A chaemn críche Cumad chain ("Taltiu") form part of the dossier of Úi Néill propagandistic literature produced or reworked around this time, and which was intended, at least partly, to reaffirm the rights of the Úi Néill.56 This is an instructive lesson in how literature, while fulfilling its function to entertain on one level, was also understood to have a real contribution to make to the political scene of the day.

_A fhír dín iadas in tech “Good sir who barrest the house”_

Another poem ascribed to Cúan and dealing with matters of kingship begins _A fhír dín iadas in tech “Good sir who barrest the house”_.57 This poem outlines the _geisi_ and _buada_ of the provincial kings of Ireland and of the high-king. _Geisi_ and _buada_ have been translated by the poem’s editor, Myles Dillon, as “prohibitions” and “prescriptions” respectively. _Geisi_, sometimes also rendered "taboos", were prohibitions, often associated with a particular institution (as in the case of the various kingships in this poem), the infringement of which usually resulted in the death of the person concerned. In the oldest examples of these prohibitions, supernatural forces were seen as behind both the imposition of _geisi_ and the retribution that is exacted in the event of their violation.58 _Buada_ in our poem describe the special prerogatives attached to the provincial kings of Ireland. The poem begins with the poet, who introduces himself as _Hua Lochain laideeb “Ua Lochain the poet”_ (literally, “_Ua Lochain of lays/poems_”), seeking to enter the house of the high-king so that he can relate to him his _geisi_ and _buada_, the observance of which will result in his military success and the prosperity of his realm. The enumeration begins with the _geisi_ and _buada_ of the king of Tara, who the poet also calls “high-king”. The identification of these two institutions with each other reflects the poet's political position. After the king of Tara, the poet outlines the _geisi_ and _buada_ of the kings of Leinster, Munster, Connacht and Ulster, in that order. The _buada_ often involve the entitlements of the kings in terms of produce of their kingdoms as well as services, tributes and hostages from their subject peoples. The kings' _geisi_ often appear innocuous, if not somewhat absurd, and although some _geisi_ may have their roots in some ancient and well-founded ideology, it can be difficult for us today to perceive a rationale behind them, as in this quatrain describing three of the _geisi_ of the king of Tara:

_Tairlemm cethine acht macd ceal ni dir dó for Druimnin Bregh, gríin fair d'irghí bi Tennaigh tair, slaidbe a chach bi Fán Chommair._

It is not lawful for him save if there be need(?), to break a journey on Wednesday, on Druimnin Bregh, nor that the sun should rise upon him at Tara in the east, nor to strike his horses in Fán Commair.59

The assembling and ordering of the rituals surrounding the provincial Irish kingships demonstrates the poet's concern for the preservation of old traditions and institutions, perhaps in the face of the political upheaval that marked Mael Sechlainn's reign. Cúan's awareness of his role as a treasurer of inherited traditional knowledge comes across clearly in the poem, as does his desire to discharge his duty to pass on that knowledge for the benefit of following generations. However historically accurate or inaccurate the details in the poem may be, _A fhír dín iadas in tech_ is a rich repository of the accoutrements of ideal kingship in early and medieval Ireland.
Hopefully, the foregoing has helped to introduce some of the many facets and functions of Cúan ua Lothcháin's work, among which are its entertainment value, its role as an important source for traditional historiography, and its unique insight into contemporary events and attitudes. It is right that we should appreciate and enjoy the work of this great poet of the kingdom of Meath, and to recognise the contribution that he, with his love for the past and concern for the future, made to the learned heritage both of his own day and of ours. I am grateful to Professor Liam Breanach for reading a draft of this essay and for suggesting improvements. Any remaining errors are my own.

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4. Fergus Kelly draws attention to one other notice in the *Annals of Connacht* of the death of the Lord Lieutenant, John Stanley, in 1414, by *firt felled*. A *Guide to Early Irish Law* (DIAS, Dublin, 1989) 44. These annals tell us that Stanley died “of the venom of the lampoos” composed about him by the poets of the Uí Úigill: see *Teampae A M., Annálta Connacht* (DIAS, Dublin, 1944) s.a. 1414-16.


8. O’Curry, E., (ed.) *Cath Muighi Lian* or *the Battle of Magh Leana* (The Cletic Society, Dublin, 1852) 175.


10. O’Curry, E., Lectures on the manuscript materials of ancient Irish history (James Duffy, Dublin, 1861) 9; Joyant, M., (ed.) *Echo Mac Echaidh Mugmedroin*, *Ériú* ix (1908) 92.


13. Hogan, E., *Onomasticon Geddelicum* (Hodges, Figgis & Co., Dublin, 1910) identifies Cënrdruim/Caindrum as Uisneach and Caindrum/Caindrum as Tara. Presumably either place could have been intended here.

14. Alternatively, it may have arisen from the author’s association of Cean with Tara.

15. Two of these compositions, beginning *Tribus Erenn stoigala* “Three outstanding trees of Ireland” (edited in Meyer, K., *Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften*, Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie vi (1905) 21-3; a new edition and translation by the present writer is forthcoming), and *A Dail Cais, is camin in “A Dal Cais! This is brave!”* (edited in Todd, J.H., *Cogadh Gaedheal re Gallachb*, 50-7), will not be discussed here as Cean’s authorship of these poems is doubtful. In the case of the remaining poetry, I am taking the assertions to Cean at face value for the purposes of this essay.

16. The poetic *Dindshenchas* (there exists also a body of prose *Dindshenchas* material) has been edited in Gwynn, E. (ed.) *The metrical Dindshenchas*, vols, Todd Lecture Series vii-xii (Royal Irish Academy Dublin, 1903-39). Gwynn’s corrigenda (vol. vii 274-45) have been incorporated silently into citations from his editions here.


22. The term “high-kingship” in this essay refers not to island-wide rule, but to the *Ul Néill* overkingship, the most powerful and far-reaching of its kind in medieval Ireland. See, for example, Byrne, F.J., *The rise of the Ul Néill and the high-kingship of Ireland*, O’Donnell Lecture Series 13 (Dublin, 1969); Binchy, D.A., *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970); Byrne, F.J., *Irish kings and high-kings* (B.T. Batsford, Oxford, 1979) 53-5.

23. Another important source, which bears some resemblance to Cean’s version, is found in the text called *Dindshenchas Teampach “the remarkable places of Tara”*, for a translation, see Bhreathnach, E., “A medieval guided tour of the Hill of Tara”, in Fenwick, J., (ed.) *Lost and found. Discovering Ireland’s past* (Wordwell, Bray, 2000) 77-87.

24. “A pious redactor.”


27. Stokes, W., “The Bodleian Dinnshenchas”, *Folklore* iii (1892) 469 (note 2); *Met. Dind. iv* 75.


33. Binchy refers to the fact that the sites of many *pánta* were originally burial grounds, *The Fair of Taltrua*, 124.

34. Binchy has shown that, contrary to the poet’s testimony, the *Oenaich Tailenit* was not a national event, but was confined to the Ul Néill and their vassals, *The Fair of Taltrua*, 115-7.


36. Other sources state that Niall’s father, Nathi, was also king of Ireland.


Notes on the history of the manor of Nobber

CHARLES MOUNT

This paper examines the history of the manor of Nobber and details how its possession passed from the initial feudal grantees, the de Angulos, to the de Lacy's and King John, then to the Barons of Naas and finally to the Viscounts Gormanston.

Introduction

Throughout the medieval and early modern periods the manor of Nobber held a strategic position close to the Meath-Ulster frontier and guarded the crossing of the river Dee on the road from Navan to Clones. It was a key objective in King John's struggle with his barons for control of Meath and Ulster and remained an important manor on the frontier of the Pale in the later medieval period. This paper builds on the work of Bradley (1984, 117-22 and 1988-9) and uses historical documents to chronicle how the manor passed from the de Angulos (1172-96) to the de Lacy's and King John (1196-1244), the Barons of Naas (1244-1386) and finally to the Viscounts Gormanston (1386-1931).

The Barony of Morgallion

In 1172 King Henry II granted the kingdom of Meath to Hugh de Lacy to hold as King Murrough O Melaghlin held it (Ottway-Ruthven 1968, 52). Hugh de Lacy established his principal castle and manor at Trim and undertook the process of sub-infeudation. De Lacy granted the territory of the Galleangha-Mor to Gilbert de Angulo. This barony became known as Morgallion. The caput of the barony was established at Nobber, on the river Dee, near the site of an earlier ecclesiastical site, where de Lacy constructed a motte and bailey castle (Bradley 1984, 117-22).

Hugh de Lacy was killed in 1186 and the lordship of Meath came into the hands of the king until Hugh's son, Walter de Lacy, came of age in 1194. In 1189 Richard I came to the throne and in 1190 departed for the Third Crusade. In 1193 his brother, Prince John, Lord of Ireland since 1185, rose in rebellion against his brother. However, John de Courcy, earl of Ulster, and Walter de Lacy had both supported King
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“A hui Chuint, a Chormaic,” ol Carpre
“Cid is dech do rig?”
Deitbhe Sencbasa
Fritfoalad fir.”

“O grandson of Conn, o Cormac,” said Carbery,
“What is best for a king?”
“Not hard to tell,” said Cormac. “Best for him…
Taking care of ancient lore
Giving truth for truth.”

TECOSCA CORMAIC

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