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The life and work of Cúan ua Lothcháin

CLODAGH DOWNEY

There is much mystery surrounding the life and death of the medieval Irish poet Cúan 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 Cúan 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**


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

**Annals of Inisfallen**

Cuan Hua Lothcháin, ardhbile Herend, senechaid, a marbad do ferraib Téthba; ocus in fer ro mmarbd do marbad fo chéitir; i.e. Gillai Ultain m. Roduib.

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

**Annals of Tigernach**

Cuan Hua Leochan primsbenchaibh Erenn, a primoelach do marbadh a Téthba, bréinad i n-oentiir in lucht romarb, as firt filed sin.

Cuan 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.

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 ‘first file’ “the poet’s miracle/spell” are very rare in our annals for this period. 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 Ultáin mac Roduib may have been a member of the Tethba family of Muinter Maelshinna, who lived in the present-day barony of Kilkenny West, Co. Westmeath. As to Cúan’s own background, Eugene O’Curry stated that “the O’Lochbáins 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 Eifel, (in Tipperary and King’s County)”. 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, although 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 O’Clery and Mac Fhirbhisigh with the information from the annals about Cúan’s murder. O’Curry’s genealogical table of the descendants of Ailill Ólomm (a Munster ancestor figure) includes a personal comment by him that Cúan descended from Tadg mac Céin, but I have not been able to find any information to this effect in O’Clery’s and Mac Fhirbhisigh’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 Lothchán, 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 au Leocatain (or Leochuailn), au Leocatain (or Leocailn) and au Leobain (or Lochains). O’Curry’s statement that Cúan was of the Gailenga may reflect confusion with Ua Leocain family of Gailenga, one member of which, at least, seems to have consorted with the Southern Úi Néill high-king Mael Sechnaill mac Donnall (died 1022). 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”, and “of a North Meath family”. 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. In one of the poems attributed to Cúan, beginning Tri croind Éirenn oiregba (“The three outstanding trees of Ireland”), the poet identifies himself as is mé Cúan o Caenruim “I am Cúan from Caenruim (Usneach/Tara)”. Although I have questioned the attribution of Tri croind Éirenn oiregba to Cúan in a forthcoming edition of this poem, the identification of the poet’s name and homeland may yet be factually accurate.

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 Donnall, 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. Such inferences are often made on the basis of an incomplete ascription in a manuscript (e.g. Cuan ceithn “Cúan sang”), or of an authorial signature within the poem itself, such as that cited above from Tri croind Éirenn oiregba. 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 Cúan is found in the collection of literature known as dindshenchas Éireann ("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. Most of Cúan'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, Cúan's role in the transmission of the dindshenchas corpus illustrates his interest in antiquarian and historical matters in general. While the poetry of the metrical dindshenchas sometimes reveals contemporary concerns, through allusions to recent events or panegyrical verses to patrons or potentates, the overriding impetus behind the compilation of the dindshenchas 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 dindshenchas 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. Tomás Ó Concháin has suggested that Cúan may in fact have been responsible for the original compilation of the dindshenchas, which, if true, shows him to have been in the vanguard of major cultural developments at the turn of the millennium.

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, 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 Néill, the most powerful dynastic group 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, rochbliathú cethr;  
rochbliathú Saltair Térmreach;  
iúi Saltair-sín atá  
a n-as dech riand senechus.

Cormac, who gained fifty fights,  
disseminated the Psalter of Temair  
in this Psalter there is  
all the best we have of history.

Pádraig Ó Ríain has argued that the so-called Psalter of Tara never existed, but was an invention by Cúan 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 Ríain would date to the early eleventh century. In the quatrain quoted above, Cúan alludes to the authority of the Psalter of Tara with respect to senechus “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: Cúan 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, the promotion of this doctrine was central to Uí Néill claims of supremacy over Ireland, and Cúan similarly demonstrates a distinctly "national", or island-wide, interest in this part of the poem. This is in contrast with many other dindshenchas 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. As well as advancing our knowledge of the toponymy of the Tara area, Cúan 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 raths 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 Conchobhair 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.34

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

The central role of Cúan in the compilation of the dindsenchas collection, as proposed by Ó Conchobhair, may be discerned in another of the poems ascribed to him, beginning Temair, Tailtiu, tir n-óenaig “Temair, Tailtiu [Teltown], land of assembly”18, according to Ó Conchobhair.39 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 Sechnail mac Domnaill to hold that kingship and the wish that it remain in his family forever:

Dindgenai b'frend tarrodain fofochus, rad cen mebal, do mach astui bu chiallda, nod astrid air co Temair. 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 bhóem criche Cuind chain “O nobles of the land of comely Conn” (“Tailtiu”)**

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 Loithchán. A bhóem criche Cuind chain “O nobles of the land of comely Conn”, entitled “Tailtiu” 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 túath, including important lawsuits between different kindreds and the issue of special ordinances, was transacted”. In “Táltiu”, Cúan explains the origin of the Óenach Tailtien. The place Táltiu was named after a woman called Táltiu, a member of the legendary Fir Bolg, who died after her great exertions clearing the plain of Bregmag (“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:

Róraid sí riú na galur,  She told them in her sickness (feeble she was but not
ciárbh én airt nírb anallírub; speechless) that they should hold funeral games to
ar a dbardnait, dichra in mod, lament her – zealous the deed.
chúise cainte b’ a cháinte.

Im kalaind August atbath, About the Calends of August she died, on a Monday,
día the sin Leog Lannasad; on the Lugnasad of Lug, round her grave from that
imman leithn òn bhean ìle prim-òenach k’er thain.
Monday forth is held the chief Fair of noble Erin.

Dóraingirt fáitsine fir White-sided Táltiu uttered in her land a true prophecy,
Táltiu töib-gel ina ina that so long as every prince should accept her, Erin
aipre nrofainmad eibh flathb na bhiad b-Eriu cén og-naith.
should not be without perfect song.

Cúan goes on to describe the ideal Óenach Tailtien: 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. 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 “Táltiu”, 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 overkingship as overkingship of Ireland. The poem’s depiction of the Óenach Tailtien as a national institution is further manifested by its reckoning of the kings who had convened it:

Dà fhíobh ar rig rodaacht, Two score of kings held the fair, by four kings it was
dá leblbar rig dorainbacht, dedicated: all the noble line of kings was sprung from
ò Niall uile in doraid rí aonacht Allíl a dhéanoir.
Niall except Allil alone.

Óen ri ò Leogaire ille, One king from Loegaire descended, one
bén ri ò chenial Cairepre, king of the race of Cairepre, nine princes of the seed of
moi flathb síle Aed a dín, noble Aed, seven princes of the family of Colman.
séacht flathb clainne Colmáin.

Sé rig dích ar Mide amach, Sixteen kings out of Meath sprung from Eogain
ò Eogan isin òenach, were at the Fair, and ten kings – these came from
occí dích rí, doraitch so the territory of Conall, O nobles!
a cribh Conailt, a chéime.

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 Allil Molt, grandson of Fiachra, the ancestor of the Uí Fiachrach branch of the Connacht and brother of Niall Óg Ciarlach (“of the nine hostages”), eponymous ancestor of the Uí Néill. The poet also alludes briefly to various traditions connected with Táltiu, some of which are found in other sources also, and lists many names of sites at Táltiu. It seems that Cúan wished to include allusions to a comprehensive collection of material relating to Táltiu 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 Tailtien, as he makes references to certain saints and underlines its divine sanction:

Ciambadh termond Táltiu ar threis. Though Táltiu was a sanctuary for the flock, God
tuc Dia caidhe da chuimh, gave friends to guard it, Patrick, Brigit, white Becan,
Pátric, Brígí, Beccán bán, Mac Eirc, Eithne, Adamann.
Mac Eirc, Eithne, Adamann.
A significant demarcation is evident in the poem between the narration of the legendary history of the \textit{Oenach} and the next section, which is concerned with contemporary matters and specifically with eulogising Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill and praising his reconvening of the \textit{Oenach}. As Gwynn suggested, the poem was probably put together to celebrate the revival of the \textit{Oenach Táilithe} by Máel Sechnaill in 1007, as witnessed by the annals, after a break of some 80 years since its last convening.\footnote{Gwynn (1910), p. 132.}

\textbf{Annals of Ulster}

\textit{Atbhunadh aonairg Thailltean la Mael Sechnaili. Ferdonnach i comarbus Coluim Cille a comurle fer nErenn isin oenach-sin.}

The assembly of Táilithe was revived by Mael Sechnaill. Ferdonnach [was installed] in the successorship of Coluim Cille by the counsel of the men of Ireland in that assembly.\footnote{Gwynn (1910), p. 132.}

Máel Sechnaill 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 \textit{Oenach Táilithe}, while casting that history in an organised and readily transmissible (and therefore preserveable) poetic form, was clearly a valid reason in itself for Cúán to compose this poem; using this history as a background and endorsement of Mael Sechnaill's actions facilitated the accomplishment of a more immediate and practical task. The reconvening of the \textit{Oenach Táilithe} by Mael Sechnaill occurred within a hiatus in his high-kingship; Brian Bórama had taken hostages from Mide, Mael Sechnaill's home kingdom, in 1002, which was tantamount to Mael Sechnaill submitting the high-kingship to Brian.\footnote{Gwynn (1910), p. 132.} Mael Sechnaill 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 \textit{Oenach Táilithe} 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 Mael Sechnaill's overkingship, and illustrates the importance of poetry in effecting such an aim.

\textbf{Druim Criach, cétē cētē cuan \textit{“Druim Criach, meeting-place of a hundred bands” (“Druim Criach”)}}

Another poem ascribed to Cúán that similarly combines the narration of traditional legend with topical references to Mael Sechnaill begins \textit{Druim Criach, cétē cētē cuan \textit{“Druim Criach, meeting-place of a hundred bands” (“Druim Criach”)}}.\footnote{Gwynn (1910), p. 132.} Druim Criach 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'etre of this poem, as was also seen in the case of \textit{Táilithe}. The poet relates two different stories about military encounters at Druim Criach, 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 Feidilech (according to other sources, Eochu reigned about the time of Christ's conception), and his three sons, known as the Ti frightening Eman ("the three Finns of Eman"), the Ti frightening Emane, Eochu 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.\footnote{Gwynn (1910), p. 132.} 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 Criach, this time in the Christian era. In fact, if Gwynn is correct in identifying this incident, then it would have been, in Cúan's lifetime, a very recent memory indeed. The story as told in the poem tells of Mael 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 Mael Sechnaill in the high-kingship. Domnall was of Cenél nEógain, the dominant branch of the Northern U Neill at this time, and which shared the high-kingship with Clann Cholmáin, Mael
Sechlainn’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 Cholmáin, 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 Uí Dubháin 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 Uí Dubháin regarding this land and taxes prompted the hostile attitude to the Uí Dubháin 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 Feidlech 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 Feidlech, 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 Chathbhad’s grandson (“Carn Furbaide”) The poem ascribed to Cúan beginning Atá sund Carn uí Chathbhad “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 Sliabh Cairpre in the north of present-day Co. Longford. There is some connection between “Carn Furbaide” and “Drum Criaich” in terms of associations between the characters in each poem. The eponymous Furbaide was in fact, a grandson of Eochu Feidlech (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 Inn) was so-called.

Síd Nechtain sund forsin tsbliéib “Síd Nechtain is the name that is on the mountain here” (“Board 1”) Rivers form the subject of two other poems ascribed to Cúan. One of these, beginning Síd Nechtain sund forsin tsbliéib “Síd Nechtain is the name that is on the mountain here” (“Board 1”), 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 baimin isin tsblíéib Ríta cantain daite in eac'h thirs: Sruth Sega a baimin otá-sín co Topor Mochúa in chlórig. Segais was her name in the Sid to be sung by thee in every land: River of Segais is her name from that point to the well of Mochua the cleric.
Nó Bóand bó ocus find
do chomraic in dá rig-lind,
in t-usc a sliabh Guaire glé
ocular bruth na side-se.

Or, Bóand is Bo and Find
from the meeting of the two royal streams,
the water from bright Slab Guair
day the river of the Sids here.51

This etymology of the name Bóand, as coming from a compound
of the words bó “cow” and find “white, fair” is probably in fact historically
accurate, as evinced by the archaic form of the name given on
Prolemy’s map of Ireland, dated to the second century AD: Bovindha.
Although this explanation of the name and that assigning it to
the name of a goddess are not necessarily mutually exclusive, this quatrains
takes a more naturalistic view, likening the compounding of the words
bó and find to the confluence of the rivers Bó and Find, which join to
form the name, and the river, Bóand. The last three quatrains of
the poem narrate a related dindshenchas story – that of the rocks known
today as Rockabill, off the coast of north Co. Dublin. Dá Billa, or
Cnoc Dabilla (Rockabill) was named after Bóand’s lapdog, Dabilla,
who was washed away with her when the well burst.

Sáer-aimn Sinna saigid dúin “The noble name of Sinann,
search it out for us” (“Sinann I”)
The other river that Cúan celebrated in verse was the Shannon, in a
poem beginning Sáer-aimn Sinna saigid dúin “The noble name of Sinann,
search it out for us” (“Sinann I”).52 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:

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do chomraic in dá rig-lind,
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(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:
Siltair sopur na Ségais
for topar na tréin-chunna,
o thuitit cóin Crimmond cain
fora rig-broid réil róglain.

In tén-fhecht n-á tuile thrummm
turchait uile don chéim-churried,
duíle ocs bháith ocs més,
do cháb uile ní bándeas.

Is amhráid-sin, cén góe nglé,
taitit n-á ró dorris
for topar sográid Ségais
fo bhomáid, fo cromfáblsa.

Teanit cù báis, na gnín nglé,
scht srotba, báis cín báisidre,
dorís isin topar the
díamid cocur cóil-eisce.

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

Together in plenteous fóisín
shot forth all at once from the goodly 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.13

Temair Breg. baile na fían “Tara of Brega, home of the warrior-bands”
The remainder of the surviving poetry ascribed to Cúain is not found
within the dhindsenchas 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 Níall
Noigiallach earned the right to the throne at Tara.14 The poem begins
as a paean to Tara, acclaiming both its outstanding physical structure
and location and the antiquity of its glorious past. Cúain then recounts
the story of Níall’s birth: his mother, Caíreann, was of noble birth but
had been captured from Britain by Níall’s father, Eochaid Mugmedón,
and was subjected to a life of servitude by Eochaid’s jealous queen,
Monghind. When Caíreann gave birth to Níall, Monghind had the
naked infant cast out to die. Níall was rescued by the poet, Torná
Éices, who fostered him until he was nine years old. Níall then
returned to Tara to liberate his mother from her slavery and to claim
his rightful place as his father’s son. Cúain gives a long, laudatory
description of Níall’s physical beauty; and tells us that as Níall rode his
horse past them, the watching crowd wondered at his handsomeness
and horsemanship. Torná introduces Níall to them as Eochaid’s son,
and Eochaid, despite anticipating an adverse reaction from Monghind, announces that he has recognised him as such. Níall then
succeeds in freeing his mother, having first overcome Monghind’s
resistance. After affirming Níall’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. Níall 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. Níall 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
erspicacious act causes a transformation in the woman: she
immediately turns into a radiantly beautiful and noble young girl. She
tells Níall 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 aiding 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 biers gámos or “sacred
marriage” of other early cultures.15 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 Níall. The incensed
Monghfind 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 Eochaidh'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 Uí 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 Uí Néill sovereignty in literature come to light. As noted above, Máel Sechlainn mac Domnnall 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 Uí Néill, and, as it turned out, Máel Sechlainn's reign marked the end of Uí Néill dominance in Ireland. Poems like Tómar Breg báiste na fian and A chloem ar ciche Cuinn chain ("Taltniu") form part of the dossier of Uí Néill propagandistic literature produced or reworked around this time, and which was intended, at least partly, to reaffirm the rights of the Uí Néill.55 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 fhéar ain iadas in tech "Good sir who barrest the house"
Another poem ascribed to Cúan and dealing with matters of kingship begins A fhéar ain iadas in tech 'Good sir who barrest the house'.56 This poem outlines the geisi and buada of the provincial kings of Ireland and of the high-kings. 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.57 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 lásidheb "Ua Locháin the poet" (literally, "Ua Locháin 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 cititaine acht madh ceal
ni dir dò for Druimniih Bregh,
grian fair d'èrghí bi Térmairgh tair,
slaidhe a each bi Fán Commair.

It is not lawful for him save if there be need(?)
to break a journey on Wednesday, on Druimne Bregh,
nor that the sun should rise upon him at Tara
in the east,
nor to strike his horses in Fán Commair.58

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 Máel 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 fhéar ain 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 insights 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 Breathnach 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 John T. *A guide to Early Irish law* (DIAS, Dublin, 1989) 44. These annals tell us that Stanley died “from the venom of the lances” composed about him by the poets of the Ui Uigín: see *Annals of Inisfallen* (DIAS, Dublin, 1944) s.a. 1414-16.
8 O’Curry, E., (ed.) *Cath Mhunigh Leana* or *The Battle of Magh Leana* (The Cletic Society, Dublin, 1852) 175.


9 O’Curry, E., Lectures on the manuscript materials of ancient Irish history (James Duffy, Dublin, 1861); J. Joynt, M. (*Ecchar mac Echad Machmudmod*), *Éiri* iv (1908) 91.

11 Met. Dindshenchas iv; *Trí cordaí Erenn stoirgeibh* “Three outstanding trees of Ireland” (edited in Meyer, K., *Mittelalterlichen irischen Handschriften*, *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* v (1909) 21-3; a new edition and translation by the present writer is forthcoming), and *A Dáil Caíl, is calma in “O Dal Caíl! This is brave!”* (edited in Todd, J.H., *Cogad Gaedhel re Galladib*, 59-7), will not be discussed here as Cuán’s authorship of these poems is doubtful. In the case of the remaining poetry, I am taking the ascriptions to Cuán at face value for the purposes of this essay.

12 The poetic *dindshenchas* (here also a body of prose *dindshenchas* material) has been edited in Gwynn, E., (ed.) *The metrical Dindshenchas*, 5 vols, *Todd Lecture Series* vii-xii (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 1903-35). Gwynn’s corrigenda (vol. v, 157-61) have been incorporated silently into citations from his editions here.

13 For a description of the nature and extent of the *dindshenchas* see *Met. Dindshenchas* v, 3-114 (General Introduction) and Bowen, C., “A historical inventory of the *Dindshenchas*, *Studia Celtica* xxi (1975/76) 113-37.


15 *Met. Dindshenchas* i, 14-27.
16 *Met. Dindshenchas* i, 14-15 (lines 9-12).


19 Another important source, which bears some resemblance to Cuán’s version, is found in the text called *Dubhghal Lìrreach “the remarkable places of Tara”*, for a translation, see Breathnach, E., “A medieval guided tour of the Hill of Tara”, in Fenwick, J. (ed.) *Lost and found. Discovering Ireland’s past* (Wordwell, Bray, 2003) 77-87.

20 “A pious reductio.”

23 Stokes, W., “The Bodleian Dinnshenchas”, *Folklore* iii (1892) 469 (note 2); *Met. Dindshenchas* i, 75.
28 *Met. Dindshenchas* iv, 150-1 (lines 41-52).
29 Binchy refers to the fact that the sites of many *dubhghall* were originally burial ground, *The Fair of Taltriu*, 124.
30 Binchy has shown that, contrary to the poet’s testimony, the *Oenach Taitlen* was not a national event, but was confined to the Ul Néill and their vassals, *The Fair of Taltriu*, 115-7.
31 *Met. Dindshenchas* iv, 158-9 (lines 177-88).
32 Other sources state that Ailill’s father, Náthla, was also king of Ireland.
33 *Met. Dindshenchas* iv, 158-9 (lines 157-63).
34 See Mac Airt, S. & Mac Niocaill, G. (eds), *The Annals of Ulster*, s.a. 957-74, which reports the disturbance of the *Oenach Taitlen* of the king Donnchad Donn, Mael Sechlainn’s grandfather, Binchy, *The Fair of Taltriu*, 120.
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 (O'Byrne 1668, 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 Gaileanga-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 to 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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Ríocht na Midhe

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Cumann Seandálaíochta agus Staire na Mí
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“A hui Chuind, a Chormaic,” ol Carpre
“Cid is dechb do rig?”
“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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