

SIR JOHN RHŶS MEMORIAL LECTURE

LITERARY CREATION AND IRISH
HISTORICAL TRADITION

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IN choosing the subject for this lecture I had in mind a remark which Rhŷs made when he addressed a joint meeting of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland and the Cambrian Archaeological Association in Killarney in 1891. His lecture was on 'Early Irish Conquests in Wales and Dumnonia', and in introducing his subject he said, 'I have often been reproached with reducing the verities of history to the haze and mists of mythology; but I am going to turn over a new leaf. In fact, I propose now to make a brief search for the historical element in the stories about Cúchulainn.'¹ In the sixty-two years which have passed since then, scholars have learnt a great deal about Irish literature and history. Yet many of the 'verities of history' are still, I am afraid, shrouded in mist. This is partly due, no doubt, to the destruction or lack of historical records, but it is also due in some measure to the nature of the compositions of Irish literary men, both in the far past and in more recent times, and to their proclivity to embroider the simple truth in their efforts to entertain or please their public, or perhaps even for their own amusement.

In any inventory of the native sources for Irish history the annalistic material must be given pride of place, for, extending as it does over a period of a thousand years, it is at once the most copious and presumably the most reliable. In origin the annals were monastic compilations, and it has been suggested that every important monastery kept its own annalistic records. If that was so, a great deal of material of vital interest to the historian has been lost, for the extant annals seem to derive from a very limited number of localities. Writing in the context of the Patrician controversy Dr. D. A. Binchy has recently taken the term 'genuine entries' used by O'Rahilly and commented, 'to the historian a "genuine" entry can only mean an entry which

¹ *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ire.* xxi (1891), 645.

goes back to a contemporary record made in a paschal table of the current year'.¹

Now the oldest manuscript containing annalistic material is Oxford Rawlinson B. 503, which contains the Annals of Innisfallen and whose compilation began in 1092.² The Annals of Ulster, though of greater importance, are found in no manuscript earlier than the fifteenth century, and the other principal collections are equally late. The result is that we have no demonstrably contemporary annalistic records prior to 1092, and the bulk of the material covering the period 1100 to 1500 is likewise non-contemporary. If we cannot satisfy ourselves that the later compilers and scribes reproduced faithfully and without interpolations earlier contemporary records, our confidence in the great body of Irish annalistic material must be shaken. Considerable doubt has already been cast on the reliability of the annalistic records prior to the sixth century, and Dr. Binchy has suggested 'that the annals of the fifth and sixth centuries represent a deliberate re-writing of history for the purpose of exalting the Uí Néill dynasties at the expense of their rivals'.³ Since manipulation of the early material for political purposes has been postulated it would seem obvious that the annals for more recent times should be subjected to fresh examination to determine how trustworthy they are and how far the 'verities' of Irish history must have a question-mark appended to them. Dr. John Kelleher of Harvard has already embarked on such an examination and he has supported Dr. Binchy in his rejection of the idea that the High-kingship of Ireland was an institution of great antiquity. He has said of the annals that 'most of the information, at least from the early seventh century on, is reliable, because it is about matters with which the revisionists were not concerned'.⁴ I must say that whenever I read Irish annals I get the feeling that there is a great deal of imaginative writing contained in them in both the pre-Norman and post-Norman periods.

Although the professions of praise-poet and historian were separate in medieval Ireland, both classes had, I am sure,

¹ *Studia Hibernica*, ii. 71.

² In that collection only the annals for the years 1092-1214 and 1258-85 are regarded as contemporary or almost contemporary as regards writing. The annals for the years prior to 1092 were taken at that time from some early collections, and the later blanks were filled in from other sources in the fourteenth century. See *The Annals of Innisfallen* (ed. Mac Airt).

³ *Studia Hibernica*, ii. 75.

⁴ *Ibid.* iii. 122.

certain things in common. Their linguistic and literary training must have been similar, for the poets were expected to be familiar with genealogical and historical lore as well as with 'poetics', and the historians showed themselves to be competent poets and at least in some of their writings gave evidence of a partiality for the highly cultivated metaphorical language found in non-historical literature. More important is the fact, as it seems to me, that at all times the historian and poet could share a common interest in supporting current claims by ambitious rulers, and neither was above using his profession to do this. Hence I suspect that the 'revisionists' did not cease their work until after the downfall of the Gaelic order in the seventeenth century. The change over a period of a thousand years was in the ranks of the dynasts.

A thirteenth-century poet has pointed out that a ruler is made immortal through the verse composed about him, and he declared that were it not for the poets no man would be remembered beyond two generations.¹ The creations of poets and storytellers have preserved for us in a very lively way the memory, if not the real *acta*, of many of the kings, princes, and saints of early Ireland, and in the process probably quite a few characters have been invented. If we tend to conclude that some of those compositions are not contemporary, and that in some cases there were political reasons for their production, we may still suppose that their subjects were outstanding enough in their day to have had the possibility of immortality assured for them by poets whose work is lost, or that within living memory they had passed into the enduring realm of oral tradition. For many reasons I feel that literary scholars and historians would do well to join together in a fresh examination of our native materials and their correlation with non-Irish sources.

Over a period of a thousand years or so from the seventh century there came into being a vast body of material in which what we might call Irish historical tradition is to be found. It was only at the end of that time that an author set about using this material to make a continuous historical narrative. This was the seventeenth-century writer Geoffrey Keating, who has been called the Irish Herodotus, and it is interesting to see what source material he accepted as representing the historical tradition and how he joined it together. Two things I might point out straight away. The first is that for a reason which we shall see later Keating took the Anglo-Norman Invasion as the

¹ *Dioghlaím Dána* (ed. Mac Cionnaith), p. 222.

end-point in Irish history; the second that the task he set himself was that of synthesizer. There is little attempt at discussion or evaluation.

It is obvious that Keating accepted unquestioningly the traditional concept of Ireland as having had from early times a central ruler, a High-king, and his 'History'¹ is accordingly centred around the activities of a succession of supposed High-kings. For it he took over the framework available in early manuscript versions of this traditional history. The oldest exemplar is in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster which opens with *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, 'The Book of the Taking of Ireland', and continues with the tract *Do Fhlaitheasib Érenn* which is a list of the Gaelic Kings of Ireland from pre-Christian times down to the last High-king, Ruaidhrí Ua Conchobair († 1198), whose death as a pilgrim in Cong is the final item noted.² The writing of the manuscript coincided with the Anglo-Norman Invasion and hence with the conclusion of the list of Kings of Ireland which Keating had taken as his framework. To deal with the history of the following centuries he would have had to devise a new method of handling the abundance of material available in annals and elsewhere. This he did not do. However, into the existing framework, which is concise enough, he managed to fit a lot of additional matter taken from a variety of sources, mostly Irish but at least one non-Gaelic. This latter was for his account of the Anglo-Norman Invasion which in the regnal list is dismissed in a few phrases and which even in the main collections of annals is not recorded at all fully. Keating's indebtedness to Giraldus Cambrensis's *Expugnatio Hibernica* for this section is quite obvious.

If we compare Keating's 'History' with the Book of Leinster we shall find that his method of dealing with the history of Ireland under the Gaelic kings was straightforward. He noted in sequence as in his main source each supposed King of Ireland, giving usually his pedigree, the length of his reign, and the nature of his death. When, however, he had found elsewhere additional material about a particular king or about important events which were associated with his reign, he introduced that to his narrative if he considered it appropriate. For the most part he supplemented the earlier portion of the list of kings by drawing on tales of the Ulster cycle and on the King-tales, such as those concerning Tuathal Techtmar, Conn Cétchathach, and

¹ *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (Irish Texts Soc., vols. iv, viii, ix).

² *The Book of Leinster* (ed. Best, Bergin, and O'Brien), l. 3208.

Cormac úa Cuinn, as well as on other texts such as the tract on personal names known as *Cóir Anmann*, 'Fitness of Names'. For the 'historic' period he used annals to some extent and also saints' lives and short texts of a fictional or semi-fictional nature, of which Dr. Best has listed a number in his bibliography under the name of the king in whose reign the events are supposed to have taken place.

Keating refers time and again to *seanchas* as his authority for statements, and he emphasizes its trustworthiness, saying, 'The *seanchas* of Ireland is all the more worthy of being considered as authoritative since there were over two hundred professors keeping it and each of them having support from the nobles of Ireland on that account, and having the revision of the nobility and clergy from time to time.'¹ Now the word *seanchas*, which in medieval times was used in reference to the branch of knowledge in which the professional historians specialized, was also applied to origin legends and other ancient tales, and it is clearly a source which must be used with caution, for its authors were not infrequently looking to particular interests when they were creating their works. It is interesting to note this warning about Keating's work in a letter written by Bishop John Roche of Ferns to Luke Wadding on 19 July 1631: 'One Doctor Keating laboureth much, as I heare say, in compiling Irish notes towards a history in Irish. Ye man is very studious, and yet I fear yt if his worke come ever to light, it will need an amendment of illwarranted narrations; he could help you to many curiosities of which you can make better use than him self.'² This was a fair comment, for only rarely does Keating express a doubt about the historicity of any of his main body of material, which for the most part he appears to have accepted as giving a true account of past events.³ For instance he was quite

¹ Op. cit. i (*ITS* iv), p. 80.

² *Wadding Papers, 1614-38* (ed. Jennings), p. 544.

³ In fairness to Keating I must add that the author of the 'Dissertation' prefixed to the 'Memoirs of the Right Honourable The Marquis of Clanricarde' in the 1722 edition stated that Keating reconsidered his work and wished to withdraw it from circulation because 'he found it would not stand the test of an History; not only for that the first Part of it, which preceded the *Milesian* Conquest, was without any Probability or Appearance of Truth . . . but because in the second which reaches down from the said Conquest, though the Series and Successions of the Kings, with many of their Actions, might be depended upon, in the main, for Reality, yet these also were so blended and interwoven with Fables, that they would carry no greater Weight than the first'.

willing to accept that Conchobar mac Nessa, King of Ulster in the pre-Christian era, could have heard in advance of the events of Christ's passion and death from a druid endowed with prophetic powers, and that, as an ancient tale tells, Conchobar through sympathy for Christ worked himself into a frenzy which brought about his death.¹ Admittedly he drew the line at believing a rather improbable item about a king with horse's ears which he recounted, for he comments *is mó mheasaim an chuid-sin don sgéal do bheith ina fínnsgeál filidheachta iond ina stair*, 'I consider that part of the narrative to be a poetic wonder-tale rather than history'.² In this connexion I might call attention to a random item in one of the Irish manuscripts in Oxford, the fifteenth-century Rawlinson B. 512, in which the difference between *scél*, *arrumainte*, and *stair* is noted. *Scél*, it says, is not the truth, but it is something like the truth; *arrumainte* tells of things which could happen even though they did not happen; *stair*, however, reveals things which really did happen.³ The item concerns the philosopher, but those engaged in Irish historical research might bear it in mind, for only too often the dividing line between *scél*, which most commonly means 'a story', and *stair*, which is used in the sense of 'history', is indeterminate, and hence there is the danger of too ready acceptance of the one or rejection of the other in considering past events simply because we do not know how to distinguish them or to extract what information they contain. Herein, as I see it, lies one of our problems—one, I might say, of which I became increasingly aware recently as I read through some of the diverse materials in the Irish language relevant to the work of the historian. I found myself constantly questioning statements in the annals and elsewhere which I had previously accepted, and I am afraid that my doubts are only too clearly reflected in what I have to say in this lecture. For this very reason I intend as a preliminary to speak briefly about a text from the last century, although most of the materials which I shall discuss subsequently belong to the medieval period.

Some years ago I noticed in a manuscript in the Royal Irish Academy an Irish text entitled *Cath na Deachmhún air Thráig Rosa Móire*, 'The Tithe-battle on Rossmore Strand'.⁴ When I examined it I found that it fell into two parts. In the first is an account of the introduction of Protestant clergy to Ireland, the disposition of tithes in the pre-Reformation Church, tithes

¹ Op. cit. ii (*ITS* viii), ll. 3170-86.

² *Ibid.*, ll. 2704-5.

³ *Éigse*, xi. 18.

⁴ *Proc. Roy. Ir. Acad.* 61 C 1.

in Elizabethan Ireland, the introduction of the potato in 1565, and other matters down to the organized resistance to tithing in the nineteenth century. In the second part there is a detailed account of a supposed tithe-battle in Co. Cork in the course of which a soldier was shot by another member of the Crown forces who were there to protect the process-server. At first sight this part appeared to be a purely fictional work. It has, for instance, passages of verse interspersed through the prose, a feature common in Early Modern Irish heroic romances as well as in earlier texts, and although the Rossmore affair was tragic in that it was the occasion of the loss of a life the author treats it more as a comedy than a tragedy. Indeed, although his text runs to nearly 400 lines it is only in the last paragraph of twelve lines that he mentions the fatality. The text is marked by vivid descriptive touches and always there is the ready simile. For example, there is a detailed description of the dress and bearing of a Captain of the Dragoons present, and in particular his helmet-shaped cap is described:

He had a smooth lively high-stepping horse with four active hooves under him, and about him a jacket of Spanish cloth with gold-bordered facing on the front of it; [on his head was] a great helmet-shaped cap with a fillet or plate of white-bronze in front of it over his forehead to protect his brain from hurt or a hard blow, and the length of a warrior's hand of a slender iron spike tightly bound with a long crest of the tail of a black horse standing up from the band over his left ear as an ornament, so that the wind used to blow it backwards and forwards with every movement he made.

Having described how the Captain was knocked from his horse by a stone the author adds:

The cap went rolling down the strand into the sea and the wind drove it out and the horse-hair cockade like a mast upon it, so that the quick-witted crowd who were watching said that it was going to England it was, bringing tidings of the battle to Parliament.

Elsewhere the author has livened his account by giving the supposed speech of the local Protestant minister, the proctor, the process-server, the magistrates, and the commanders of the Crown forces. He even portrays the minister and the process-server, whom he nicknames 'Seán an Mhála' from the bag for the processes which the minister hung around his neck, as addressing one another in verse.

As I have said, my first impression was that this was pure fantasy, but when I examined contemporary sources I found

that not only had such a tithe-affray taken place on the day mentioned in the text but that many of the details given by the Irish author could be confirmed from other sources. The author, whom I later identified when I discovered two autograph copies of the text, lived within a few miles of the place where the clash took place, and although he was then seventy-five years of age he may well have been present. I am satisfied that, although he created neither the main situation nor the characters, he did supply the highlights which characterize the text. The important thing is that as late as 1833 a writer who had some acquaintance with Irish literary and historical tradition set about treating a contemporary happening in such a fashion. I emphasize the point that this text was composed at the time of the events of which it treats, for it brings home to us that semi-historical compositions from earlier times may also be strictly contemporary. Nevertheless I may anticipate the main part of my lecture by saying now that my examination of various texts has led me to suspect that the bulk of the earlier material is non-contemporary in varying degrees. This view extends not only to tales, semi-historical texts, and some poems, but also to some of the annalistic material.

Among the semi-historical tracts one thinks of *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil*, *Cogad Gáidel re Gallaib*, *Lebar Oiris*, and *Cath Cluana Tarb*, upon which Keating drew so heavily for his account of the period of the Viking wars. *Cogad Gáidel re Gallaib* may contain the salient facts of the successful resistance to the foreigners which culminated in the Irish victory at Clontarf, but it is clearly a narrative produced to glorify the O'Briens, and as such it has all the marks of embellishment.¹ So, too, has *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil* which, though dealing with events some fifty years before Brian Bórama's reign, is thought to have been composed somewhat later than *Cogad Gáidel re Gallaib*. Whereas Brian as a member of Dál Cais was a usurper in the throne of Cashel, Cellachán was of the old royal line of the Eoganacht and was an ancestor of the MacCarthy's who from the twelfth century onwards developed considerable power in south and west Munster. The 'Caithréim' is a glorification of Cellachán for the part he played in organizing resistance to the foreigners, but it has been shown² that the account of his

¹ See Goedheer, *Irish and Norse Traditions about the Battle of Clontarf*, and Ryan, 'The Battle of Clontarf', in *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ire.* lxxviii (1938), 1-50.

² See Ryan, 'The Historical Content of the "Caithréim Ceallacháin Chaisil"', in *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ire.* lxxi (1941), 89-100.

exploits is in conflict with the Irish annals of the period, and it seems reasonable to believe that the work was composed by some scholar under MacCarthy (or O'Callaghan) patronage who was inspired by the earlier composition *Cogad Gaidel re Galluib*. Both works are in the form of prose narratives with verse interspersed, but the 'Caithréim' has more verse put into the mouths of the principal characters. It need hardly be said that the language of the poetry seems far too modern for warriors born about the year 900. Dr. Binchy has described the reign of Brian Bórama as a watershed in Irish history,¹ and I think very few people would be unwilling now to accept the view that in the century or two following Brian's death Irish historians and poets deliberately set about creating a literature about his reign and about some of the best-known historical persons of the ninth and tenth centuries.

Now it is well known that one of the main branches of early Irish literature consists of tales of the so-called historical cycle which purport to treat of events in the lives of great rulers. Dr. Myles Dillon has said of the *filid* (or poets) to whom these tales are attributed: 'Their duty was to celebrate the heroic past rather than to narrate events of recent history, and they did it in stories, with the emphasis on the story rather than on the event, so that we have a blend of fact and fiction. Sometimes the annals serve to confirm a fact.'² This seems to imply that the King-tales as a whole were non-contemporary literature and I think that is probably correct, although I do not know of any conclusive evidence one way or the other. The fact that an extant recension of a tale is considerably later linguistically than the date of its characters does not preclude the possibility that it is merely a modernization of a near-contemporary tale. On the other hand it equally well might be a late invention. I might illustrate this point.

The tale 'The Adventures of Conall Gulban', which is found in manuscripts of the seventeenth century and later, has for its principal character a son of Niall Noígíallach, fourth-century King of Ireland.³ It is a romantic adventure tale similar to tales of chivalry which were common in Ireland in the sixteenth century and it was composed hardly much earlier than that.

¹ *Seven Centuries of Irish Learning, 1000-1700* (ed. Ó Cuív), p. 71.

² *The Cycles of the Kings*, p. 2.

³ None of the manuscript versions has been published, but versions from oral narration in Ireland and Scotland have been printed. See *Bealoideas*, xii. 163, xxix. 138.

We may deduce this on grounds of content alone. Another tale, also common in later manuscripts, is 'The Complaint of Guil's Daughter', which tells of an unexpected visit which Feidlimid mac Crimthain, King of Munster, paid to a West Munster landowner and satirist. The tale could also be a modern invention, but in fact there is an earlier version which may have been composed in the eleventh century.¹

In such circumstances the task of isolating fact from fiction in the historic tales is likely to be a long and tedious one. Yet the examination of them is important to the historian, for they may contain matter of considerable significance. In this connexion one thinks of the work of T. F. O'Rahilly, who in his last book put forward several interesting interpretations such as that of the tales *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and *Orcaín Denda Ríg* which he regarded as being fictional accounts of the same historical event viewed from opposite sides, namely the Lagenian invasion of Ireland which he dated to the third century B.C.² I might also mention the point made recently by Dr. Binchy in connexion with the supposed submission of Corc mac Luigdech, founder of the Eoganacht dynasty of Cashel, to Loégaire, a fifth-century King of Tara.³ This notion is found in the text of the old legal document known as *Senchas Már*, but against it, as Dr. Binchy has pointed out to me, can be cited a reference to Corc as being styled 'King of Ireland' in a tale which in origin may be as old as the seventh century.⁴ This need not be taken as a fact of fourth-century history, but it is significant in relation to the question of the High-kingship based on Tara that a seventh-century storyteller should have made such a statement. It is obvious that further consideration of tales, saints' lives, and anecdotes against the background of the annals and genealogies should be rewarding. In this context I must at present restrict myself to commenting on a number of literary items whose authors or redactors were, I suspect, impelled by political motives in presenting their work.

It has been said that 'the long succession of kings whose reigns furnished material for the King-tales may be said to have come to end with Cathal mac Finguine († 742)' and furthermore that

¹ Modern version in *Gadaidhe Géar na Geamh-Oidhche*, pp. 93-114; earlier version in *Hibernica Minora* (ed. Meyer), pp. 65-69. Dillon's inclusion of this tale in the cycle of Crimthann mac Fidaig (*The Cycles of the Kings*, pp. 33-34) is hardly correct.

² *Early Irish History and Mythology*, p. 116.

³ *Studia Hibernica*, ii. 21.

⁴ *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, iii. 57-63.

'after the beginning of the eighth century Irish had all but ceased to produce heroic literature about contemporary characters'.¹ In view of the first statement the second would seem to imply that tales such as *Cath Almaine*, which tells of the death of Fergal mac Maíle Dúin, King of Tara, and in which Cathal mac Finguine, who was a Munster king, features to a minor extent, were composed more or less contemporaneously with their principal characters. Yet it can hardly be maintained that *Cath Almaine* in the form in which we have it is as old as the first half of the eighth century. In essence it is part of the story of the Leinster tribute, Bóraime Laigen, and the introduction of Cathal at the beginning and end may have been a later modification.² Certainly the statement at the end that the Munster King Cathal bestowed the Kingship of the Uí Néill in the Northern Half on Flaithbertach son of Aéd seems highly doubtful.³ On the other hand, if it could be proved that the story in its entirety belonged even to the second half of the eighth century that statement, like the one about Corc mac Luigdech, would be of considerable importance to historians. It is in such a case that more reliable sources are essential. Entries in the annals indicate that Cathal was of some note as a King of Munster, and he seems to have taken advantage of dissensions among the Uí Néill to try to extend the power of the Eoganacht. Both Northern and Southern annals record him as having devastated the Brega area of the Northern Half in 721. The Annals of Innisfallen go further and say that the King of Tara subsequently submitted to Cathal and they describe Cathal as King of Ireland in the notice of his death in 742. This would appear to give a high degree of probability to the statement in the King-tale already mentioned, but in fact the first of the Innisfallen entries⁴ is clearly suspect, for it is accompanied

¹ *Proc. Internat. Cong. Celt. Stud.* (Dublin, 1962), pp. 80, 98.

² *Revue Celtique*, xxiv, 44-67. In one manuscript (TCD H. 2. 16) *Cath Almaine* immediately precedes another tale of the Bóraime, *Cath Belaig Dúna Bolc*, and in another (RIA D iv 2) it immediately follows the same text.

³ Flaithbertach, who was son of Loingsech and not of Aéd, was the last of the Cenél Conaill branch of the Uí Néill to be King of Tara. The Annals of Innisfallen note under the year of Fergal's death: *regnauit Flaithbertach la Hú Néill*. There is no hint in any of the annals that Cathal mac Finguine had anything to do with his election as King of the Uí Néill or of Tara. On the other hand, the entry about Fergal's submission to Cathal referred to later in this lecture might be regarded as supporting the trustworthiness of the storyteller. The patronymic *mac Aéda* may be due to confusion with Aéd Alláin who supplanted Flaithbertach in the Kingship of Tara. For another instance of confusion of names see p. 244, n. 5.

⁴ *Sub anno* 721.

by a note about other Munster kings who ruled Ireland, including two who lived in the centuries after Cathal, and I believe that the second¹ may likewise have been added long after Cathal's time. According to Keating² Cathal mac Finguine and Aéd Alláin, the King of Ireland, met at Terryglass in Ormond and they jointly imposed the 'Law of Patrick' on Ireland. Again this would support the view that Cathal had achieved considerable power as a ruler. However, there is no record of this event in the Annals of Innisfallen, and Keating's statement may have arisen from a misinterpretation of two items juxtaposed in the Annals of Ulster for the year 736 (= 737): *Dal itir Aedh nAlddan 7 Cathal oc Tir da glas. Lex Patricii tenuit Hiberniam*, 'A meeting between Aéd Alláin and Cathal at Tír-dá-glas. The "Law of Patrick" held Ireland.' The one may be quite independent of the other.³ A similar misinterpretation by a contemporary of Keating of adjacent entries in the regnal list in the Book of Leinster has led to the mistaken idea that two men of learning governed Ireland for a period of twenty years from 1022 to 1042.⁴

Other items about Cathal have survived,⁵ including a panegyric contained in the Book of Leinster.⁶ He also features in the tale *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, which tells of the love which he had for the sister of his supposed rival, Fergal mac Maile Dúin, King of Ailech and later High-king, and the misfortune which came to him therefrom. There are two medieval versions of this tale,⁷ neither of which is very old. The more expanded one, which is the later, is a twelfth-century satire written under the influence of the goliardic movement. But leaving aside the satire on the clergy, which is fundamental in the late version, the dynastic elements suggest that there were political considerations involved in the composition of the tale.

In the century after Cathal mac Finguine another Munster king, Feidlimid mac Crimthain, achieved prominence by his

¹ *Sub anno* 742.

² *Op. cit.* iii (*ITS ix*), ll. 2346-50.

³ However, Thurneysen has followed Keating in associating the entries. See *Zeits. f. celt. Phil.* xviii. 391-3.

⁴ On this see O'Rahilly, *Celtica*, i. 313-17.

⁵ Proinsias Mac Cana has shown (*Ét. Celt.* vii. 81-82) that the association of Cathal mac Finguine with the story of Mór Muman (see *Proc. Roy. Ir. Acad.* 30 C 9) is erroneous and probably arose through confusion of him with a seventh-century King of Munster, Cathal mac Aéda. Mac Cana has made an interesting suggestion (*Ét. Celt.* viii. 60) about the possible political significance of the Mór Muman story.

⁶ *Op. cit.* (ed. Best, Bergin, and O'Brien), ll. 19164-219.

⁷ Both printed by Meyer in *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*.

actions which are chronicled in the various annals. The Annals of Innisfallen claim for him that he was *lánrí Érenn*, 'full-king of Ireland';¹ the regnal list in the Book of Leinster recognizes him as 'King of Ireland with opposition';² and even the Annals of Ulster have a laudatory entry on him under the year of his death.³ This epigrammatic quatrain about him is quoted earlier in the same annals:

*Is é Feidlimid in rí
dianid opar óinlaithi
aithrige Connacht cen chath
ocus Mide do manrad,⁴*

'Feidlimid is the king for whom it is the work of a single day to depose [the King of] Connacht without a battle and to destroy Meath.'

Feidlimid was an ecclesiastic and is represented as being a religious reformer, but in fact he appears to have been ruthless in his wars against secular and monastic rivals. Several Middle-Irish poems have been attributed to him and he features as a character in a number of tales.⁵ I have already mentioned *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil* as a semi-historical tract composed from an Eoganacht viewpoint. A more comprehensive, but also rather fanciful, compilation is *An Leabhar Muimhneach*, which deals with Munster history and genealogies from early Gaelic times down to the sixteenth century. In this work Feidlimid is the first Christian King of Cashel to be given prominence.⁶ Naturally his contemporaries in the Kingship of Tara get no showing. One is reminded of the fact that Giraldus Cambrensis seems to have been impressed with the importance of Feidlimid, whom he refers to as King of Ireland.⁷

We can now sum up on these two kings. If we accept the annalistic records then both were outstanding and would almost certainly be commemorated in verse compositions in their lifetime, and possibly in other ways such as in tales, not much later. Linguistically and stylistically, however, the extant items about them appear to be considerably later, so that they may indeed

¹ *Sub anno* 838.

² *Op. cit.*, ll. 3113-14.

³ *Sub anno* 846.

⁴ *Sub anno* 839.

⁵ Cf. p. 242, n. 1. For another tale see *Celtica*, ii. 325-33. On the latter see Mac Cana, *Ét. Celt.* vii. 370-82. For Mac Cana on Feidlimid see also *Ét. Celt.* viii. 62, where he has a suggestion about the alleged seizing by Feidlimid of Gormlaith, wife of Niall Caille, King of Tara.

⁶ *Op. cit.* (ed. Ó Donnchadha), pp. 95-103.

⁷ See *Topographia Hiberniae* (Rolls Series), cap. xxxvi, xxxvii = O'Meara, *Proc. Roy. Ir. Acad.* 52 C 4, pp. 172-3.

have much in common in their design with *Cáithréim Chellacháin Chaisil*.

Let us turn back to consider briefly the holders of the Tara Kingship in the ninth and tenth centuries. There were eleven of them from Aéd Oirdnide mac Néill, who ruled from 797 to 819, to Maélshechnaill mac Domnaill, who ruled from 980 to 1002, when he was displaced by Brian Bórama, and again from 1014 to 1022. The annals are supplemented for the first part of these centuries by semi-historical tracts, a copy of which has survived in a seventeenth-century manuscript,¹ and again we find that Keating accepted these as part of the historical tradition. The accounts of the Viking Tuirgéis and of the stratagem by which his death was encompassed, which are found in Giraldus Cambrensis's *Topographia Hiberniae*² and in Keating's 'History',³ probably derive from some such tract. There are no major historic tales about any of those kings, although we have the title of one which has been lost.⁴ However, there are several short anecdotes about some of them, and again we find Keating reproducing one of the most absurd of these which describes the scenes at the burial of the father-in-law of Donnchad son of Flann Sinna, King of Ireland, when nine jet-black devils appeared at the graveside and chanted a strange sort of composition subsequently known as *croántacht*, whereupon two poets there present learned the new measure and practised it till their death.⁵ The story is chronologically wrong, for according to the annals Donnchad, who is represented as being alive at the time, predeceased his father-in-law by thirty-two years.⁶

¹ See *Annals of Ireland: Three Fragments* (ed. O'Donovan).

² Op. cit., cap. xxxvi-xl = *Proc. Roy. Ir. Acad.*, pp. 172-4.

³ Op. cit., iii, ll. 2704-869.

⁴ See p. 247. A minor tale of some interest in which Domnall mac Muirchertaig (956-80) features is *Airec Menman Eraird meic Coisse*, publ. in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, ii. 42-76.

⁵ Op. cit. iii, ll. 3382-477, where it is incorporated in the account of the reign of Donnchadh mac Flainn. Meyer published an earlier version in *Zeits. f. celt. Phil.* xii. 290-1.

⁶ Donnchad mac Flainn died in 944, Donnchad mac Cellaig in 976, according to the Annals of Innisfallen. The 'Four Masters' record the death of a Mór, daughter of Donnchad mac Cellaig, Queen of Ireland, in 985, but they do not say who her husband was. Meyer has published a poem which he thinks was addressed to this lady (see *Fianaigeacht*, pp. 42-44), and he has assumed that her husband was Maélshechnaill mac Domnaill (op. cit., p. xxiv). Gerard Murphy, who republished the poem in *Early Irish Lyrics*, pp. 88-90, accepted this identification but was more cautious in suggesting a likely date for the composition of the poem (op. cit., pp. 212-14).

Yet it may have some significance in connexion with the development and use of the metre *dechnad cumaisc*¹ or *snédbairdne*, which is that in which the *crossántachta* of the story occur and which is also the metre of the verse sections of later *crossántachta* which are partly in prose and partly in verse. We have no further knowledge of the two poets named in this story, and it is likely that they are the invention of the storyteller.

The lost tale I mentioned is *Serc Gormlaidhe do Niall*, 'Gormlaidh's Love for Niall', which is named in a tale-list which is as old as the twelfth century.² Although the tale itself has not survived, what appears to be a summary of it is found in the seventeenth-century English version of the Annals of Clonmacnoise,³ and there is still extant a collection of poems ascribed to Gormlaidh in which she laments Niall's death and refers to the mishap which supposedly brought about her own.⁴ It is generally believed that these are part of a late version of a romantic tale about Gormlaidh, daughter of Flann Sinna, and her successive marriages with Cormac mac Cuillénáin, King of Cashel, Cerball mac Muirecáin, King of Ossory, and Niall Glúndub mac Aéda, King of Ailech and subsequently King of Tara. What historical basis there is for such a tale I do not know, for I have found only one reference to Gormlaidh in the earliest collections of annals, namely in the Annals of Ulster where her death is recorded under the year 947 without reference to her royal husbands. The 'Four Masters' record her as being queen to Niall Glúndub,⁵ but it is perhaps significant that otherwise their entry about her is rather like that which they have made earlier in their annals about another Gormlaidh who was wife of Niall Caille, King of Ireland († 846), and who was

¹ A quatrain in this metre in the Annals of Ulster commemorates the death in 797 of Aéd Oirdnide, great-grandfather of Niall Glúndub. The metre was used for two important tenth-century texts: *Immram Curaig Maile Dúin* and *Immram Snedgusa ocus Maic Riagla*, and it was used in *senchas*-poems on the Ailech dynasty found in the Book of Leinster and attributed to Flann Mainistrech († 1056), for which see *Archivium Hibernicum*, ii. 37-99.

² Published from the Book of Leinster by O'Curry in *Lectures on the Manuscript Materials of Ancient Irish History*, pp. 584-93. A similar list is incorporated in the tale *Airec Menman Eraid meic Coisse* referred to in n. 4 on p. 246. For discussion see Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage*, pp. 21-24.

³ *Op. cit.* (ed. Murphy), pp. 145, 153-5. The connexion of Clonmacnoise with several items in this genre (e.g. anecdotes about Maelshechnaill mac Maelruanaid and Congalach Cnogba) is suggestive.

⁴ See *Miscellany presented to Kuno Meyer*, pp. 343-69, *Ériu*, xvi. 189-99.

⁵ *Sub anno 947*.

carried off by Feidlimid mac Crimthain.¹ Gormlaith, daughter of Flann Sinna, does not feature in the genealogical material published recently by the late M. A. O'Brien, although her later illustrious namesake who also made three royal marriages is commemorated there in a witty epigram:

*Trí lémenn ra ling Gormlaith
ní lingfea ben co bráth:
léim i nÁth Cliath, léim i dTemraig,
léim i Caiseal, carnmaig ós chách,²*

'Three leaps did Gormlaith perform which no other woman shall do till Doomsday: a leap into Dublin, a leap into Tara, a leap into Cashel, the plain with the mound which surpasses all.' Chronological difficulties in the accounts of this latest Gormlaith, who was wife in turn of Amlaib Cuarán, King of Dublin, Maélshechnaill mac Domnaill, King of Tara and High-king, and Brian Bórama, have puzzled historians, and I feel that the succession of royal husbands whom both the later Gormlaiths are represented as having had should make us slow to accept the story of the second Gormlaith's enduring love for Niall Glúndub as more than a pleasant fiction.

Niall Glúndub's career between 904 and 919 is outlined in the annals. He appears as the warlike prince challenging the supremacy of the existing King of Ailech, his own brother, whom he later succeeded, engaging in successful hostings, intervening in the affairs of the King of Tara when the latter's sons rebelled against him—an action which reveals Niall as one of the most powerful kings in Ireland in his day—and finally gaining the Kingship of Tara for himself, only to be slain four years later in a battle with the Norse near Dublin. It is not surprising that a tale should have been composed about him, for here we have materials for a saga. Moreover, some of the annalistic entries, which contain very factual reporting of skirmishes and so on,³

¹ *Sub anno* 859. Niall Caille was grandfather of Niall Glúndub, and the father of each was named Aéd. The confusion is increased by statements in the twelfth-century *banshenchas* (*Revue Celtique*, xlvii. 311) that Mael Muire, daughter of Cinaed mac Ailpin of Scotland, was mother of both Domnall mac Flainn and Niall Glúndub (son of Aéd Findliath), and also that Gormlaith, daughter of Muiredach mac Echach, King of Ulster, was mother of Domnall son of Aéd Findliath.

² O'Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hibernicarum*, p. 13. This quatrain was incorporated in the later text about the O'Briens, *Senchas shíl Briain*, published by O'Grady in *Caitheám Thoirdealbhaigh* (*ITS* xxvi), Appendix D.

³ e.g. *Annals of Ulster*, *sub annis* 913, 916.

suggest that his career was being followed with perhaps more than usual interest. An alternative explanation of such entries is that they are 'pseudo-authentic' touches added later; and certainly the expanded accounts with additional verse interludes found in the Annals of the 'Four Masters'¹ clearly represent a literary working-up. This suggestion brings me to a rather different sort of text, which will be the last item which I intend to discuss specifically in connexion with the pre-Norman Invasion period.

This has to do with Niall Glúndub's son, Muirchertach, who became King of Ailech and was in the running for the High-kingship but was killed by the Norse before he achieved that position. The entries about him in the annals indicate that, like his father, he was an active ambitious warrior-king, anxious to prove himself as a power to be reckoned with and ready to challenge the superior King of Tara. In recording his death the Annals of Ulster extravagantly describe him as *Echtoir iarthair betha* 'Hector of the western world'.² Another entry records briefly an expedition by him into Mide and several areas in the Southern Half where he took hostages and on which occasion he brought Cellachán of Cashel to submit to the King of Tara.³ This short entry is supplemented otherwise by a poem of sixty-four stanzas attributed to Cormacán Éces mac Mailbrigte, supposed poet to the King of Ailech, who is represented as accompanying Muirchertach⁴ on a triumphant circuit of all Ireland (*mórhímhchell Érenn uile*) when he took hostages from all the provinces and from Dublin and subsequently handed them over to the King of Tara. The expedition is described vividly in narrative verse reminiscent of the Fenian ballads which were popular from the twelfth century on. The poem has been

¹ *Sub annis* 915, 917.

² *Sub anno* 942.

³ *Sub anno* 940. There is only one entry about him, an obit, in the Annals of Innisfallen. The Annals of Ulster and Chronicon Scotorum are more or less in agreement on entries about him between 921 and 943. There is a summary of his career in a regnal list contained in the Books of Ballymote and Lecan, and his exploits are recounted in a poem attributed to Flann Mainistrech (†1056), published by MacNeill in *Archivium Hibernicum*, ii. 72-73 (§§ 40-53). We may note MacNeill's comment (op. cit., p. 79): 'The account in the annals (AU 940) seems disproportionate. Flann corroborates Cormacán.'

⁴ Muirchertach is given the nickname *na cochall croicenn* ('of the skin cowls') in the Annals of Ulster *sub anno* 942. This name is explained in the poem and in the prose introduction to it. A completely different, and highly ludicrous, explanation is found in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* (ed. Murphy), pp. 152-4.

accepted by scholars¹ as a genuine document of the tenth century. Indeed one editor assured readers that 'the narrative must have been written between June 942, and the 26th of February, 943'.² Linguistically I see nothing in this text to support the theory of its composition in the first half of the tenth century. On the contrary, it seems to me much more likely that it was composed about two centuries later.³

Little is known of Cormacán. The Annals of Ulster have a quatrain in reference to a hosting by Niall Glúndub in 914 in which Cormacán is represented as addressing Niall on that occasion:

*Brón do Grellaig Eillti uair,
fuaramar cuain 'na taib;
as-bert Cormacán fri Niall:
'nach-in lécar siar, tiagam sair',*

'Sorrow to cold Grellach Eillte, we have found a host by its side; Cormacán said to Niall: "let us not be driven back, let us proceed nobly".'⁴

Such quatrains must be suspect. There are four quatrains of an elegy on Niall;⁵ another refers (as if it were a contemporary comment on a situation) to a hosting by Donnchad mac Flainn against Muirchertach mac Néill,⁶ and there is a further elegiac quatrain on Muirchertach.⁷ While I should be slow to dismiss

¹ Dr. Binchy has already pointed out that the poem is late. See *Ériu*, xviii. 120. He has told me that O'Rahilly had the same view.

² Hogan, *Móirthimchell Éirenn Uile*, p. 6.

³ The three oldest copies of this poem known to me are in seventeenth-century manuscripts. One is in a book of genealogical material where it is included in an account of the Kings of Cenél nEógain. The other two copies form part of the text of Míchéil Ó Cléirigh's modern version of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*. All three copies of the poem are preceded by an account in prose of the occasion commemorated in it. It is not surprising therefore that in the Annals of the 'Four Masters' there is an account of Muirchertach's expedition which tallies more or less with the poem, though of course not so detailed. I might point out that the 'Four Masters' Annals and Ó Cléirigh's version of *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* are clearly interdependent. Perhaps what is most striking in this connexion is the number of verse citations not found in earlier annalistic compilations which are common to both these seventeenth-century texts, which represent a working-up of older material, annalistic, poetic, legendary, and quasi-historical.

⁴ The printed text (*Ann. Ul.* i. 430) has *sair*, and the editor has translated 'We will not be allowed to go westwards, let us go eastwards'. But rime requires *sair* (: *taib*). I have therefore emended the text. My translation is tentative.

⁵ *Sub anno* 919.

⁶ *Sub anno* 929.

⁷ *Sub anno* 943.

any of these on purely stylistic grounds, I certainly suspect them; especially the last which ends *nád mair Muirchertach ba liach | dílechta iath Gáidel ngnáth*, 'woe that Muirchertach lives not, the land of the dear Gaeil is orphaned'. It is perhaps significant that this is the last verse item in the Annals of Ulster for the tenth century.

A noticeable feature in Irish tradition is the tendency to dramatize the careers of literary men and give them a place in history. Another is the capacity of poets to project themselves back into the past and represent their compositions as belonging to earlier historic or pseudo-historic characters. Two poets in particular are associated in Irish tradition with the figures familiar to us from accounts of the Battle of Clontarf: Mac Liac and Mac Coise. It has been argued that there are good grounds for believing that they, as well as two other poets, Flann mac Lonáin and his mother Laitheóc, are literary figments and that much of the material in prose and verse relating to the famous battle was composed between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹ While I think that view may be too extreme, I accept completely that we are dealing here with later compositions projected back, as it were, several hundred years.

The branch of the Cenél nEógain to which Muirchertach mac Néill belonged supplied eight Kings of Tara between 710 and 980, more than did any other of the royal lines. The last of these was Muirchertach's son Domnall, from whom the Uí Néill and Meic Lochlainn of later times were directly descended. Domnall had a long and eventful reign, and he too was immortalized in a fictional work concerning the poet Mac Coise whose death is recorded in the annals for the year 990.² For over a hundred years after Domnall's death no King of Ailech was recognized as King of Ireland. Then Domnall Mac Lochlainn became King of Ireland from 1091 to 1121 and Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn from 1143 to 1166. Dr. Dillon has recently shown that it is highly probable that the text known as the 'Book of Rights', which was formerly thought to be very old, was compiled in the twelfth century.³ I have already said that it is believed that *Cogad Gáidel re Gallaib* and *Caithréim Chellacháin Chaisil* were produced early in the twelfth century to support rival claims of O'Briens and MacCarthys. My examination of the material which I have been discussing up to now leads me

¹ See O Lochlainn, 'Poems on the Battle of Clontarf', in *Éigse*, iii. 208-18 and iv. 33-47.

² See p. 246, n. 4.

³ See Dillon, *Lebor na Cert* (*Irish Texts Soc.*, vol. xlvi).

to suggest that it may be to a similar office performed for the Cenél nEógain (or for the Uí Néill) that we owe much of the supposed contemporary literary matter of the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries and also, most probably, some of the material in the annalistic collections.

An examination of the genealogies suggests that they, too, were at times made to serve the ends of the family or tribal historian. MacNeill and O'Rahilly have shown that because of their desire to present a picture of a common Gaelic stock for the ruling classes in early Ireland, the genealogists of the ninth and tenth centuries did considerable violence to historical truth. Thus, for example, Brian Bórama, who as a member of Dál Cais is thought to have belonged to a pre-Gaelic tribe, had a respectable pedigree provided for him back to Ailill Aulomm,¹ supposedly common ancestor of the Eoganachta and Dál Cais, the former being genuinely Gaelic and the chief dynasty in Munster prior to the tenth century. The course of history is similarly reflected in later times. For instance, the chief families of Cenél Conaill recorded in the twelfth-century collections of genealogical material² are the Uí Maéldoraid and the Uí Chanannáin, and this tallies with the picture found in the annals. After the Norman Invasion the Uí Domnaill or O'Donnells became the most prominent of the descendants of Conall Gulban, and the term Cenél Conaill, as well as the geographical term Tír Conaill, is most frequently associated with them. Now in the early genealogical collections the pedigree of the latest (twelfth-century) ancestor of the O'Donnells, Cathbarr, is given under the heading Síol Lugdach or Cenél Lugdach³ and not under Cenél Conaill. The annals record two ancestors of Cathbarr as kings of Cenél Conaill, namely Dálach and Écnechán,⁴ but the growth of the O'Donnell family fortunes really began in the thirteenth century with Domnall Mór († 1241) and they survived the wars of the following centuries better than most. When we look at the seventeenth-century Ó Cléirigh Book of Genealogies we find that the Uí Chanannáin are omitted and the Uí Maéldoraid pedigree is exactly as in the twelfth-century compilations,⁵ whereas pride of place is given to

¹ O'Brien, *Corp. Genealog. Hib.*, p. 250.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 164, 358, 435.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁴ Dálach died in 870 according to the *Annals of Ulster and Chronicon Scotorum*; Écnechán died in 905 or 906.

⁵ *Op. cit.* (ed. Pender), p. 16.

the Dálaig or O'Donnells for whom detailed genealogical tables from the thirteenth century to the seventeenth are supplied.¹ Domnall Mór is the first O'Donnell to whom the title *rí Cenéil Conaill* is given there, and the audacious claim is made that 'it was he who fixed the customary usages and rights of the Conal-laigh and it was he who reduced their disabilities and their evil practices for the sake of God'.² This, I suspect, is part of a long build-up of the O'Donnells in which poets as well as genealogists played their part.³

The emergence of the O'Connors of Connacht as successful contenders for the Kingship of Ireland introduced a new element into twelfth-century politics. The suggestion has been made⁴ that Diarmaid Mac Murchadha, King of Leinster, had similar ambitions when he appealed to Henry II for help, but if he had they were not destined to be realized. On the contrary his call for aid was to bring to an end the long period of the supposed High-kingship of Ireland and to initiate a new era in our history during which we have been subject in varying degrees to constraint from our neighbours across the Irish Sea. The Anglo-Norman Invasion may have ended the era of the High-kings, but it did not end the individual and family ambitions for which the praise-poet and historian catered. Indeed I think that it possibly had the effect of intensifying them. Certainly there is a vast amount of professional praise-poetry extant from the following four centuries, and in the final section of this lecture I propose to comment on the relevance of this material and of its authors to the work of the historian. Before I do so, however, I might refer briefly to other Irish sources for the later medieval period.

First of all there is the annalistic material which is even more abundant than for the pre-Invasion period. In addition there are genealogical works, family and semi-historical tracts, and tales with a supposedly historic setting. Once more we may suspect that some of the later annalists were not above enlivening their records with some imaginative writing. It would take too long to go into that in detail here, but perhaps I might give one example. The Annals of Loch Cé and the Annals of Connacht have some very vivid descriptive passages in the

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-14.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³ Professor R. Dudley Edwards has called my attention to a number of matters in connexion with the growth in importance of the O'Donnells in the post-Invasion period.

⁴ O'Rahilly, *Ear. Ir. Hist. and Myth.*, p. 117.

thirteenth-century entries. At the end of one of these (under the year 1249) the death of Donnchadh mac Anmchadha Ó Giolla Pádraig is noted and the comment added:

This was a benefit to the Foreigners, for many of them had he killed and plundered and burned before that time. For Donnchadh was one of the three Gaels who rose against the Foreigners since their occupation of Ireland, namely Conchobhar Ó Maoilsheachlainn, Conchobhar of the Castles Ó Cochláin, and this son of Anmchadh. And Anmchadh's son used to go in person to reconnoitre the market-towns, in the guise of a beggar or a carpenter or a turner or some other craftsman, as it is said:

'He is a carpenter, he is a turner,
my darling is a book-man;
he sells wine and hides
wherever he sees a gathering.'¹

There may be a solid basis of fact for this item, but in view of its nature and the fact that the annalist had a ready-made quar-
rain to illustrate his text we may reasonably suspect that it is the creation of a medieval Baroness Orczy.

Of the post-Invasion pseudo-histories which have survived the best known is *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh*² which is for the most part an account of wars in which the leading O'Briens of Thomond engaged in conflict with one another and with the Normans at the end of the thirteenth century and at the beginning of the fourteenth. This is clearly in the tradition of such texts as *Cogad Gaidel re Gallaib*, with similar use of verse to relieve or enliven the narrative. Standish O'Grady, who edited it long ago, was of the opinion that it was composed as late as 1495, but more recent scholars have tended to agree that it was written by the son of a poet who is represented in the text as having been present at one of the battles, that is about 1330.³ It has been suggested that the author used 'contemporary materials in the way of annals and poems and . . . for a part of the period the testimony of survivors'.⁴ If this suggestion is correct *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh* may be, of all the medieval texts of this nature, the one nearest in date of composition to

¹ *Bídh 'na shaor, bídh 'na thornóir,
bídh mo laogh ina leabhróir;
bídh sé ag reic fhíona 's chraiceann
mar a bhfaiceann an searmóin.*

² Ed. O'Grady (*Irish Texts Soc.*, vols. xxvi, xxvii).

³ See *Éigse*, viii. 30.

⁴ *ITS* xxvi, p. xiv.

the events it describes. But it is far from certain, and there is at least one other text dealing with the same period which is now believed to have been dated 150 years too early. This is a supposed contemporary poem on the inauguration of Feilim O'Connor as King of Connacht in 1310, which Dr. Dillon now suggests was composed in the following century to honour another Feilim O'Connor by celebrating the fame of an illustrious predecessor and namesake of his whose solemn inauguration was a famous occasion.¹ That such a thing is considered possible shows how difficult it is to handle material of this nature with confidence. I might mention one other imaginative text dealing likewise with the first part of the fourteenth century which, however, is found only in manuscripts of the nineteenth.² It is an account of the Bruce invasion, and is not without interest, for, as well as differing from the better-known accounts in certain details and containing information not available elsewhere, it is remarkable for its sympathetic attitude towards Bruce, which is in contrast to the Irish annals which are almost unanimous in condemning him.³ Once more the problem is to determine how far this and similar texts from the later period, and the annals themselves, may be relied upon.

From time to time in the course of this lecture I have referred to the work of poets, and I have suggested that verse accounts of supposed historical events, including the quatrains contained in the annalistic collections, are likely to have been composed later than the events referred to and that they may well be the product of literary rather than historical activity. Even less closely connected with the historical material are the compositions of the professional praise-poets. Yet the historian cannot afford to disregard them.

Since E. C. Quiggin lectured to this Academy⁴ fifty years ago on the subject of bardic poetry, quite an amount of verse then in manuscripts has been published. Yet it is still difficult to assess the value of this body of material to the historian. For one thing, it is clear that owing to certain conventions poets continued as late as the sixteenth century to allude to circumstances which could not possibly have existed after the

¹ *Medieval Studies presented to Aubrey Gwynn, S.J.*, pp. 186-202.

² See *County Louth Arch. Jour.* i, no. 2, pp. 77-91. There is a copy in RIA MS. 23 G 45.

³ See the annals *sub anno* 1318. The Annals of Innisfallen are not in agreement with the other collections on this.

⁴ *Proc. Brit. Acad.* v. 89-143.

thirteenth. The problem is, To what extent are statements made by poets to be discounted as literary fictions? For instance, the fine descriptions of the dwellings of chieftains, where poets with their retinues are honoured guests, where wine and ale are dispensed freely in vessels of gold and silver and crystal, where fair women spend much of their time embroidering with threads of gold while their husbands are away plundering the territories of other lords, and so on, may bear some relation to reality, but in many respects they are too reminiscent of early tales to inspire absolute confidence. Even more notable is the convention of stating that the subject of a praise-poem is fit to be or destined to be King of Ireland. It is possible that this had its origins in the twelfth century, when it must have seemed that the High-kingship could be won by a member of any sept provided he was sufficiently powerful.

In the fifteenth-century Book of Fermoy there is a *dán díreach* poem without ascription which is apparently addressed to a King of the Isle of Man named Ragnall. It has been shown¹ that the person addressed was probably Reginald son of Godred who reigned from 1187 on and who was killed in 1229. If we accept that this is a genuine contemporary praise-poem—and there is nothing fundamentally against such a view—then it is one of the oldest belonging to the Classical Irish period and it is of special interest as giving some indication of the attitudes of the professional poet at that time. The author may have belonged to the generation which saw the Anglo-Norman Invasion of Ireland, and he may have hoped for a successful counter-movement which would once again establish the High-kingship. Strangely enough there is no reference to the Normans or to anything unusual in the political situation in Ireland. Ragnall, who was of the line of Norse kings of Dublin, is addressed as a potential King of Ireland and his expected coming to Dublin referred to. Here we have an early instance of a non-Gaelic king being acceptable in the eyes of a poet, but, of course, Ragnall may have had Irish blood in his veins, for according to the Chronicle of Man² his father, Godred, had married a granddaughter of Muirchertach Mac Lochlainn, King of Ireland.³

¹ *Éigse*, viii. 283-7.

² *Op. cit.* (ed. Goss), i. 76.

³ The earliest Irish poem I know of addressed to a Norman lord is the one to Richard de Burgo referred to later in this lecture. In it the poet addresses de Burgo as 'King of the Connacht race' (§ 28) and declares that he is 'lord of Tara' (§ 19); yet in another poem to Cathal Croibhdhearg Ó Conchobhair,

A little more than half a century later an attempt was made to organize a national confederacy and restore the High-kingship under Brian Ó Néill, King of Cenél nEógain. It failed with the defeat of the Irish army in the Battle of Down in 1260 and the death of Brian and many of his supporters. Within a few years, if we may believe the Haakon Saga,¹ a group of Irish chiefs sent ambassadors to the King of Norway inviting him to come and rule them, and again just fifty years later there was the invitation to Edward Bruce to accept the High-kingship. This latter invitation is supposed to have come from a group of Irish princes headed by Domhnall Ó Néill, who, according to the 'Remonstrance' addressed to Pope John XXII in 1317, claimed to be 'by hereditary right true heir to the whole of Ireland' and who announced his willingness to renounce his right in favour of Bruce.² In the long run neither Irishman nor foreigner succeeded in restoring the Kingship of Tara, the memory of which was preserved through the poets' convention. As Dr. Eleanor Knott has pointed out,³ at least one poet was sufficiently a realist to note that this was indeed no more than a convention. For Gofraidh Fionn Ó Dálaigh in the fourteenth century assured the Earl of Desmond, who was of Norman descent:

*Flaitheas nach gabhaid Gaoidhil
geallmaoid dóibh i nduanlaoidhibh;
a ráthughadh dhúibh níor dhlúigh,
gnáthughadh dhúinn a dhéanaimh,*

'A sovranity they never get we promise to the Gaeil in our odes; you need not take any notice of this, it is our custom.' Yet the custom survived to the end of the Classical period when it gave way to a new theme that the kings of the Stuart line were legitimate 'spouses' for the Queen Éire.

Apart from the problem of the conventional nature of much of this praise-poetry, there are other difficulties. One of these arises from the fact that the number of Gaelic manuscripts in

King of Connacht, the same poet says that Cathal will drive out the foreigners who have seized Tara (§ 18). For these poems see *Studies*, June 1924, March 1925.

¹ See *Annals of Loch Cé* (ed. Hennessy), i, p. 444, n. 4.

² For a translation of the Latin original of the 'Remonstrance', which is found only in the *Scotichronicon* of John Fordun, see *Irish Historical Documents: 1172-1922* (ed. Curtis and McDowell), pp. 38-46; see also Wood, 'Letter from Domnal O'Neill to Fineen Mac Carthy, 1317', in *Proc. Roy. Ir. Acad.* 37 C 7.

³ *Irish Classical Poetry* (2nd ed.), p. 72.

existence today which were written before the year 1600 is relatively small. It is hard to say how many there are, since several collections have not been fully catalogued yet, but it is likely that the number is not more than 200. Certainly of more than 1,500 manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy and Trinity College in Dublin hardly more than a hundred can be assigned with reasonable certainty to the sixteenth century or earlier. Moreover, if we examine the pre-seventeenth-century manuscripts we will find that very few of them contain bardic poetry of the period from 1200 on.¹ The position, then, is that for most extant praise-poetry we are dependent on scribes who lived at anything from one to six centuries after the supposed authors, and unless the poems themselves contain sufficient information to identify their authors and their subjects we have little means of checking scribal ascriptions or of supplying the names of authors of poems which are anonymous in the manuscripts or of establishing dates of composition.

While it is generally accepted that even late scribal ascriptions are reasonably trustworthy, one possibility should not be lost sight of, for it is one which would be in accord with the tradition of which I spoke in the first part of this lecture: that is, that the technique of projecting back may have been used in the Classical Irish period as well as earlier. In illustration of this I must be content with outlining for you in the remainder of my lecture a problem which exists in relation to one of the earliest known poets of the post-Invasion period. I do this in particular because it raises again the question of the trustworthiness of the last of the great compilations of annals, that of the 'Four Masters', and the possibility that in it we have the final working-up of a conglomeration of texts from former times, and especially of material relevant to the glorification of the O'Donnells, who from relatively unimportant forebears, became the leaders of Cenél Conaill from the thirteenth century on.

Three praise-poets of the thirteenth century are particularly familiar to us from poems ascribed to them. They are Muireadhach Ó Dálaigh, Giolla Brighde Albanach (of unknown surname), and Giolla Brighde Mac Conmidhe. The second and third were for long taken to be one and the same person, but

¹ Exceptions include the Book of Uí Maine, Book of MacGauran, both fourteenth-century; Yellow Book of Lecan, Book of Fermoy, Book of Lismore, Brit. Mus. Add. 19995, all fifteenth-century; and the Book of the Dean of Lismore, Oxford Rawl. B. 514, Brit. Mus. 33993, and RIA 24 P 25, sixteenth-century.

Gerard Murphy has shown conclusively that they belonged to different periods of the century.¹ Now if we may judge from their work these three poets were in the top class in their profession. Nevertheless none of them is mentioned in the main collections of annals, although there are entries about other poets of whose work we know nothing. Muireadhach Ó Dálaigh does, however, feature in the annals of the 'Four Masters', where a strange story about him is recorded. To him, under a variety of names, are ascribed elsewhere some twenty-two poems.² Thirteen of them are praise-poems or poems addressed to well-known thirteenth-century figures, including Cathal Croibhdhearg Ó Conchobhair, King of Connacht, who died in 1224, Alún Mac Muireadhaigh, Laird of Lennox in Scotland, who died in or before 1225, Domhnall Mór Ó Domhnaill, King of Cenél Conaill, who died in 1241, Donnchadh Cairbreach Ó Briain, King of Thomond, who died in 1242, and a Norman Lord, Richard de Burgo, who died in 1243. One of the poems is in the form of a dialogue, supposedly between the King of Connacht and the poet on the occasion of their accepting the tonsure. Another is said to have been composed in the Adriatic while the author was journeying home from the Holy Land. The poet would appear to have been on intimate terms with the most outstanding rulers in Ireland at that time and to have addressed himself with confidence and almost with an air of effrontery to the son of one of the Norman invaders.

Although the poems are highly interesting as being among the earliest specimens of Classical Irish verse, what is intriguing about them is the way in which they can be made to fit into a framework provided for them in the entry I have already mentioned which is given in the Annals of the 'Four Masters' under the year 1213. According to this Muireadhach Ó Dálaigh, resenting the behaviour of a steward of Domhnall Mór Ó Domhnaill who came to the poet's house to collect tribute, took an adze and killed the steward. Then fearing O'Donnell's anger he fled for protection to de Burgo in Clanricard in Galway. O'Donnell pursued him and de Burgo was forced to send the poet south to Thomond where Donnchadh Cairbreach Ó Briain kept him until he, too, was forced by O'Donnell to send the poet away. So the pursuit continued until finally Ó Dálaigh fled to Dublin. O'Donnell turned back at that, but soon made another hosting and went

¹ *Éigse*, iv. 90-96.

² See Ó Cuív, 'Eachtra Mhuireadhaigh Í Dhálaigh', in *Studia Hibernica*, i. 56-69.

to Dublin, so that the people of Dublin were forced to send the unfortunate poet from them to Scotland. There he remained until he made three poems of praise asking for peace and forgiveness from O'Donnell. This he obtained, and O'Donnell received the poet into friendship with him and gave estates and territory to him as he wished.

Now among the names which we find in manuscript ascriptions accompanying the poems already referred to are Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh, or simply Muireadhach Albanach. Such ascriptions are found, for instance, in the sixteenth-century Scottish 'Book of the Dean of Lismore'. Moreover, in one poem the poet himself uses the name Muireadhach Albanach. With this might be linked the claim that the Mac Mhuireadhach or Mac Vuirich family of Scotland, who for long were hereditary bards to the Clanranald family, are descended from an ancestor called Muireadhach Albanach. This claim is found in two Mac Vuirich genealogies which date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹ It might well be argued as likely that our poet, having spent many years in exile, would have left descendants in Scotland and that the first generation after him might have abandoned their father's surname, Ó Dálaigh, and named themselves from his Christian name, Muireadhach, since he was the first of their family to have settled in Scotland. However, the Mac Vuirich genealogies are unsatisfactory evidence, for they disagree in matters of detail. When we look to Irish genealogies for evidence we find that in late collections² Muireadhach Ó Dálaigh is named with a different sobriquet but no descendants are given. However, he and his supposed brothers, many of whom are represented as founding branches of the Ó Dálaigh bardic family, are given a respectable pedigree back to Fergal mac Maíle Dúin, the eighth-century King of Ireland whom we have met already. Our suspicions are aroused when we turn to the older body of genealogies, for none of the immediate ancestors of the Ó Dálaigh clan are found there and there is no record of the son of Fergal mac Maíle Dúin from whom they are supposed to be descended.

Turning to the poems themselves we find that in the address

¹ See *Highland Society Report on Ossian*, p. 275, Watson, *Rosg Gàidhlig*, p. 139, for the later genealogy. The earlier one, for a copy of which I am indebted to the Rev. William Matheson of the University of Edinburgh, is contained in the MacNicol MSS. in the National Library of Scotland.

² RIA MS. 23 Q 10, p. 36^v, Mac Fírhisigh Book of Genealogies (in University College, Dublin), p. 133, O Clery Genealogies (ed. Pender), § 592.

to Richard de Burgo Ó Dálaigh describes himself as fleeing to the Norman lord for protection against O'Donnell whom he has angered by killing a churl of his.¹ In one poem to O'Donnell,² which is certainly an appeal for peace and reconciliation, there is apparently another clear reference to the cause of their quarrel, and in another poem Ó Dálaigh represents himself as having been away from his native land for fifteen years.³ All this and more internal evidence adds up to a strong *prima facie* case in favour of the annalistic account. Unfortunately the annal itself raises great difficulties with regard to contemporary history, for according to my historian colleagues Richard de Burgo was almost certainly not installed as early as 1213 in what was later known as the Clanrickard territory in Connacht, and the idea that Domhnall Ó Domhnaill could have enforced his will on the people of Thomond and subsequently on the people of Dublin within three years of King John's visit to Ireland is, it seems, out of the question.

We may wonder, then, Is the fugitive Muireadhach Albanach Ó Dálaigh the creation of a later age—by someone, perhaps, who was interested in the history of the early part of the thirteenth century and in the undoubtedly important chieftains who lived then? At least some of the poems, like those attributed to Queen Gormlaith, might then be part of yet another historical cycle nearer to our times. It might even be significant in this regard that each of the Irish chieftains I already mentioned is given particular prominence in other contexts—Donnchadh Cairbreach Ó Briain in later accounts of the O'Briens as found in *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh* and elsewhere, Cathal Croibhdhearg Ó Conchobhair in the accounts of thirteenth-century events in Connacht in the western collections of annals, and Domhnall Mór Ó Domhnaill, as I have already said, in the accounts of the O'Donnell genealogies. Furthermore there is the fact that there is extant a romantic tale, possibly composed in the sixteenth century, about another Ó Dálaigh poet, Cearbhall, said to be son of Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh, head of a poetic school in Finvara in Co. Clare. This tale has a link with Scotland, for Cearbhall's supposed romance was with Farbhlaith, daughter of the King of Scotland.⁴ Nevertheless I am not completely satisfied that this is the correct solution of

¹ *Studies*, June 1924, pp. 241-6.

² *Proc. Brit. Acad.* v. 130-2.

³ *Ibid.* 132-3.

⁴ See *Ériu*, iv. 47-67, *Irishleabhar Muighe Nuadh* (1928), pp. 26-45.

our problem, especially in view of the fact that eminent scholars, including Quiggin, Bergin, McKenna, and Murphy, have in the past accepted the Muireadhach Albanach story as being substantially correct. Unfortunately I can as yet provide no other which will fully meet the objections raised by the historians.

The problem of Muireadhach Ó Dálaigh, which has been chosen to illustrate the 'bardic' material, is but one of many which confront the student of Early Modern Irish literature. It is likely that the solution of one will help us in our approach to others. Each fact established in relation to Irish literary and historical tradition, whether from the Old Irish or the late Modern Irish period, can contribute something to our apparatus for dealing with our material, be it the fact that an unnamed ninth-century monk penned in a manuscript of Priscian an allusion to Viking raiders or the fact that a nineteenth-century farmer-scholar treated in a mock-heroic manner a contemporary local skirmish.

Had Keating continued his *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* beyond the twelfth century the problems which beset us in examining this later material in prose and verse would, I suspect, have troubled him very little, for he had a capacity for ignoring, or not seeing, chronological difficulties, anachronisms, and other contradictions. We live in a more demanding age in which the literary and linguistic scholar must be prepared to consider the views of the historian and vice versa. Perhaps in some small way this lecture will contribute to the promotion of such an exchange in the field of Irish tradition.