

Obituary: Anders Ahlqvist (1945–2018)



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ANDERS AHLQVIST (1945–2018)

THE world of Celtic Studies suffered a profound loss when Anders Ahlqvist died unexpectedly on 23 August 2018. Anders had served as Chairman of the Governing Board of the School of Celtic Studies since 2005. At the time of his death, he was also Professor Emeritus at the National University of Ireland, Galway; Docent of Celtic Studies at the University of Helsinki; Honorary Professor at the University of Sydney; Secretary of the Permanent Bureau for the International Congress of Celtic Studies; and a member of the Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters.

Anders first came to Ireland in 1963 to spend a holiday on the Aran Islands, and it must have been there that the seeds of his life-long devotion to the Irish language were sown. Having graduated from the University of Helsinki in 1969 with a degree in Classical and Nordic Philology and General Linguistics, he attended the Summer School of the School of Celtic Studies, and enrolled for the academic year 1969–70 as a visiting postgraduate student in University College Dublin. During that year, he was a regular participant in the seminars of the School of Celtic Studies. He went on to study General Linguistics and Celtic Studies in Edinburgh, and under the direction of Kenneth Jackson, completed his doctoral dissertation on *The History of the Adverb in Irish* in 1974. He then returned to Dublin as a Scholar in the School of Celtic Studies, and in 1976 was appointed Statutory Lecturer in Old and Middle Irish at University College Galway. In 2005, he took early retirement from what had become the National University of Ireland, Galway, his rank at that time being Personal Professor. During his years in Galway, Anders was a frequent traveller on the train to Dublin, not least in order to attend the annual Statutory Lecture and *Tionól* of the School of Celtic Studies. He would frequently venture further afield as well, to conduct research and to attend and speak at conferences. He served as Acting Professor and Head of Department of General Linguistics at the University of Helsinki (1988–9), and Visiting Professor of Celtic, University of Utrecht (2004–5).

Throughout his career he also spent as much time as he could in his home country, Finland. In 1979 he was appointed Docent of Celtic Studies at the University of Helsinki. The title of docent testifies to the esteemed position of its holders in the academic community, and enables them to teach and supervise research at the University. Anders accordingly gave Celtic (and especially Old Irish) courses there from time to time under the aegis of the Department of General Linguistics. He inspired a group of enthusiastic young scholars to join him in founding the Finnish Society for Celtic Studies in 1991. The society thrived: it has organized a number of successful international conferences in Celtic Studies, and since 2004 has regularly published its yearbook, *Studia Celtica Fennica*. The second volume of the yearbook is a festschrift

for Anders, in which he is aptly described as the ‘founding father’ of Finnish Celtic Studies.

Three years after he retired from his Galway professorship, Anders became, in 2008, the inaugural Sir Warwick Fairfax Professor of Celtic Studies at the University of Sydney. The considerable impact of his five-year tenure of that chair is described and commemorated in *The Land Beneath the Sea: Essays in Honour of Anders Ahlqvist's Contribution to Celtic Studies in Australia*, edited by his friend and colleague Pamela O'Neill. She coined for him the title *Ollam na nÉces* in recognition of his status as a Scholars' Scholar.

He has indeed left us a formidable body of scholarship, written variously in English, Irish, French, Swedish and Finnish, and ranging from short notes on a wide variety of linguistic topics to his edition of the canonical part of *Auraicept na nÉces*, which was published in 1983 by the Finnish Society of Sciences and Letters. He began to publish in 1972, while he was still a graduate student; one of his pieces from that year is a study of the copula in Irish, which vindicates the analysis set forth in the Irish grammatical tradition from the *Auraicept na nÉces* onwards. That tradition was one of the major strands in his subsequent scholarship. He wrote on linguistic typology and language contact; in recent years he became increasingly preoccupied with the question of Celtic influence on English. He was especially interested in grammatical terminology, and he produced a pamphlet on the grammatical terms of Old Irish, *Téarmaí Gramadaí na Sean-Ghaeilge*. Pedagogical considerations were doubtless to the fore when he worked on that pamphlet, as they certainly were when he authored his *Grammatical Tables for Old Irish*.

No brief account could do justice to the scope of his published work, but mention must be made of one other strand in his scholarship. Over the years he published textual notes on words, phrases or passages in Irish tales and poems. *Audacht Morainn* fascinated him: he went so far as to produce an edition of it, with a translation into French, and returned to it from time to time over the years. He wrote about many of the early poems preserved in more or less contemporaneous manuscripts, and it seems fitting that one of his finest achievements in scholarship is his posthumously published edition of ‘The Milan Poem’, which is the title given by him to the riddling poem preserved on the first leaf of the ninth-century manuscript that contains the Milan glosses.

Many of his publications were based on conference presentations, and indeed he was himself a prodigious and exceptionally able organizer of conferences and editor of conference proceedings. In this respect, as in many others, he was a great enabler of other people's work.

Anders was the most convivial and hospitable of men. He was a loyal and generous friend, and among his many friends he counted individuals from all phases of his life from schooldays onwards, and from the various places in which he resided over the years. He was renowned as a superb teacher and mentor, and he was always eager to help younger scholars to do their very best work and thereby advance their careers.

A Companion in Linguistics, the title of the festschrift presented to him by friends and colleagues on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday, was singularly well-chosen. It is as a witty, erudite and humane friend and companion that many of us will remember Anders. Our heartfelt sympathies go to his wife Judith, his son Jacob, and his wider family. He will be greatly missed by his friends and colleagues as well, but we must be thankful for, and celebrate what he has given us: his scholarship and academic leadership have left tangible fruit in the publications written or edited by him, and the intangible effects of his mentorship and encouragement of countless young scholars will enhance the field of Celtic Studies for many years to come.

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