

Review: *Altirische Erzählkunst* (Corthals)



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and 'In retrospect' sections, which are well-suited for introducing the topic of Viking Ireland and stimulating big-picture thinking. Others may appeal more to researchers looking for up-to-date interpretations of Viking activity at specific geographical locations (Simpson on Dublin, for instance). Certain essays seem particularly likely to attract readers with existing specialist knowledge and appetites for thought-provoking new contributions (Ní Mhaonaigh, 'A man of two faces', Downham, 'The break-up of Dál Riata') — although, thanks to crystal-clear writing, even these will be accessible enough for keen non-specialists to enjoy. Any readers hoping to use this book as a source of ideas for Viking-related experimentation in the creative arts might well be drawn to O'Sullivan's examination of the glass beads found in mysterious Dunmore cave, or Clarke's suggestion that Sitriuc Silkenbeard could be 'one of those characters in search of an author'.

Overall, it is difficult to imagine how this lovely volume could have been improved, other than by adding a few more maps, here and there (for readers such as myself with limited knowledge of Irish geography), and perhaps also by ensuring that all sources quoted in translation were accompanied by the relevant original-language texts. This is a colourful and authoritative collection which is highly recommended for specialist researchers, university-level students, and other Irish history enthusiasts looking for fresh perspectives and exciting new questions to consider.

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Altirische Erzählkunst. Johan Corthals. Revised edition, CreateSpace, 2016. 123 pp. €9.95. ISBN 978-1530451562.

Johan Corthals's new edition of his book, *Altirische Erzählkunst* (first edition: Forum Celticum. Studien zu keltischen Sprachen und Kulturen 1, Münster, 1996), contains translations of eight tales along with an introductory overview of early Irish, a pronunciation guide, and bibliographical details and suggested reading. The tales translated in the new edition of the book are the same as in the 1996 version: *Organ Denna Ríg*, a section of *Tochmarc Étaíne*, *Scéla Mucce meic Dathó*, *Echtra mac nEchach Mugmedóin*, *Tochmarc Becfolá*, *Siaburcharpat Conculaind*, *Immram Snédgusa ocus Mac Riagla* and the beginning of *Acallam na Senórach*. The new edition explicitly states the aim of the book, namely to serve as an introduction to the world of early Irish narratives primarily for those who are not familiar with it ('Dieses kleine Buch möchte in die fremde und fremdartige Welt seines Themas einführen', preface). To my knowledge there are relatively few modern German translations of medieval Irish texts from the original, some of which are by Corthals, and further translations carried out by someone with a scholarly background in the discipline present a noteworthy contribution in attempts to make the material accessible to general readers in German-speaking countries. For this reason alone, the book, in its original edition and in the new edition,

is valuable, and both the old and the new version meet the goal of providing an introduction to the topic. Given the inclusion of background information and bibliographical details, one might imagine that the book will not only be useful to the interested public, but may also provide easier access to the subject for German-speaking students and scholars of other disciplines.

In reviewing this book, I have focussed in particular on the readability and usefulness of the book as an introduction to medieval Irish literature, with particular attention to the differences between this edition and the 1996 version. However, one point of criticism must be mentioned at the outset as it pertains to the 1996 edition and was carried over to the new edition. This is the choice of title, *Altirische Erzählkunst*, for a book which includes translations of texts that post-date the Old Irish period; moreover, this title does not do justice to the much wider scope of the Introduction. While it would obviously not have been possible to change the title at this stage, it is also noticeable that no mention is made of Middle Irish and it appears to be subsumed under the term *altirisch*, although the term *frühirisch* is also used (new edition, p. 11). This is a point that could have been received more attention in the new edition and would have complemented the overall more sensitive approach to matters of textual transmission in the new edition, referred to below.

However, returning to my main focus, it must be noted that, leaving aside changes in wording that are found here and there — the new edition uses the term ‘Normannen’ instead of ‘Wikinger’, for example — substantial changes have been made to the structure and content of the Introduction (pp. 7–40 in the new edition; pp. [1]–[26] in the 1996 edition). While Corthals clearly retains the modern concept of cycles in his Introduction (Ulster cycle, Finn cycle, King tales, mythological cycle), he addresses the problems associated with this in both the old (pp. 8–9) and the new edition (p. 16) and proposes organising the texts according to the time at which the events narrated are said to have taken place. Within this overall structure, however, material has been slightly reorganised in the new version, resulting in a different order of sections and in voyage tales no longer being subsumed under the heading ‘Erzählungen zur frühen christlichen Zeit’. As part of this overhaul of the Introduction, Corthals has also added a section on translations of classical works, making the Introduction more wide-ranging. Corthals has also removed material: the old edition contained an image of a passage from fol. 269a of Ó Longáin’s facsimile of the Book of Leinster with a transcription in order to provide a visual idea of the work involved in accessing medieval texts (p. [26]), which is no longer included in the new edition. While this practical aspect is important, it is a topic that requires more than a sample photograph of a facsimile to do it justice, and it is indeed perhaps best omitted in favour of more information on the main focus of the book: the texts and the culture which produced them.

At the end of the Introduction, Corthals includes a more detailed and useful paragraph than found in the old edition on his approach to translating the texts and to the conventions used to indicate verse and untranslated words. Given the book’s aim to introduce the subject to those unfamiliar with early Irish literature, and perhaps medieval literature more generally, a note on issues

of style such as shifts between past and present tenses might also have been beneficial, but this is a minor point and does not take away from the fact that Corthals's Introduction fulfils its aim of giving a first overview that is fleshed out by the translations that follow. Similarly, the section on the pronunciation of Irish names and terms provided at the end of the book (pp. 108–113) is a useful and sensible new addition. The previous edition merely contained some guidance on pronunciation in its brief introductory note on the translations themselves (p. [27]).

With the exception of *Siaburcharpat*, the same editions are used as the basis for Corthals's translations in the new and in the old edition of the book. For *Siaburcharpat*, Corthals now also takes the editions by Meyer (1910) and Ó Béarra (2004) into account. Nevertheless, there are some significant differences between the translations in the old and the new versions of Corthals's book. Each translation is prefaced by a short introduction to the text in question, and some of these introductions have been changed. For example, the introduction to *Echtra mac nEchach* provides more information on the Uí Néill than the old edition without losing itself in details. One of the more immediately obvious changes to the translations themselves is that Corthals's new edition includes footnotes in the text, while the old version does not. These include information such as the localisation of places, additional information regarding characters, general notes on matters relating to medieval scribal practice (for example, on the practice of glossing; see p. 46, n. 2), literal translations of passages rendered more freely in the main text, and other issues of translation. Occasionally the relevance of a note is not entirely clear, and more thorough editing might have been helpful — the note 'Aed war ein häufiger Name' on p. 78 is an example — but the notes are generally a welcome addition to the translations.

The changes to the translations themselves vary greatly in their nature. In some instances errors due to oversight in the original edition are corrected: for example, the old version erroneously translates *Luid iar sin co techta Ulad* (Thurneysen 1935: 5) as 'Darauf ging er zu den Gesandten von Connacht' (p. 46), but this has been corrected in the new edition (p. 58). There are also differences in wording which are superficial in that they do not change the meaning but in some cases make the German text read more easily; examples of this are 'es sei denn, er hätte es gegen Widerstand bekommen' (old edition, p. 62) versus the clearer if less literal 'es sei denn, er hat sich gegen Widerstand durchgesetzt' (new edition, p. 77) for *acht ina gabad co fresabra* (Stokes 1903: 202) and 'Diese Blut war soviel wie Reliquie und Kommunion zusammen' instead of 'Dieses Blut hatte die Substanz einer Kommunion und einer Reliquie' (old edition, p. 80) for *Ba comnai 7 ba cretra in fuil-sin* (Stokes 1888: 20). The reason for some other changes in wording, however, is not as obvious, especially as some less readable phrases have been retained. For example, the translation of the phrase *airchisis Crist doib* (Stokes 1888: 18) in *Immram Snédgusa ocus Mac Riagla* has been changed from the more general and perfectly idiomatic 'erbarmte sich Christus ihrer' (old edition, p. 79) to the more liturgical-sounding 'erbarmte sich Christus über sie' (new edition, p. 97),

but ‘Warum verkehren wir nicht miteinander?’ (old edition, p. 67; new edition, p. 84) for *Cid ná comraicim* (Bhreathnach 1984: 75) has been left to stand although the most common senses of ‘miteinander verkehren’ are simply ‘to be in regular contact’ or ‘to interact’. Bhreathnach’s (1984: 79) translation, ‘Why don’t we become lovers?’, could have served as a model if the aim was to avoid wording that was felt to be too blunt. There may be reasons for some of the more unusual word choices — the translation ‘Frauenzimmer’ (old edition, pp. 31–2; new edition, p. 44), for example, which sounds rather old-fashioned, is presumably a way of translating *banscál* in a way that distinguishes it from *ben*; however, as the word is at odds with the style of the translation in general, the more neutral term ‘Frau’ might have been preferable or a note might have been added clarifying the usage. There are also some other slightly unusual usages: for example, the abbreviation ‘nl.’ is used, apparently to mean ‘nämlich’, but to my knowledge, this is not particularly common.

While it is clearly sensible not to overload a text with footnotes and specialist details if it is aimed at an audience who may not have experienced these texts before, there are some examples where footnotes might have had some interest for general readers too. One example is ‘Bachbunge’ (new edition, p. 106), used to translate Irish *fochlocht* instead of the general ‘sonstiges Grünzeug’ used in the old edition (p. 86). However, as the entry in *DIL* indicates, the exact identity of *fochlocht* is not clear; thus, while the translation ‘Bachbunge’ is in line with the translation ‘brooklime’ that is found in English texts, it is in fact an interpretation of the Irish word. A note explaining this would reflect the amount of lexicographical work, and at times interpretation, that can be involved in translation, which might well be of interest even to a general audience.

There are also more significant changes to the translation, which affect the sense of the text and which justify Corthals’s claim to having revised and improved this edition. In *Echtra mac nEchach*, the verses beginning *A ri Temra, is me in flaithius* (Stokes 1903: 200, but only the first couplet cited) have been translated differently in the new edition (p. 75) from the old (pp. 60–1), reflecting a mixture of more superficial changes to increase readability and a revision of some passages. In this particular case, a gloss on the text that was incorporated in brackets in the old edition has been placed in a footnote. This suggests a more nuanced approach to the text, and the reader’s attention is directed more strongly towards manuscript variation. A further example of this is the fact that the final sentence in *Staburcharpát* has been changed to follow the edition in Meyer (1910) rather than the text of *LU*, with a footnote added to draw attention to a potential contradiction in the text. Moreover, Feargal Ó Béarra’s as yet unpublished edition of the text has been taken into account, which has presumably also contributed to some of the changes in the translation of this text. In addition, more caution is applied in the translation of some uncertain passages throughout the book, for example, some of Torna Éces’s words at the beginning of *Echtra mac nEchach*, translated in their entirety in the old edition (p. 56), but omitted as uncertain in the new edition (p. 69).

The bibliographical section at the end of the book provides further reading on the subjects discussed in the Introduction. It takes the form of a literature overview rather than a list of references, which is a more helpful way of pointing the non-specialist reader towards relevant further resources. Following this, Corthals provides a paragraph on each of the texts, in which he gives details on the editions used as the basis of the translations. Other sources must, however, also have been used, at least in one case and perhaps also in others: only the first couplet is provided in the edition of *A ri Temra, is me in flaithius* from *Echtra mac nEchach*, but Corthals translates several verses. This is not a major problem from the point of view of usability for a novice to the subject, assuming that someone attempting to get a first impression of early Irish literature is unlikely to want to compare Corthals's translation to the edited text. However, it limits the extent to which the book can also be used by more advanced readers, and, for accuracy, this information might have been included.

The 1996 edition also contained this bibliographical section, but in the new edition, Corthals has organised it according to the new structure of the Introduction and has updated the sources cited with some more recent publications; among these are articles from vol. 1 of the *Cambridge History of Irish Literature* (Kelleher and O'Leary 2006), O'Connor's study of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (O'Connor 2013), and Dooley and Roe's (1999) translation of *Acallam na Senórach*. While this section of the book is clearly meant only as a starting point and not a comprehensive literature review, a few other publications that have appeared since 1996 might also have been mentioned, for example, Muireann Ní Bhrolcháin's *An Introduction to Early Irish Literature* (Ní Bhrolcháin 2009) in the paragraph on early Irish literature on p. 115 and Ciaran Carson's translation of the *Táin* (Carson 2007) in the paragraph on the *Táin* on p. 117. In addition to this, there is no mention of online resources, which now play a significant role and for which guidance can be particularly important. Moreover, they have the significant practical benefit of being available to a reader who does not have ready access to an academic library. Examples of useful online resources would have been, amongst others, the CELT website (<https://celt.ucc.ie/>), the CODECS database (<http://vanhamel.nl/codecs/Home>), and the electronic version of the Bibliography of Irish Linguistics and Literature published (<https://bill.celt.dias.ie/>) by the School of Celtic Studies at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies.

With regard to the bibliographical details regarding the translated texts, in the new version of Corthals's book, unlike in the 1996 edition, references to other translations of the text, be they into English or German, are no longer given, except in the case of *Immram Snédgusa*. In addition to this inconsistency, there are some errors and typographical problems that could have been avoided by more thorough proof-reading (for example, Stokes's edition of *Echtra mac nEchach* is from 1903 and not 1905 and Ó Béarra's edition of *Siaburcharpát* is a PhD thesis, not a 'Diplomarbeit'), but most of these do not limit the usefulness of this section.

All of this said, the bibliographical section may overall serve as a good starting point for anyone interested in pursuing the subjects introduced in the book. The same applies to the book as a whole: despite some points of criticism above — not all of which may, after all, be relevant to a reader seeking an introduction as opposed to someone with prior knowledge of the subject — this book is a useful and overall very readable introduction in German to early medieval Irish narrative in general, and it provides access to some of the best known early Irish narratives. While the reasons for some of the revisions are not entirely obvious, the restructuring of the book and the expanded Introduction and revised bibliographical section are beneficial. Given that Celtic studies may sometimes be perceived of as somewhat peripheral, this updated introduction to the subject, which is aimed at bringing the subject matter to a new audience by providing reliable information and translations and which shows the historical, philological and literary research involved in dealing with medieval Irish narratives, is a welcome publication.

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