

Review: *Studies in Irish Mythology*
(Bondarenko)



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expressed most stridently on p. xii of his preface, that generations of scholars of medieval Irish literature have been distracted by misguided notions of Indo-European mythology and Dumézilian essentialism, rather than studying medieval Irish literature as the European literature that it is and as the product of a thoroughly Christian intellectual élite. The format of this publication places medieval Irish literature firmly within the European canon.

Donnchadh Ó Corráin often signs off emails with the phrase ‘prospere procede’, from Psalm 44:4–5, which reads:

*Accingere gladio tuo super femur tuum, potentissime.
Specie tua et pulchritudine tua intende, prospere procede,
et regna, propter veritatem, et mansuetudinem, et iustitiam;
et deducet te mirabiliter dextera tua.*

Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O thou most mighty.
With thy comeliness and thy beauty set out, proceed prosperously, and reign, because of truth and meekness and justice: and thy right hand shall conduct thee wonderfully.

With *Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium*, Professor Ó Corráin has provided us with a weapon which future generations can use in order that our discipline can proceed prosperously. He has given us a mighty gift indeed. For the next generation of scholars, it remains for us to pursue truth, armed with the wisdom and knowledge that Ó Corráin has encapsulated in this work. This is scholarship at its best, but it is also a powerful symbol and a call to arms. There is much for us to do.

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Studies in Irish Mythology. Grigory Bondarenko. Curach Bhán Publications, Berlin, 2014. ix + 287 pp. €35. ISBN 978-3-942002-15-8.

Grigory Bondarenko's *Studies in Irish Mythology* is a collection of sixteen essays discussing matters of Irish mythology as well as Slavic and Indic mythology in comparison to the Irish material. While there is no overarching theme other than that suggested by the title, the following Irish texts receive the greatest amount of attention: *Airne Fíngéin*, *Dindsenchas Érenn*, and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on kingship and the treatment of space and time in medieval Irish literature, as well as on aspects of cosmology and numerology. The book also has a philological component in that it provides editions and translations of several poems and prose pieces. Bondarenko is well-placed for this type of comparative work: he gives insights into the scholarship of Russian medievalists and Celticists whose work has informed his own, and makes available their scholarship, in distilled form, to a non-Russian-speaking readership.

The description on the back cover states that '[s]ome chapters of this book were published previously in different periodicals and proceedings of conferences'. While this practice may seem puzzling to some readers, it is promised that those chapters were 'reworked and updated' for the present volume. This is not quite accurate. Thirteen of the sixteen chapters in the book have already appeared elsewhere, which leaves three new chapters. One of the three new chapters in the collection, Chapter 11, 'Roads and knowledge in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*', actually appeared simultaneously in *Celtic Cosmology* (ed. Jacqueline Borsje *et al.*, Toronto, 2014) though neither version acknowledges the existence of the other. Upon closer examination, the changes undertaken by Bondarenko are mostly cosmetic, being limited to the odd explanatory paragraph here and additional reference there. Indeed, I cannot say that the new versions provide any new insight beyond what the original versions achieved. While some typographical errors in the original versions have been rectified, I am afraid to say that as many new errors have appeared in the new versions, something which could easily have been avoided with rigorous proof-reading. Since much of the material in this book has already been reviewed (in reviews of the original volumes in which it appeared) in my review I will place greater emphasis on the new material in the book.

The first new chapter in Bondarenko's book offers a new edition and discussion of the poem on the famous tree *Eó Rossa*, which has survived in the Book of Leinster (199b–200a) and in the Yellow Book of Lecan (col. 330). The author's statement that the text is 'from the *Dindsenchas*' needs to be refined. In *LL*, the poem occurs as part of a prosimetric article between the poem on Mide attributed to Aed úa Carthaig (*MD* ii, 42–5) and the prose section on Ceilbe. In *YBL*, the poem forms part of an independent text relating the destruction of famous trees during a storm in AD 665, but this text has no connection to the *Dindsenchas* found in the same manuscript in cols 401–36. Indeed, unless we count the example in *LL*, *Eó Rossa* does not form part of *Dindsenchas C*, the prosimetric version, at all. But Bondarenko is right in pointing out the absence of that poem from Gwynn's *Metrical Dindshenchas*, since Gwynn did include other poems found exclusively in *LL*. While Bondarenko's focus is clearly on the Christian imagery and the literary interpretation of the poem, some more textual and linguistic discussion would have been helpful. In his commentary on the poem, Bondarenko notes '[t]he comparatives employed in the tree's description [...] (functioning as superlatives) [...]' (p. 76), referring to the phrases *saeriu crannaib* and *cāemiu dossai*b. This wording seems a little misleading: Bondarenko is not referring to the form of the comparative in *-(i)u* gradually replacing the Old Irish superlative in *-em/-am*, but to the comparative having the semantic force of a superlative in constructions like those given above. He translates them accordingly as 'noblest of the trees' and 'fairest of the bushy trees' (p. 71). Since no date was given in P. L. Henry's earlier edition of the poem, I would have been interested to know how old Bondarenko thought the poem was, especially in comparison to the syllabic poem on *Eó Mugna* and *Eó Rossa* in *LL*.

The second new chapter is called ‘*Búaid Cuinn rígróit rogaídi*—an alliterative poem from the *Dindsenchas*’. The poem is incorporated into the prose section of the prosimetric article on Slige Dala,¹ an article which survives in *Dindsenchas* Ba and in *Dindsenchas* C (as per Thurneysen’s division). Bondarenko supplies a first edition and translation of this poem (pp. 132–6), which had been omitted by Gwynn and by Stokes from their respective editions. He also gives a stemma of all the manuscripts which contain it. As we are dealing with yet another alliterative poem, its date and place within the *Dindsenchas* – especially given that it has never been edited before – are of importance. Yet I found Bondarenko’s dating of the poem the most confusing aspect of this chapter. While he begins by emphasizing the archaic nature of the *rosc* and its surmised ‘archaic’ metre, and mentions linking alliteration as a feature of seventh-century texts, he later (p. 130) states that ‘[s]ome features in the poem point to a Middle Irish date (approximately the 10th century).’ But further on again, he concludes (p. 154):

There are several examples in the poem, where its lexical material resembles that of the metrical *dindsenchas*, to which corpus the poem formally belongs. On the other hand, our alliterative poem contains some archaic forms, and its contents do not repeat or coincide with the syllabic version. It may be argued, that the *rosc* in its present form was composed at the same time as the syllabic poem (12th c.), but the source (X) used by the poet for its composition (or written fixation?) differs from the variant originated in *AF*.

First of all, linking alliteration is not a feature exclusive to seventh-century poetry, or indeed Old Irish poetry; in fact, traces of it persist, as James Carney stated, into Bardic verse (Carney 1981: 252). Furthermore, while there is consistent internal alliteration in the poem, there are only four instances of linking alliteration in 37 lines. Bondarenko then claims that the poem is Middle Irish. If that is the case, then I cannot agree with the automatic expansion of manuscript R’s *Tem-* as an *i*-stem genitive *Temra* in l. 15. While both *Temra* and *Temrach* were allowed according to metrical requirements beyond the Old Irish period, it should be noted that those variants of the poem which give the word *plene* write it as *Temrach*. The same guttural form *Temrach* (corroborated by variants) appears again in l. 23, and the noun is generally treated as a guttural stem elsewhere in the *Dindsenchas* (e.g. *MD* i, 36 (l. 98), metrically confirmed). Finally, Bondarenko’s conclusion that the *rosc* is from the twelfth century and was composed at the same time as the syllabic poem on Slige Dala seems surprising as he has not presented us with a discussion

¹This placename is correctly spelt *Slige Dala*, not **Slige Dála*, as given in Hogan’s *Onomasticon* (Hogan 1910: 613), and in the *Triads* (Meyer 1906: 6–7). See the rhyming pair *Dala: mara* in an example in *ochtfoclach mór* (Thurneysen 1891: 94). My thanks to Liam Breatnach for this reference.

of the latter. Even more surprising is his statement that the ‘contents do not repeat or coincide with the syllabic version’, meaning that he sees no overlap between *Búaid Cuinn* and the syllabic poem. But in his discussion of *Búaid Cuinn*, Bondarenko not only discusses its connection to *Airne Fíngéin*, but also to the syllabic poem. The two texts essentially tell the same story, and I would not exclude the possibility that *Búaid Cuinn* could have been one of the sources of the syllabic poem. Further research is needed here.

The following chapter, ‘Roads and knowledge in *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*’ looks at the actions of the doomed king Conaire in spatial terms. Specific focus is placed here on Conaire’s movements on the famous roads, Slige Chúalann, Slige Assail, and Slige Midlúachra, as well as his movements towards, and away from, the centre Tara. In quasi-Proprian fashion, Bondarenko lists all the instances of knowledge or absence thereof which are connected with the three roads (pp. 156–7). The use of maps (pp. 162 and 170) helps to visualise the king’s movements. Bondarenko (p. 174 n. 27) states that, at the time of publication, Ralph O’Connor’s monograph on *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (O’Connor 2013) was not available to him, but that he discussed some aspects of the work with O’Connor.

There are some problems with Bondarenko’s book which are not specific to any given chapter. The first is a near-complete lack of cross-referencing. At best, this will lead to confusion as to why the same text or topic keeps being reintroduced. For instance, the figure of Conn Cétchathach, who is the subject of Chapter 9, ‘Conn Cétchathach: the image of ideal kingship in Early Medieval Ireland’, and to a lesser extent, of Chapters 8 and 10, is reintroduced in Chapter 15, ‘Swineherds in Celtic Lands’ (p. 208): ‘The *dindsenchas* mention a certain Odba, the royal swineherd of a legendary high-king of Ireland, Conn Cétchathach, who was also a distinguished hunter of deer and birds.’ The famous tree Eó Rossa, which is the subject of Chapter 6 (discussed above), is reintroduced in the final chapter of the book (p. 231): ‘I mean the wonderful ancient tree variously called in the different manuscripts in *AF Eó Rossa* or *Eó Mugna*.’ In Chapter 16, Bondarenko discusses the connection between Eó Rossa and Fintan mac Bóchra; in Chapter 6 no mention is made of Fintan. While this is somewhat cumbersome, in other cases, information given can be completely contradictory. For example, in his chapter on *The Finding of the Táin*, Bondarenko mentions ‘the seventh-century alliterative poem “Eó Rossa” from the *dindsenchas*’ (p. 178). As discussed above, Bondarenko has edited that same poem in Chapter 6, where he does not give any clear indication of date. Bondarenko says that druids and *filid* are the same in Chapter 1, ‘Hiberno-Rossica: “knowledge in the clouds” in Old Irish and Old Russian’, but in Chapter 12, ‘Oral past and written present in “The Finding of the Táin”’, he mentions their ‘presumed opposition’ (p. 175). On this subject, Kim McCone’s *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, at the very least, should have been cited (McCone 1990).

The word *Dindsenchas*, when referring to the corpus, is variously spelt with upper-case, then with lower-case *d*, and sometimes with *sh*, sometimes with *s*, and now it is spelt with *nd*, now with *nn*. Sometimes it is italicised,

sometimes not. In general there seems to be very little engagement with the textual aspects of the *Dindsenchas*, which, even if the work's emphasis is literary rather than philological, are necessary for context. I also find myself wondering about the use of certain highly charged terms in the book, e.g. 'archaic', 'autochthon', 'historical', 'shamanic', 'microtext/megatext', etc. In Chapter 3, 'Authochthons and Otherworlds in Celtic and Slavic' (pp. 27–42), Bondarenko discusses the Túatha Dé Danann as autochthons even though *Cath Maige Tuired* as well as *Lebor Gabála* describe their arrival in Ireland from abroad. I also cannot understand what is meant by an 'oral druidic text' (p. 4) or 'the traditional pre-written corpus of place-lore' (p. 45).

On the whole, more recent scholarship should have been consulted – especially since the book's objective was to present an updated version of previous research. For instance, in Chapter 15, 'Swineherd [*sic*] in Celtic Lands', Bondarenko gives the date of *Buile Shuibhne* as thirteenth century. Since O'Keeffe's dating has since been revised, research by Pádraig Ó Riain (Ó Riain 1974) and Gearóid Mac Eoin (Mac Eoin 1989: 120) should have been cited here, and Alexandra Bergholm's more recent monograph on the tale (Bergholm 2012). But there is also older scholarship which should have been consulted, e.g. on p. 72, in a discussion of a poem ascribed to Cináed úa hArtacáin in *LL*, the poet's obit is given as 987, which is the incorrect date given by Lucius Gwynn in his edition of the poem. Thurneysen in his *Heldensage* (Thurneysen 1921: 608) and Gerard Murphy (Murphy 1952: 151, 152) give the correct date 975, as does John Carey in his entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Furthermore, the poem in question could not have been written by Cináed, as both Thurneysen (1921: 608) and Murphy point out (Murphy 1952: 155 n. 7). On archaic metres, there is much more scholarship to cite than just Watkins's article from *Celtica* 6 (Watkins 1963). When discussing comparisons between the *Iliad* and the *Táin*, Brent Miles's recent monograph should have been consulted (Miles 2011).

It is unfortunate that so many errors and inaccuracies mar this diverse and promising book, which has such a uniquely broad and interdisciplinary outlook. The Celto-Slavic comparisons are interesting although they offer no more insight beyond the thematic similarities between the texts compared. And, as Matthias Egeler has pointed out in his own review of the book (Egeler 2016: 237), there should be a clear distinction between a historical approach and a typological approach, especially as far as the comparative material is concerned. A second edition of the book should therefore have a stronger and clearer methodological framework and some of the content should be reorganised completely: I would suggest publishing all the material which is even loosely associated with Conn Cétchathach as one monograph – and all the material on *Airne Fíngéin* should be included here. This way, the *Dindsenchas* and its relationship to *Airne Fíngéin* can be explored further and more important textual groundwork covered. I would leave all Hiberno-Slavic comparisons for another publication so that, as Bondarenko states in his introduction (p. vii), the reader has indeed an 'integral text' before their eyes.

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A Dictionary of Irish Saints. Pádraig Ó Riain. Four Courts, Dublin and Portland, 2011. 660 pp. €58.50. ISBN 978-1-84682-318-3.

This wonderful publication is the first of its kind in the modern era. One has to journey back to John O'Hanlon's *Lives of the Irish Saints*, a multi-volume work published during the 1870s, and incomplete to boot, to find a predecessor. Needless to say, the present volume is vastly superior to that earlier publication. In the preface the author makes clear that this project is the work of many, albeit intermittent, years of labour. As readers we may rejoice in this publication in the sense 'better late than never'. Many such ambitious projects have been cruelly cut short by the unfortunate demise of their author. Thankfully, this is not the case with Professor Ó Riain.

In his introduction the author lists the main sources he has used, primarily saints' lives, martyrologies, calendars, and saints' genealogies. Under the heading 'Modern Sources' the author presents a highly illuminating assessment of the value of the contribution of the great John O'Donovan when working for the Ordnance Survey. O'Donovan, it appears, was greatly interested in the subject of local devotion to the saints and a keen recorder of ecclesiastical traditions.