Sagas, storytelling and humanist history in Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (*c.* 1634)

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SAGAS, STORYTELLING AND HUMANIST HISTORY IN GEOFFREY KEATING'S *FORAS FEASA AR ÉIRINN* (*c.* 1634)[1]

Abstract

Geoffrey Keating's use of mediaeval legendary narratives (*scéala*) as sources for his *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, or *History of Ireland*, is often seen as either an old-fashioned and uncritical aspect of his work, or as a sign that narrating a true history was not his primary intention. The present article explores Keating's treatment of these legendary sources, setting his work alongside contemporary humanist writings such as John Milton's *History of Britain* and alongside Keating's own devotional writings in order to gain a clearer understanding of how he conceptualized the veracity of legendary narratives. I argue that, despite his willingness to rely on many such sources, Keating's attitude towards *scéala* displays a critical approach that is consistent with the contemporary European humanist drive to expunge fables from history while also pushing back against colonial disparagement of Irish intellectual culture. In the process Keating redefined the narrative category *scéal*, distancing it from historical narrative in a manner which marks a turning-point in that term's semantic history.

Introduction

Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (1634), 'The basis of knowledge about Ireland' or *History of Ireland*, is widely recognized as a landmark in the development of modern Irish and Gaelic prose. A panoramic vernacular history of Ireland from the earliest times to the Anglo-Norman invasions, it gave a new lease of life to the longstanding Gaelic tradition of synthetic history exemplified by the mediaeval compilation *Lebor Gabála Érenn* ('The book of the taking of Ireland'). Keating recast that tradition in the mode of Renaissance humanism, writing primarily for a readership of Irish Catholic gentry who would have been familiar with some of the views held about Ireland by scholars across the British and Irish isles. In the process *Foras Feasa* forged a new Irish ethnic and political identity, powerfully vindicating Catholic Ireland's ownership of its own history against its colonial detractors.[2]

[1]I am very grateful to Ruairí Ó hUiginn, Feliks Levin, Michael Clarke, Pía Coira, Helen Lynch and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful feedback on earlier versions of this essay, and to Barbara Hillers for discussing specific points with me. All remaining errors are my responsibility.

[2]The fundamental overarching studies are Breandán Ó Buachalla, '*Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* is *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*: an comhthéacs comhaimseartha', *Studia Hibernica* 22–3 (1982–3), 59–105, and Bernadette Cunningham, *The World of Geoffrey Keating: History, Myth and Religion in*

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Keating's rhetorical gifts, rooted in Counter-Reformation polemic, Classical rhetoric and early modern preaching methods, combined with his verve as a storyteller to maintain his work's lasting hold on the attention of audiences at home and further afield, even if they disagreed with some of his views. To this day, extracts from *Foras Feasa* continue to be studied as exemplars of Early Modern Irish prose style.[3]

Part of Keating's aim in this work was to vindicate the value of mediaeval Gaelic source-material and underline the futility of passing judgement on Ireland's history without knowledge of the full range of these sources or the language in which they were written. These mediaeval sources included chronicles, historical poems, regnal lists, genealogies, lawtexts, saints' Lives and sagas. Keating presented them as a branching web of interrelated genres amounting to what he called *seanchus*, a word that usually denoted 'historical learning' in general terms (including oral lore) but was used by Keating specifically to refer to authoritative written texts about the past in any language.[4] Close attention to the sources (*ad fontes*) was a hallmark of humanist history-writing, and humanist historians across Europe prided themselves on their ability to treat such sources with greater critical acumen than their supposedly credulous mediaeval forebears. Part of Keating's point was to show that the range and value of mediaeval Gaelic sources went far beyond the superficial understandings of British and colonial scholars.[5]

Keating's anti-colonial project continues to resonate with his modern readers, but his attitude towards his mediaeval source-material is often seen as something to be apologized for or held up for disapproval. Besides the testimony of mediaeval Gaelic poems that Keating considered as valid historical sources, he also used numerous mediaeval Gaelic sagas, or *scéala*, about legendary figures such as Cú Chulainn and Cormac mac Airt as sources for Ireland's early history, as well as the saga-like narratives about Ireland's earliest settlers found in the prehistoric sections of *Lebor Gabála*. Keating took these narratives seriously as histories, reworking and carefully weaving them into the larger structure of *Foras Feasa*. Modern scholars, by contrast, tend to see these kinds of legendary narrative as imaginative compositions which tell us far more about the concerns of their authors' own times than about the remote events that they narrate.

Seventeenth-Century Ireland (Dublin, 2000). On identity-formation in *Foras Feasa* see also Brendan Bradshaw, 'Reading Seathrún Céitinn's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*', in Pádraig Ó Riain (ed.), *Geoffrey Keating's Foras Feasa ar Éirinn: Reassessments*, ITS Subsidiary Series 19 (London, 2008), 1–18.

[3]The standard text-book in this regard is Osborn Bergin (ed.), *Sgéalaigheacht Chéitinn: Stories from Keating's History of Ireland*, 3rd ed. (Dublin, 1930). On Keating's rhetorical agility, see Tadhg Ó Dúshláine, 'Medium and message: the rhetoric of *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*', in Ó Riain, *Geoffrey Keating's Foras Feasa*, 68–89. In this article I refer to the written language shared by mediaeval and early modern Gaels as 'Irish' and to their literatures and cultures as 'Gaelic'.

[4]On the breadth of genres encompassed by *seanchus*, see Francis John Byrne, '*Senchas*: the nature of Gaelic historical tradition', *Historical Studies* 9 (1974), 137–59. Feliks Levin points out to me (pers. comm.) that in his devotional writings, Keating also used the term *seanchus* to refer to authoritative ecclesiastical sources.

[5]On how Keating's political and confessional aims meshed with European humanist methodology, see Ó Buachalla, '*Annála Ríoghachta Éireann*'.

Keating's attitude looks naïve by comparison, and so he has often been dismissed as 'devoid of all historical criticism'.[6] Anne Cronin, in her painstaking study of Keating's use of *Lebor Gabála*, considered him to have had 'a rigid type of mind dominated by the accepted infallibility of the material'.[7] Donnchadh Ó Corráin went further, calling Keating's attitude that of a *símpleoir* ('simpleton') who accepted *gach rud* ('everything') that he found in his source-materials. Ó Corráin argued that *Foras Feasa* was both a step backward from his mediaeval predecessors and inferior to the work of his contemporaries.[8] Brian Ó Cuív has offered a similar appraisal in more measured tones.[9] Joep Leerssen, in an otherwise razor-sharp study of early modern Irish antiquaries, has declared that 'Keating wholly disregards any "modern" distinctions between mythical and historical, saga and record'. For Leerssen, Keating exemplifies the survival of mediaeval credulity about origin-legends in 'bardic-Gaelic learning', the product of a learned class whose colonial oppressors had succeeded in isolating them from 'the post-Renaissance, modern, scientifically minded climate of Europe'.[10]

Keating's scholarly credentials and his participation in the wider intellectual currents of humanism have been rehabilitated by more recent and more nuanced discussions, especially since the landmark studies by Breandan Ó Buachalla and Bernadette Cunningham.[11] Nonetheless, when it comes to the earlier parts of his history, Keating's source-criticism (or lack of it) is still often treated as something to be apologized for or got out of the way as quickly as possible in order to focus on aspects of his work that seem less vulnerable to negative critique.

I am not in the slightest degree suggesting that Keating's *Foras Feasa*, or the sagas that he used, represent accurate accounts of ancient Irish history. But it is important not to judge Keating by standards of historiography established much later, in the Enlightenment and Romantic eras, or to exaggerate his failings by that yardstick. Ó Corráin's indictment is based on the assumption that neither Keating's mediaeval predecessors nor his humanist contemporaries accepted the historicity of a great many accounts contained in sagas and other legendary narratives, and that he was out of line in taking these sources so literally.[12] On the first point, however, it is becoming increasingly clear

[6]Norman Moore, 'Keating, Geoffrey', in Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee (eds), *Dictionary of National Biography*, 63 vols (London, 1885–1900), xxx, 274.

[7]Anne Cronin, 'Sources of Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* 2: manuscript sources, chapter I', *Éigse* 5 (1945–7), 122–35, at 124.

[8]Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Seathrún Céitinn (c. 1580 – c. 1644): an cúlra stairiúil', in Pádraig Ó Mathúna (ed.), *Dúchas 1983–1984–1985* (Dublin, 1986), 56–68, at 56 and 64–5.

[9]Brian Ó Cuív, 'Literary creation and Irish historical tradition', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 49 (1963), 233–62, at 235–8.

[10]Joseph Th. Leerssen, 'On the edge of Europe: Ireland in search of oriental roots', *Comparative Criticism* 8 (1986), 91–112, at 97–8.

[11]Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, 75–6. Equally essential for the wider antiquarian context is Clare O'Halloran, *Golden Ages and Barbarous Nations: Antiquarian Debate and Cultural Politics in Ireland, c. 1750–1800* (Cork, 2004), 13–40.

[12]This view of mediaeval legendary narratives is expressed in, for example, Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Legend as critic', in Tom Dunne (ed.), *The Writer as Witness: Literature as Historical*

from reception-oriented studies of mediaeval Gaelic literature that Keating's scholarly predecessors did indeed use sagas about remote times as historical sources, even if they disagreed on points of detail, and that (as Ó Corráin himself conceded) *Lebor Gabála* long retained its status as an authoritative history.[13] Chronicles, sagas and *Lebor Gabála* reinforced each other's testimony, and sagas were valued for filling out the bare accounts in chronicles or genealogical compendia with further details about some of the more memorable figures, even if they did so in ways which *also* (rather than *instead*) invited symbolic or allegorical interpretation beyond the literal sense.[14] Keating was writing for a highly educated readership that already knew many of his legendary sources. As Cunningham rightly emphasizes, his contribution was to pin the events of those stories down into a timeline where they made sense as part of his larger historical master-narrative.[15] In this respect he continued and extended the synthesizing work of mediaeval Gaelic chronicles and national history-writing.

As for Keating's contemporary historians, their participation in similar projects can be seen in the renewal of the Gaelic annalistic tradition in the *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* ('Annals of the kingdom of Ireland' or *Annals of the Four Masters*) and a new recension of *Lebor Gabála*, both of these produced by Keating's Franciscan contemporary Micheál Ó Cléirigh and his associates. As Cunningham puts it, 'Keating's approach to the traditional interpretation of the past was consistent with that of his contemporaries'.[16] That said, Keating was not writing an annalistic chronicle but a narrative history, a very different genre of historical writing that allowed for the inclusion of a wider range of material and rhetorical techniques than annalistic chronicles permitted.[17]

Evidence (Cork, 1985), 23–38, at 29–30; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Irish origin legends and genealogy: recurrent aetiologies', in Tore Nyberg et al. (eds), *History and Heroic Tale: A Symposium* (Odense, 1985), 51–96, at 84–6.

[13]See, for example, Ó Corráin, 'Irish origin legends', 67–8.

[14]See, among many other studies, John Carey, *The Irish National Origin-Legend: Synthetic Pseudohistory*, Quiggin Pamphlets on the Sources of Medieval Gaelic History 1 (Cambridge, 1994), 22–4; Gregory Toner, 'The Ulster cycle: historiography or fiction?', *CMCS* 40 (Winter 2000), 1–20; Erich Poppe, 'Narrative history and cultural memory in medieval Ireland: some preliminary thoughts', in Jan Erik Rekdal and Erich Poppe (eds), *Medieval Irish Perspectives on Cultural Memory* (Münster, 2014), 135–76; Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, 'Irish world annals and universal chronicling: medieval Irish scholars and their "global turn" ', *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 40 (2021), 1–34; Ralph O'Connor, '*Scélšenchus* revisited: historical function and literary artistry in the Gaelic kings' sagas', in Kevin Murray (ed.), *Revisiting the Cycles of the Kings* (Cork, 2022), 1–24; Ralph O'Connor, 'The Ulster cycle: history, fiction or literature?' in Lára Ní Mhaoláin, David Stifter and Elizabeth Boyle (eds), *Ulidia 5: Papers from the Fifth International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales* (Hagen, 2024), 1–35.

[15]Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, 75–6.

[16]Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, 6.

[17]Ó Dúshláine, 'Medium and message', 71–4. However, annalistic chronicles themselves varied greatly in their inclusion or exclusion of figures and materials taken from sagas, as may be seen by comparing two seventeenth-century examples produced around the same time, the *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann* or Annals of the Four Masters (which excludes many saga materials and figures even when mentioned by its own annalistic sources unless they have a specific bearing on the kingship of Ireland) and the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* (which strains visibly against the annalistic framework and includes much more narrative material). On the contrasting aims and

Looking further afield, the British equivalent to *Lebor Gabála* – namely, the Brut origin-legend with King Arthur at its centre and Geoffrey of Monmouth's highly creative *History of the Kings of Britain* as its main framework – continued to be taken seriously and reproduced in whole or in part by English, Welsh and Scottish historians long after Keating's own death, even by some who entertained doubts about the historicity of Arthur.[18] Meanwhile in Scandinavia, the no less imaginative Norse-Icelandic equivalents of the mediaeval Gaelic sagas continued to be used beyond the seventeenth century as source-material in constructing humanist histories to support the claims of early modern Danish and Swedish dynasties to regional supremacy.[19] Keating's use of sagas as source-material, as part of an authoritative body of *seanchus*, is thus in keeping with the procedures of many of his humanist contemporaries, as long as we take account of differences in genre.[20]

It is nonetheless true that the humanist historians whose names are best known to us today are famous for their sceptical approach to legendary storytelling. While many of them took (for example) much of Geoffrey of Monmouth and the Brut framework seriously, they were usually less willing to accept the Arthurian romances that had followed in Geoffrey's wake. Indeed, they often drew attention to the fabulous nature of such sources in order to underline their own critical credentials in expunging fables from history-writing. If Keating, by contrast, accepted everything he found in mediaeval sagas without any reservations and treated *Lebor Gabála* as infallible, as suggested by the critics cited above, would this not mark him out as uncritical by comparison? Pursuing this line of thought, if mediaeval Gaelic scholars

expectations of these different genres of historical writing, see Bernadette Cunningham, *The Annals of the Four Masters: Irish History, Kingship and Society in the Early Seventeenth Century* (Dublin, 2010), 74–101 (especially 99–101); also ibid., 22–3, on fundamental differences of training and milieu between Keating and the Four Masters' chief compiler Mícheál Ó Cléirigh. On the range of rhetorical approaches taken in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*, see now Denis Casey, 'The *Annals of Clonmacnoise* (1627) as a translation and an early modern history', *Studia Hibernica* 49 (2023), 1–23.

[18]Roberta Florence Brinkley, *Arthurian Legend in the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1932), 26–88; Ben Guy, 'The reception of Geoffrey of Monmouth in Wales', in Georgia Henley and Joshua Byron Smith (eds), *A Companion to Geoffrey of Monmouth* (Leiden, 2020), 494–7; Sarah Elizabeth Connell, ' "No room in history?" genre and identity in British and Irish national histories, 1541–1691', unpublished doctoral thesis, Northeastern University, 2014, 180–219.

[19]See Ralph O'Connor, 'Putrid fables and true histories: perceptions of authenticity and the management of scepticism in northern humanist *fornaldarsaga* scholarship', in Matthew Driscoll et al. (eds), *The Legendary Legacy: Transmission and Reception of the Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda* (Odense, 2018), 117–60.

[20]This is consistent with the contextualization of Keating's work within the humanist tradition of history-writing by such scholars as Bernadette Cunningham (*World of Geoffrey Keating*), Sarah Connell and Feliks Levin. See Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*; O'Halloran, *Golden Ages*, 18–19; Connell, ' "No room in history" '; Sarah Connell, 'The poetics and politics of legend: Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* and the invention of Irish history', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 14/3 (2014), 83–106; Feliks Levin, 'Representation of the tales of the Ulster cycle in *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*: sources and features of the retellings', *Studia Hibernica* 44 (2018), 1–33; Feliks Levin, 'Representation of the tales of the Ulster cycle in *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*: organisation of discourse and contexts', *Studia Hibernica* 46 (2020), 1–25, at 4–12. I am grateful to Feliks for sharing these two articles with me.

valued sagas and other legendary narratives as literally credible accounts of events in the remote past, it would be tempting to see *Foras Feasa* as a late survival of this attitude, a throwback to the Middle Ages. A different and more positive way of reading Keating's approach to source-criticism, advanced in some recent scholarship, has been to argue that narrating a true account of Ireland's past was not his primary concern in the first place.[21]

I will argue that both these interpretations seriously misrepresent Keating's work.[22] His attitude towards traditional *scéala* displays a critical approach that is entirely in keeping with other humanist projects in early modern Europe, even though it does not come close to the scepticism with which these sources were sometimes treated from the eighteenth century onwards. In this article I will consider how Keating's attitude towards, and presentation of, his mediaeval Gaelic narrative sources relate to his chosen strategies of truth-making.[23] I will devote the greater proportion of my attention to the innovative way in which Keating conceptualized the narrative category *scéal* itself, especially in places where he voices a humanist desire to prevent fables from polluting or adulterating historical discourse. This focus on the rhetorical balancing-act performed by Keating around *scéala* will reveal the complex cultural negotiations involved in the use of mediaeval stories as sources for a humanist history. On this basis I will argue that Keating's *Foras Feasa* marked a turning-point in the semantic history of the category *scéal* – a category which had previously enjoyed central and largely unquestioned status within the knowledge-system of mediaeval and early modern Gaelic elite culture.[24]

1. Rationalization of saga sources

The first point to emphasize is that Keating did not attempt to incorporate everything he found in his mediaeval sources into his own narrative. Certainly, he was very respectful of his mediaeval written sources. Part of his aim was to show that the *seanchus*, as embodied in texts written in the Irish language, was the true basis for knowledge about Ireland (*foras feasa ar Éirinn*).[25] For this reason he could not take too high-handed an approach to these written sources where he happened to disagree with them, unlike his combative ripostes to New English commentators. For example, his account of the earliest migrations to Ireland followed the main outlines of *Lebor Gabála*; so, too, did all attempts

[21] This interpretation is documented and examined in section 2 below.

[22] Such a view also overstates the sharpness of the break between mediaeval and early modern historiographical practice, an assumption robustly challenged by Connell (' "No room in history" ', 223–5). Nonetheless, the present study focuses more on what sets *Foras Feasa* apart from its mediaeval Gaelic predecessors than on the (equally real) continuities.

[23] On the concept of 'strategies of truth-making', see for example Catalin Taranu and Ralph O'Connor, 'Introduction', in Catalin Taranu and Michael J. Kelly (eds), *Vera Lex Historiae? Constructions of Truth in Medieval Historical Narrative* (Binghamton, 2022), 35–81, at 59–70.

[24] For an overview of this term's semantic history, see Ralph O'Connor, 'The semantics of *scél* and the truth of stories in medieval Gaelic culture', in Alice R. Taylor-Griffiths and Seosamh Mac Cárthaigh (eds), *Storytelling in Gaelic from AD 700 to the Present: Truth, Tradition, and Translation*, Studies in Celtic History 47 (Woodbridge, 2025), 20–44.

[25] Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, 116–18.

by Irish scholars to reconstruct Irish prehistory up to and beyond Keating's time. But it overstates Keating's slavishness to claim that he 'practically never alters anything' or that *Foras Feasa* displays 'little attempt at discussion or evaluation'.[26] On the contrary, plenty of space is taken up in the pre-Milesian portion of *Foras Feasa* by Keating's critical discussions of why one account of a given event is more likely to be accurate than another, whether on grounds of chronological coherence, genealogy, geographical plausibility or collation with non-Irish authorities (chiefly the Book of Genesis). He often summarizes competing accounts, but rarely offers these without indicating which account he judges more likely and why. I will return to this procedure of Keating's below.

For modern readers, the most obvious sticking-point in Keating's inclusion of material from *Lebor Gabála* and other legendary saga narratives concerns what we see, today, as the fantastic quality of some of those narratives. As Ray Cashman puts it, summarizing the views of Keating's detractors, 'What place in a factual account of the past have tales of a pagan sorcerer reviving the dead or of a magical harp revealing a king's secrets?'[27] The harp example actually appears in a story that Keating explicitly discredits, and this, too, will be discussed below. But the force of Cashman's question remains, since necromancy and other practices that strain our credulity do feature in several of Keating's accounts of 'true' history. All the same, the fact that some twenty-first-century Western academics do not believe necromancy existed (or worked) in pagan times is no reason to deny the status of (an intended) 'factual account of the past' to early modern histories that include accounts of necromancy in remote periods. If seventeenth-century scholars and rulers could believe that demons and witchcraft were real in their own time, we should not be surprised to find Keating repeating some of his sources' mentions of demonic agency in connection with pre-Christian events. Likewise, if the longevity of Biblical patriarchs was still matter for sober scholarly debate in this period (warranted, like necromancy, by biblical authority), it would be anachronistic to boggle at Keating or his Gaelic sources for crediting other humans in equally ancient times with lives several centuries long. Scepticism on such matters was not the only option in early modern intellectual culture.

Yet within this framework Keating also participates in the rationalizing approach common to his humanist contemporaries, and in this sense draws a line between his own attitude and the claims of some of his mediaeval sources. For instance, he repudiates both the notion that Fionntain mac Bóchra lived from before the Flood all the way up to the time of St. Patrick (pointing out that *go bhfuil an Scrioptúir 'na aghaidh*, 'Scripture is against it') and the suggestion that Fionntain was resuscitated magically after the Flood.[28] When

[26] Cronin, 'Sources', 123; Ó Cuív, 'Literary creation', 236.

[27] Ray Cashman, 'Ethnohistorical preservation and persuasion in *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*', *New Hibernia Review* 5 (2001), 147–52, 150.

[28] Geoffrey Keating, *The History of Ireland* / Seathrún Céitinn, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, ed. and trans. by David Comyn and Patrick S. Dinneen, 4 vols, ITS 4, 8, 9 and 15 (London, 1902–14, reprinted 1987), I, 146–52. Subsequent references to Keating's *Foras Feasa* are to this edition. My

he adjudicates between competing accounts of what prompted the Milesians in Spain to send Ioth son of Breoghan to Ireland to explore it, he rejects the romantic account in *Lebor Gabála* which held that Ioth had seen Ireland *i néallaibh nimhe oidhche gheimhridh … do mhullach thuir Breoghain* ('in the clouds of heaven one winter's night from the top of the tower of Breoghan') and substitutes the more prosaic explanation that there were already longstanding trade links between Spain and Ireland.[29]

This critical mindset surely lies behind some of Keating's choices concerning which mediaeval *scéala* to include and which to exclude from his grand narrative, as well as his selection of content from each *scéal* he included. Contrary to the notion that he included everything he found, he not only omitted various competing accounts of the same event mentioned in his sources, but he also made no use in his main historical narrative of various saga sources that were either available to him or that he knew about. Some ancient events that loom very large in the mediaeval Gaelic saga and chronicle traditions, such as the invasion of Cúailnge led by Medb and Ailill of the Connachta, are relegated in Keating's account to (at best) a bare cross-reference to the saga narrating it.[30] His omission of this central event from his narrative may reflect the possibility that he did not have access to a written text of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (unlikely, given the evidence that he had access to British Library Egerton 1782), or perhaps that he felt it did not support the message that he wished to inscribe into his account of the deeds of Irish rulers and warriors of this period. This part of *Foras Feasa* is, instead, based almost entirely on their death-tales, forming a sequence of tragic episodes that Feliks Levin argues is designed to illustrate the dire consequences of sin. It is also possible that (like the writer of the colophon in its Book of Leinster recension) Keating did not consider it to be as reliable as other sagas, a motivation I will illustrate more fully in what follows.

When Keating did incorporate saga narratives, he presented them as bare but elegant summaries much shorter than the equivalent saga texts familiar to Celticists today. In contrast with the sagas' frequent fondness for long passages of dramatic dialogue, monologue and detailed description, Keating's narratives of the exile of the sons of Uisneach (based on the saga *Longes mac nUislenn*, 'The exile of the sons of Uisliu') and Cú Chulainn's killing of his own son (based on the saga *Aided Óenfîr Aífe*, 'The death of Aífe's only son'), for instance, are boiled down to plot essentials, only occasionally broadening out to include direct speech (something that is used only sparingly in *Foras Feasa* more generally). The long, emotionally intense verse exchanges found in the oldest versions of both these sagas are absent from Keating's text, even though Keating very frequently quotes verse in other contexts where it serves

translations from Keating draw on that of Comyn and Dineen but depart from it where appropriate. When discussing characters in Keating's narrative I use Keating's Early Modern Irish spellings for their names, but when discussing characters as seen in his medieval sources I normalize to Old Irish.

[29] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 50.

[30] For this example see Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 220.

to document and authenticate a prose account rather than raise the emotional temperature.[31]

It must be acknowledged that the condensed nature of Keating's saga summaries in some cases reflects an already condensed source-text rather than a deliberate attempt by Keating himself to reduce his source-text, since divergent recensions of these sagas were in circulation and some were briefer than others. Clarity on the extent of his own adjustments is hindered by uncertainty regarding precisely which manuscripts containing sagas Keating had access to, but Cunningham has argued convincingly that he probably had access to the large sixteenth-century Ó Maolchonaire manuscript known today as British Library MS Egerton 1782 and to another manuscript (now lost) which was the exemplar or close relation of the extant Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, McClean MS 187, written *c.* 1640.[32] On this basis Levin has recently surveyed Keating's treatment of Ulster Cycle material in *Foras Feasa* and found that his treatment of *Aided Óenfir Aífe* (and many other Ulster sagas) reflects the brevity of his source, as seen in the closely related McClean manuscript, whereas the condensing treatment of *Longes mac nUislenn* in *Foras Feasa* is the result of Keating's own omission of dramatic verse dialogue and other matter included in this saga in his likely source, Egerton 1782.[33] And where the shortening was present in the source, this does not necessarily rule out agency by Keating himself. He may have known the widely circulating Early Modern Irish recension of *Aided Óenfir Aífe*,[34] with its much more elaborate use of dialogue and dramatic verse. But if so, he favoured the more condensed rendering for his purposes.

Keating's presentation of condensed versions of his saga sources is usually put down to his desire for a smooth and accessible narrative. He himself hints at this motivation when he says in the middle of his account of first-century Ireland that if he were to narrate everything in his sources, then *eachtra adhbhal* ('a long narrative') would be needed to do so. Instead, he here refers the reader who wants *a bhfios go forleathan* ('extensive knowledge of them', i.e. of Ulster and Connacht princes and champions) to the sagas themselves,

[31]These and other aspects of the style of Keating's saga retellings are discussed in Levin, 'Representation … organisation of discourse', 4–12.

[32]Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, 78–81.

[33]Feliks Levin, 'Representation … sources and features', 12–13 and 18–20. To gain a good sense of the contents of the text of the first recension of *Longes mac nUislenn* in Egerton 1782 (very similar to the Book of Leinster text of the same saga that forms the basis of most modern editions and translations), see the variant apparatus and textual notes in Ernst Windisch and Whitley Stokes (eds), *Irische Texte mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch*, 5 vols in 7 (Leipzig, 1880–1909), i, 59–92.

[34]The Early Modern recension itself bears the title *Oidheadh Chonlaoich* but is typically joined to *Oileamhain Chon Culainn* as a single narrative. An edition of this narrative is in preparation by Ruairí Ó hUiginn, who points out that some plot details in Keating's rendering of the story are much closer to the Early Modern Irish recension than to other versions of the story, even though Keating's rendering generally stays closest to a version resembling the Old Irish *Aided Óenfir Aífe* (I am grateful to Ruairí Ó hUiginn for sharing his findings with me). The possibility that Keating knew the Early Modern recension is also mentioned by Levin, 'Representation … sources and features', 20.

listing seven of these by title.[35] Similarly, he introduces his account of Deirdre and the sons of Uisneach as *go cumair éirim na heachtra* ('the content of the story in brief').[36]

But abbreviating means selecting and hence emphasizing some aspects of a source at the expense of other aspects. Keating's selective treatment of his mediaeval sources brought them more closely into line with what was expected of humanist historical narrative. This is consistent with stylistic analysis of Keating's work, for example with Levin's observation that Keating's narrative voice makes prominent use of direct appeals to the reader in a way that bears more resemblance to early modern English historiography than to the mediaeval Gaelic sources he summarizes.[37] His omission of long passages of dramatic dialogue and monologue – favouring a mode dominated by third-person narration, albeit varied by limited use of direct speech – can be seen in similar terms.[38] Keating was a gifted storyteller and his saga retellings have been celebrated for their narrative verve as well as their economy; but too overt a desire to entertain an audience or too wholehearted an indulgence in poetic devices were increasingly associated in humanist circles with untruth and seen as the opposite pole from the telling of credible history. Hence it is also in keeping with Keating's humanist credentials that he spends more time than most of his mediaeval sources do in debunking other mediaeval sources as poetical fictions, an aspect of his truth-making that I will analyse more fully below.

Keating's desire to present his mediaeval sources as credible links in an interconnected web of Gaelic *seanchus* manifests itself as much in his omissions as in what he includes. Even though magic, demons and witchcraft were real to scholarly audiences in Keating's day, his summaries of sagas tend to omit not only the parts with most poetic or dramatic elaboration but also the most fantastic occurrences, as if tacitly acknowledging the humanist dictum that truth is often mixed with fable in ancient narrative sources and that fable needs to be expunged to produce history. For instance, his discussion of one key witness to ancient history, the long-lived sage Tuan mac Cairill, makes no mention of the multiple shapeshifting reincarnations that punctuate the mediaeval *Scél Tuáin maic Cairill* ('The story of Tuán mac Cairill'). Keating also reduces Tuan's age by several centuries. Tuan is portrayed here simply as a very long-lived human, and Keating presents Tuan's testimony as deriving in part from his own ancient forebears rather than wholly on eyewitness testimony alone as in *Scél Tuáin*.[39]

Another example of this kind of omission concerns Keating's much more detailed retelling of the tragic story of Deirdre in his Ulster-saga sequence. The Egerton 1782 text of *Longes mac nUislenn* (Keating's probable source)

[35] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 220.

[36] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 188.

[37] For this point see Levin, 'Representation … organisation of discourse', 8.

[38] Ibid., 4–5. Levin here also briefly analyses the function of direct speech where it does occur in the first-century portion of *Foras Feasa*.

[39] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 150–2.

begins with a feast at which the pregnant mother of the heroine, Deirdre, is present. The foetus Deirdre cries out in her mother's womb so that everyone present starts up, alarmed.[40] This is not a mere detail but a crucial plot point: it prompts the druid's prophecy about the disasters that will befall Ulster as a result of Deirdre's beauty and the people's demand that she be killed *in utero*, and this in turn prompts Conchubhar's disastrous decision to have her raised away from the court and kept for himself. This is one part of the saga where Keating does choose to include some of his source's direct speech and dramatic verse – but he omits this episode of the pre-natal scream, instead moving the birth of Deirdre so that it takes place at the time of the same feast, and having the prophecy and Conchubhar's decision follow the baby Deirdre's birth.[41] This is not the only example of Keating significantly adjusting the chronology and content of his saga sources.[42]

Of course plausibility and the problem of perceived fantasy were not the only considerations shaping Keating's selection of and creativity with his sources. Keating was writing moralized history, crafting his narrative to underscore specific messages about governance, religion and society and using his skills as a preacher in order to do this.[43] This meaning-making aspect of Keating's retellings of saga sources about the first centuries of Gaelic rule up to the coming of Christianity has been examined by Sarah Connell and Levin. Both scholars argue that this part of Keating's history presents saga-based stories about individual kings and champions as exempla of royal and aristocratic behaviour, repeatedly dramatizing and underlining the consequences or correction of protagonists' transgressions or 'sins'.[44] His desire to emphasize this theme doubtless informed his selection of sagas to include or exclude, privileging those with tragic storylines.

Given this thematic emphasis, we may wonder why Keating did not include anything from the saga that explores the disastrous consequences of royal transgression more fully and emphatically than any other. This saga is *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* ('The destruction of Da Derga's hostel'), whose protagonist

[40]Windisch and Stokes, *Irische Texte*, i, 67.

[41]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 190. On the omission of the pre-natal scream see Alan Bruford, *Gaelic Folk-tales and Mediæval Romances* (Dublin, 1969), published as *Béaloideas* 34 (1966), 99–100. A number of other significant adjustments made by Keating in his retelling of the Deirdre saga – not least the centrality of Deirdre herself – have been analysed in Kate Louise Mathis, 'The evolution of Deirdriu in the Ulster cycle', unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2010, 157–60.

[42]As Sarah Connell has shown, Keating made several changes to the Egerton 1782 account of Guaire mac Colmáin's reign when using this likely source in *Foras Feasa*, including adding details not found in that source but also moving Guaire's reign to a position one century earlier so that it coincided with the reign of the last pagan king of Tara. See Connell, 'Poetics and politics of legend', 92–9.

[43]On this aspect of *Foras Feasa* and Keating's other writings, see Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, 159–70; Ó Dúshláine, 'Medium and message'.

[44]Connell, 'Poetics and politics', 92–9; Connell, ' "No room in history" ', 155–77; Levin, 'Representation … organisation of discourse', 13–25. Further insights into the theological meanings built into Keating's saga-retellings are provided in Levin's contribution to the forthcoming volume, Abigail Burnyeat et al. (eds), *The Ulster and Finn Cycles: Studies in Gaelic Heroic Literature* (Woodbridge, forthcoming).

Conaire mac Eterscéle presides over a glorious reign that collapses around him when he fails to bring his renegade foster-brothers to book for plundering; the saga ends with Conaire's tragic death, not unlike the Ulster and Connacht death-sagas (*aideda*) of which Keating retold so many in this part of *Foras Feasa*. *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* circulated widely in mediaeval Ireland; a copy of it was extant in Egerton 1782, to which Keating probably had access.[45] Several lines in *Foras Feasa* are devoted to Conaire, but apart from the name of his (mortal) father and the location of his death, the information given either conflicts with, or is completely different from, what the saga narrates, instead being compiled from variant accounts in historical poetry, chronicles and *Lebor Gabála*. For instance, in Keating's account Conaire kills Nuadha Neacht and exacts tribute from the Laighin, neither of which is mentioned in the saga. The Conaire of the saga (at least in Egerton 1782) is directly descended from Eochaid Airem and the Túatha Dé Danann noblewoman Étaín, neither of whom figures in the variant genealogy included in Keating's account. The saga's main focus is Conaire's acquisition and loss of kingship, in which Otherworldly apparitions play a decisive role: an Otherworldly birdman fathers Conaire on the future bride of Eterscél (Conaire's mortal, and here adoptive, father) and other apparitions hasten his demise. The Egerton 1782 recension of the *Togail* amplifies this dimension by bringing parts of the independent saga *Tochmarc Étaíne* into the text of the *Togail* as a long genealogical prelude, so that the *Togail*'s already fantastic ambience is heightened with details about Otherworldly shapeshifting and trickery, lovesickness, the eventual disappearance of Étaín into the *síd* with Midir, and a feud between people of this world and the Otherworld.[46] All this, as well as the subsequent narrative about Conaire's rise and fall, is absent from *Foras Feasa*.

If Keating had access to Egerton 1782, he could hardly have missed this substantial saga about kingly conduct when scouring it for usable narrative. His choice to follow the chronicle tradition may be explained by his desire to avoid saga material that seemed to him too fanciful to qualify as serious history, or seemed likely to strike his target audience in this way. Other important sagas included in Egerton 1782 but omitted from *Foras Feasa* include *Aislinge Óengusso*, *Echtrae Chonnlai* (whose royal protagonist is killed in *Foras Feasa* rather than being spirited away to the Otherworld as in the saga), *Echtrae Nerai*, *Táin Bó Regamna*, *De Chophur in Dá Muccida* and *Compert Chon Culainn*.[47] All these sagas either focus on Otherworldly beings and apparitions, or explore dramatic encounters between Otherworldly phenomena and human

[45] On this saga, see Ralph O'Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Mediaeval Irish Saga* (Oxford, 2013). The complete Egerton 1782 recension has been edited by Máire West in 'An edition of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*', unpublished doctoral thesis, National University of Ireland, 1986, 821–93. For Keating's account see Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 230–2.

[46] For the Egerton 1782 text of this part of the *Togail*, see the text entitled *Tochmarc Étaíne* in Windisch and Stokes, *Irische Texte*, i, 117–30.

[47] For the contents of this manuscript, see Standish Hayes O'Grady, Robin Flower and Myles Dillon, *Catalogue of Irish Manuscripts in the British Library*, new ed., 3 vols (Dublin, 1992), ii, 259–98.

protagonists. Egerton 1782's Early Modern Irish werewolf-romance *Eachtra an Mhadra Mhaoil* is also, of course, not included in Keating's history. None of these texts is even deemed worthy of a mention in Keating's list of sagas, which readers may consult for more details about some of the people mentioned.[48] He did, after all, point the finger at several sagas about Fionn mac Cumhaill which he considered to have been written as romance-like entertainment rather than as history, excluding their testimony from his account of the 'historical' Fionn later in *Foras Feasa*.[49] These sagas are also rich in Otherworldly phenomena, so it is not surprising that he was similarly selective about sagas concerning Ulster warriors and other kings as well.

Keating clearly did not wish to include everything he found in his manuscript sources. By omitting the sagas I have just listed, adjusting other sagas' storylines to remove implausible content, and condensing his main saga sources to decrease the proportion of direct speech, he ensured that his account met humanist standards of rational and sober history-writing, even though he still included some content that would be considered fantastic by later historians.

2. The red line of historical fact and the purging of fables from history

Some recent scholars have sought to exonerate Keating from the charge of credulity or historiographic backwardness by arguing that *Foras Feasa* was not primarily intended as an account of what really happened in the past. For Cashman, Keating's conception of history-writing is a forerunner of modern 'salvage ethnography', compiling culturally valuable but not necessarily factual traditions from a society undergoing traumatic socio-political upheaval.[50] In his view, Keating's priority was to preserve cultural heritage in the form of narrative traditions, regardless of whether or not they were true stories about the past. From this viewpoint, modern scholars who cavil at Keating's inclusion of unlikely stories are missing the point: these were meant to be stories, not history.

Building on this perspective and analysing Keating's procedures in more depth, Connell has argued that the inclusion of multiple narrative genres within *Foras Feasa* exemplifies the multimodal breadth and capaciousness of early modern history-writing more generally; her wider analysis includes examples from England, Scotland and Wales as well as Ireland. In Connell's view, humanist history-writing was far more welcoming of 'fable' in practice than its standard rhetoric of truth-telling might suggest, incorporating legends (a term that Connell uses to denote untrue stories about the past) alongside true accounts of the past in order to point up recurring themes and patterns in a nation's history, underline core aspects of national identity, make the

[48] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 220.

[49] These sagas are *Cath Fionntrágha*, *Bruighean Chaorthainn* and *Imtheacht an Ghiolla Dheacair*, and Keating's comment on these is in his *Foras Feasa*, ii, 326. I discuss this point more fully below.

[50] Cashman, 'Ethnohistorical preservation', 150.

reading experience more pleasurable, and vindicate the wide range of sources (historical and legendary) over which the historian must show mastery.[51] For Cashman and Connell alike, Keating embodies 'the historian as collector and interpreter of a variety of texts, legendary and historical'.[52]

Cashman and Connell are right to identify multiple narrative modes and voices in *Foras Feasa*, as well as ideological motivations and cultural meanings beyond the mere establishment of chronology. By virtue of being narrative, all narrative history introduces layers of meaning that go beyond chronology: that is what gives it much of its significance for its target audience, and we cannot understand Keating's history without interpreting the ideological significance of the narratives he includes in it as well as their place in his chronology. Moreover, allowing the historian's sources to speak momentarily in (what is presented as) their own voice is an important aspect of maintaining that audience's attention by varying the mode of discourse. Yet it is also vital not to lose sight of Keating's overriding concern to establish and narrate what really happened, and – as with other humanists – to trace a clear red line of historical fact through the many genres of primary source-material over which he demonstrates his mastery and critical deliberation. This is what makes *Foras Feasa* (in Keating's view) a true history of his nation's past rather than a collection of parables or stories, even though he has subsequently come to be valued by literary scholars for his *scéalaigheacht*, 'storytelling'.

It is necessary, then, not to overstate the extent to which Keating welcomed untrue stories into his history. Cashman states that *Foras Feasa* 'includes a great deal of narrative that even he does not believe to be factual';[53] Connell, meanwhile, calls *Foras Feasa* 'a work of history liberally sprinkled with legends' that were not supposed to be interpreted 'as simple historical facts', and states that he made no attempt to 'quarantine legend from history'.[54] Yet almost all the legendary or non-factual narratives to which Keating gives voice turn out to be summaries of opinions which Keating then clearly states to be untrue or unlikely compared to his favoured explanation. I will give some examples to show this process at work in Keating's treatment of alternative accounts of the same event, before moving on in the next section to explore the rhetoric by which he robustly 'quarantined' dubious accounts of the past from his red line of historical fact.

Keating's respectful attitude towards alternative opinions (by writers in Irish at any rate) sometimes makes it look as if he cannot decide which source to follow. For instance, when discussing how long the descendants of Gaedheal resided in the island of Gothia, Keating first repeats the mediaeval poet Gilla Coemáin's view that they stayed for thirty years and then contradicts that view based on the testimony of mediaeval genealogies. His contradiction is done very discreetly:

[51] Connell, ' "No room in history" '; Connell, 'Poetics and politics'.
[52] Connell, ' "No room in history" ', 145–6.
[53] Cashman, 'Ethnohistorical preservation', 150.
[54] Connell, 'Poetics and politics', 101; Connell, ' "No room in history" ', 25.

agus do chomhnuigheadar sliocht Gaedhil san tír deich mbliadhna fichead is do anadar lucht díobh ann ó shoin i le; gonadh da dhearbhadh sin adeir Giolla Caomháin an rann-so:

> Fine Ghaoidhil ghasta dhíl,
> Triochad bliadhan san tír-sin;
> Anaid lucht díobh ann ó shain,
> Go dtí deireadh an domhain.

Measaid drong oile ré seanchus gurab caogad ar chéad bliadhan do chomhnuighsiod sliocht Gaedhil san Ghotia, agus is í sin céadfaidh is fírinnighe. Óir is follus gur chaitheadar aicme Ghaedhil ocht nglúine da ngeinealaigh san Ghotia mar atá ó Éibhear Ghlúinfhionn go Brátha. Ag so iomorro an geinealach ghlún sin .... agus do bhrígh nachar bh'éidir an oiread soin glún do theacht don leith istigh do thríochad bliadhan is dearbh liom gurab í an chéadfaidh dhéidheanach atá fírinneach.[55]

'and the line of Gaedheal dwelt in the land for thirty years, and their people have stayed there ever since. In proof of this Giolla Caomháin spoke the following verse:

> The progeny of skilful, beloved Gaedheal
> Thirty years in that land;
> Their people have stayed there ever since
> Until the end of the world.

Another group of historians consider that the line of Gaedheal dwelt in Gothia for a hundred and fifty years; and that opinion is the most trustworthy. For it is clear that the people of Gaedheal spent eight generations in Gothia, that is, from Éibhear Glúinfhionn to Brátha. And those generations are as follows: .... and since that number of generations would not be capable of coming over here within thirty years, it is evident to me that the latter opinion is the true one.'

At first glance this looks like a narration of two mutually incompatible accounts, but it becomes clear within a few lines of Keating's quotation from Gilla Coemáin that he is adjusting that poet's chronology quite significantly (and why). The passage ends by firmly discrediting the thirty-year interpretation.[56] To reinforce his chronology still further, Keating then goes on to mention a

[55] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 34–6.

[56] Keating's disagreement with Gilla Coemáin should not be misinterpreted as a sign that he distrusted poets' testimony in general, despite Keating's use of language associated with poetic licence to discredit some other narratives (section 3 below). *Foras Feasa* is full of narratives whose authenticity Keating demonstrates by quoting a poem in support of its testimony, as Pía Coira points out to me (pers. comm.). This is continuous with early mediaeval Gaelic practice: see Gregory Toner, 'Authority, verse and the transmission of *senchas*', *Ériu* 55 (2005), 59–84.

third opinion found in other *seanchus* that suggest a three-century stay in Gothia; he disposes of this view on the grounds of its incompatibility with the chronology set out in earlier chapters of *Foras Feasa*.[57] All in all, this passage gives the impression of a historian wishing to display his knowledge of and respect for competing accounts as well as his ability to discern which account is correct.

Admittedly, Keating does sometimes present two alternative accounts of the same event without hinting at his preference, as when he says that Conaire Mór reigned for thirty or seventy years.[58] But such hesitation does not equate to the inclusion of fable. Here Keating is simply reporting the divergence between his own chronicle-sources, reflecting a longstanding discrepancy in mediaeval Gaelic accounts of Conaire's reign.[59] Admitting uncertainty in this way and presenting the two alternatives had been part of normal historical practice since the Middle Ages.[60] Keating implicitly admits that both alternatives have equal claim to plausibility and accuracy. Equally importantly, this ambivalence does not affect the narrative content of Conaire's reign in *Foras Feasa*, since Keating does not provide year-numbers, only a regnal sequence. Nonetheless, in such cases Keating more frequently provides his readers with a clear signal as to which alternative he considers more accurate.

One of the most notorious inclusions of inauthentic or fabulous history in *Foras Feasa* is the account of antediluvian occupations of Ireland in Book I section 5, covering occupations by Ceasair and/or others and taking up four pages in a modern edition.[61] Here Keating summarizes three different accounts of antediluvian occupations of Ireland without appearing, on the surface, to judge between their merits: *Adeirid drong .... Adeirid drong eile .... Adeirthear, trá* ('Some say .... Others say .... It is said, however ....'). After these summaries, though, Keating declares that he has included these accounts only because they are in old books (*i sein-leabhraibh*) that he is using as source-material, but that he does not consider any of these accounts to be true history (*stair fhírinnigh*). Here he makes his stance unambiguous: he has been summarizing traditional, but untrue, accounts of antediluvian settlements before going on to tell the true history. Keating then goes on to discuss in some detail why these, and several other legendary narratives about early settlers, are implausible, before moving on in the next section to what he considers to be the more credible accounts of Ireland's settlement after the Flood.[62] And a careful reading of the end of the preceding section (section 4) shows that Keating has already primed his readers to take his antediluvian settlement-accounts with a very strong pinch of salt:

[57] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 36.

[58] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 230.

[59] On this discrepancy in medieval regnal sequences see Gisbert Hemprich, *Rí Érenn – 'König von Irland': Fiktion und Wirklichkeit*, 2 vols continuously paginated (Berlin, 2015), 289–90. Hemprich's book demonstrates how mediaeval regnal listing of this kind combined a claim to trace the backbone of Irish political history with a willingness to treat some of the details creatively.

[60] For mediaeval Gaelic examples, see Toner, 'The Ulster cycle'; Toner, 'Authority', 69–74.

[61] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 138–46.

[62] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 146–54.

> cuirfeam síos ann so ar dtús, do ghabhálaibh Éireann ria ndílinn, do réir droinge re seanchus, sul luaidhfeam na fíor-ghabhála do rinneadh uirre d'eis dílinne.[63]
>
> 'we shall first set down here something concerning the invasions of Ireland before the Flood, according to some historians, before we discuss the true invasions to which it was subjected after the Flood.'

Taken together, this whole antediluvian sequence shows Keating summarizing and then disposing of historical traditions that were well known to many among his scholarly target readership, but which he considers to be untrue or unlikely, moving on after that to narrate what he considers to be the true first settlement of Ireland. Both the summaries and the refutations were essential aspects of his rhetorical procedure for setting out clearly what he believed really happened and demonstrating his mastery of Gaelic source-material. He was not neutrally repeating information that he had found 'in old books' with no care as to whether or not it was true. Rather, he was intervening directly in controversies about the authenticity and chronology of individual episodes in Ireland's history, and about the legitimacy of Gaelic written sources for narrating that history. It was necessary for him to show that he was fully aware of the content of accounts of antediluvian settlements and other doubtful episodes of which his educated target audience would also have been aware, so that he could go on to plot a clear path for them through the labyrinth and reject the parts which he felt to be untrue (*neimhfhíor*).[64] Mentioning alternative accounts in order to set them aside is a rhetorical strategy found in much mediaeval and modern narrative history-writing.[65] It is no more an 'inclusion of fable within history' than a prosecuting lawyer's preliminary summary of the case for the defence (before dismantling it) can be taken as a sign that the prosecutor was herself defending the accused. True, Keating gives those competing accounts plenty of space to have their say (occasionally, one suspects, with his tongue in his cheek);[66] but this stance, displaying his scrupulousness in sifting sources, is part of how Keating constructs his own scholarly authority as he guides the reader through the true history of Ireland. The vocabulary of historical truth and untruth pervades the whole sequence, as with Keating's other discussions of doubtful episodes.

[63]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 138.

[64]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 148.

[65]For discussion of some seventeenth-century Irish examples of this strategy, see Cunningham, *Annals of the Four Masters*, 78–9 (on the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* and the Ó Cléirigh recension of *Lebor Gabála*); M. Pía Coira, *By Poetic Authority: The Rhetoric of Panegyric in Gaelic Poetry of Scotland to c. 1700* (Edinburgh, 2014), 117–18 (on Dubhaltach Mac Firbhisigh's genealogical compendium); Casey, 'The *Annals of Clonmacnoise*', 20–2.

[66]O'Halloran (*Golden Ages*, 18) has suggested that Keating's tone was ironic, rather than serious, when – in the same antediluvian sequence – he dismissed the possibility that knowledge about antediluvian settlers could have been transmitted to post-diluvian tradition-bearers by fairy lovers of the antediluvians. For other examples of dry humour in Keating's rhetoric, see Ó Dúshláine, 'Medium and message', 78 and 85.

Keating's approach to the past bridged the divide between mediaeval and modern methodologies rather than presenting a radical break. Connell uses the case of *Foras Feasa* to undermine overly rigid distinctions between mediaeval and early modern historical practices and to challenge the triumphalist claim that humanists introduced superior methods of sifting truth from fable compared to their mediaeval forebears.[67] She rightly emphasizes how several of the humanists' historical procedures maintained or drew substantially on mediaeval practices, and Keating's use of the *Lebor Gabála* framework is a case in point. Nonetheless, the humanists' rhetoric of expunging fable from history was typically accompanied by a more transparent signposting and weighing-up of the truth-value they claimed for specific episodes than one finds in some mediaeval national histories. Most of the allegedly fabulous narratives that Connell identifies in early modern British and Irish histories are there placed in a clear ontological hierarchy so that the reader is guided not to take them literally as part of the main historical narrative (as in Keating's account of antediluvian settlements just discussed).[68] In most cases, the episodes deemed by Connell as fabulous inclusions are argued by the historian in question to have really (or probably, or possibly) happened, and are hence included not as fables but as genuine or possible historical information, even though we might prefer to classify the same episodes as fabulous or legendary.[69]

Keating's scepticism about the antediluvian narratives in the *Lebor Gabála* tradition contrasts with the willingness of contemporary Irish historians to include at least some of this material as accredited fact.[70] Furthermore, as Clare O'Halloran has pointed out, Keating was more sceptical than some later Irish historians who similarly wrote to vindicate the dignity of their own history. The best-known of these was Roderic O'Flaherty, whose *Ogygia* (1685) seemed to mark a fuller embrace of international humanist currents by being written in Latin and published in London. While O'Flaherty, too, voiced scepticism about some narratives he found in his sources,[71] he gave more literal credit to the prehistoric invasion-narratives of *Lebor Gabála* than Keating had half a century earlier, even specifying the exact date and day of the week on which Partholón had arrived in Ireland.[72]

[67]For an important earlier example of this challenge to the 'historical revolution' model, see Andrew Hadfield, 'Sceptical history and the myth of the historical revolution', *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* 19/1 (2005), 25–44. Connell's discussion is, however, innovative in placing Irish historians such as Keating within the context of this challenge.

[68]Fables included outwith the main historical narrative thread: Connell, ' "No room in history" ', 43, 58, 126.

[69]Apparent fables deemed true or possibly true (and therefore, if true, no longer fables): Connell, ' "No room in history" ', 39, 47, 57.

[70]Examples include the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* (albeit displaying scepticism about the long-lived Fionntain) and the *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland* by the Four Masters. See Cunningham, *Annals of the Four Masters*, 77–80; Casey, 'The *Annals of Clonmacnoise*', 21. Casey's article (ibid., 12–17) explores the varying positions between scepticism and credence regarding saintly miracles in the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* as examples of its author-translator's engagement with humanist methods and with Tridentine caution regarding hagiographic 'fables'.

[71]For examples see Connell, ' "No room in history" ', 123–4 and 126–7.

[72]O'Halloran, *Golden Ages*, 18–19.

Foras Feasa also presents itself as even less inclusive of historically dubious or uncertain narrative than are several humanist histories by early modern English writers. The Brut narrative of British kings is a case in point. Some early modern historians treated most or all of that narrative as fabulous and therefore unworthy of inclusion within a history; but some even among the doubters still included it in their own main historical narrative on the grounds that some well-regarded scholars continued to uphold its partial veracity.[73] The most extreme example of this position, amounting to a wholesale incorporation of legends and fables in a historical narrative, was that advanced by John Milton in his *History of Britain*, composed mostly in the 1640s and published in 1670.[74] A brief contrast between Milton's and Keating's treatment of the earliest portions of their respective histories will help clarify Keating's purpose.

Milton's narrative begins, like Keating's, with a series of legends that Milton briefly summarizes in order to dispose of as fabulous; but when he reaches the Brut narrative, he admits that 'we cannot so easily be discharg'd' of this account that is 'defended by many, deny'd utterly by few'. For this reason Milton states that he has 'chos'n not to omitt' this sequence from his history,[75] even though he himself is one of the doubters (as he makes clear throughout his Brut sequence). This sequence takes up twenty-six pages of his *History of Britain* and amounts to a kind of fabulous, dreamlike prehistory leading up to the clearer light in which the history of Roman Britain is introduced in book 2.[76] The four-page sequence of self-declared fabulous material opening the main historical narrative in *Foras Feasa* seems very modest by comparison.

Earlier in the same work Milton equivocally defends his inclusion of doubtful or outright fabulous accounts by appealing to the common humanist trope of keeping an open mind, just in case 'Relations heretofore accounted Fabulous' might 'contain in them many foot-steps, and reliques of somthing true' – but then he immediately admits that these accounts may end up serving only 'our English Poets, and Rhetoricians, who by thir Art will know, how to use them judiciously'.[77] Later in the work, when discussing the supposed existence of King Arthur, Milton remarks that 'he who can accept of Legends for good story, may quickly swell a volume with trash'.[78] Milton here uses 'story' in the sense we know as 'history', but this remark also reflects oddly on his decision to swell book 1 of his own volume with matter that he himself declares doubtful or fabulous. This is a particularly glaring example of the tension that Connell identifies in much humanist history-writing between the

[73]Connell, ' "No room in history" ', 180–219.

[74]Connell, ' "No room in history" ', 30, 56–9 and 214–15. On the strategies, contexts and publication history of Milton's *History of Britain*, see Nicholas von Maltzahn, *Milton's History of Britain: Republican Historiography in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1991).

[75]John Milton, *The History of Britain*, facsimile of 1677 edition, ed. by Graham Parry (Stamford, 1991), second run of pages, 10–11.

[76]Milton, *History of Britain*, second run of pages, 12–37.

[77]Milton, *History of Britain*, second run of pages, 7.

[78]Milton, *History of Britain*, second run of pages, 145. Milton's use of the word 'story', in the early modern sense synonymous with 'history', is also seen in John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. by Alastair Fowler, 2nd ed. (Harlow, 1971), 634 (xii.506).

rhetoric of 'purging fables from history' and the desire to include fables in history.

Some scholars have explained this tension in terms of a failure of critical nerve. In Graham Parry's view, for instance, the fabulous content of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* left Milton 'bewitched, against his better judgement', as if he just could not help but include it in his own history.[79] But Milton clearly *chose* to include it. He was following a custom, widespread among historians in early modern England, of including the Brut narrative even while also expressing doubts about its veracity, and was unusual mainly in including so much of this narrative. Milton displays his poor opinion of the reliability of Geoffrey's *History* at various points in book 1, interspersing his retelling of the Brut narrative with barbed asides about the 'grand Fable' or 'tedious Tale' and reminding the reader of its unreliability at its beginning and end, suggesting that he has included the whole sequence mainly to pour scorn on it.[80] Yet elsewhere in book 1 Milton leaves open the identification of his doubtful source as 'Story or Fable' (again using 'story' in the sense of 'history'), and even seems to support the veracity of a few of the events narrated by citing accredited historians in the margins, such as Matthew of Westminster and Henry of Huntingdon.[81] At other places Milton leaves the reader without overt authorial guidance. These features, combined with the sheer length of his Brut narrative, cause it to drift at times into a seemingly straightforward narration of historical events. By contrast, the much smaller scale of Keating's inclusions of self-declared spurious history makes it easier for the reader to distinguish the true from the false as Keating saw it.

To explain the much greater space given to putatively 'fabulous' history by Milton than by Keating, we must take into account the stylistic and generic spectrum of humanist history-writing, and the range of target audiences. These two works were not aimed at the same kinds of readers and used different literary modes. Early in his *History of Britain* Milton distances his procedure from the more deliberative and evidence-sifting style of humanist history-writing: 'I intend not with Controversies and Quotations to delay or interrupt the smooth course of History; much less to argue and debate long who were the first Inhabitants, with what Probabilities, what Authorities each Opinion hath bin upheld'. Instead he aims 'with plain, and lightsom brevity, to relate well and orderly things worth the Noting'.[82] Keating, too, strove to present a smooth narrative, but the early sections of *Foras Feasa* do give relatively more space than the early sections of Milton's *History of Britain* to debating the merits of rival accounts. After all, Milton could expect the more scholarly of his readers to look to his English humanist predecessors such as William Camden and John Speed for closely argued debates about different interpretations of the sources. His aim was to produce a more transparent, widely accessible narrative with

[79] Graham Parry, 'Introduction', in Milton, *History of Britain*, first run of pages, 7–48, at 14.

[80] Milton, *History of Britain*, second run of pages, 19 and 36. For discussion, see von Maltzahn, *Milton's History of Britain*, 103–16.

[81] Milton, *History of Britain*, second run of pages, 36, 35 and 37 respectively.

[82] Milton, *History of Britain*, second run of pages, 7–8.

a punchy moral message, and the Brut legends had obvious entertainment value as well as exemplary potential.[83] Keating, by contrast, seems to have had a well-educated audience in view from the outset, and as the first Irish humanist to produce a *longue durée* narrative history of Ireland he had to break the necessary ground for himself. Hence his account of prehistoric Ireland is interwoven with deliberations about the relative plausibility of competing accounts.

Today's historians might accuse Keating of treating fables as history, when he uses *Lebor Gabála* and various sagas to narrate the history of Ireland from the Deluge to the early Christian era; but Keating included those accounts because he held them to be true, not because he wished to swell his history with fables or legends. Unlike the proliferation of spurious history that Milton allows in book 1 of his *History of Britain*, I can find only two instances where Keating includes (in Cashman's words) a 'narrative that … he does not believe to be factual' in his history for purposes other than sifting historical evidence to tell his readers what really happened in Ireland's past. In both instances Keating summarizes a mediaeval story about a recognized pre-Christian Irish king that he states was never intended to be taken literally, doing so seemingly for light relief or to point up a moral lesson. At one point he includes a brief story about Lughaidh Laighdhe's sexual encounter with a woman of sovereignty who transforms from an ugly old woman to a beautiful young lady and grants the kingship to Lughaidh.[84] As Connell notes, Keating rationalizes this story by editing out some of its more obviously supernatural aspects; but he also insists that the story is not a truthful historical account, but rather an allegory about kingship.[85] Elsewhere Keating retells an anecdote about King Labhraidh Loingseach having horse's ears and the revelation of this peculiarity by a magic harp, and after narrating it Keating adds that he considers it untrue.[86]

Two untrue stories hardly counts as 'liberally sprinkled with legends': Keating's inclusion of these stories was atypical of his usual practice. However, they require a closer look if we are to understand Keating's attitude towards mediaeval Gaelic storytelling and its veracity, because – as I will argue – they make use of a discourse of fictionality that sets Keating's work apart from his mediaeval forebears.

3. Keating and 'poetical fictions' in early modern Irish thought

In both of the narrations of untrue stories just mentioned, Keating's denial of the story's veracity is accompanied by a kind of genre-designation: he refers to each story as *finnscéal filidheachta*, 'a poetical *finnscéal*'. So far as I am aware, Keating is only the second author attested in the mediaeval and early modern Gaelic corpus to use the word *finnscéal*, and his sole predecessor was a poet living some five centuries earlier whose usage of the term offers no clues as to

[83] See Parry, 'Introduction', 9–10.
[84] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 148.
[85] Connell, ' "No room in history" ', 160–1.
[86] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 172–4.

how (if at all) it meant anything different from *scéal*.[87] This means we must be careful about making assumptions about what Keating meant by *finnscéal*.

Connell translates *finnscéal* as 'legend', which is consistent with modern Irish folklorists' use of *finnscéal* as the technical term for a folk legend.[88] But 'legend' is itself a notoriously multivalent word. Folklorists typically use it (with German *Sage*) to denote a narrative whose supposed historical veracity is part of the point of telling it: a story about something noteworthy or strange that is held by the narrator (but not necessarily the folklorist) to have really taken place, as opposed to a *Märchen* or 'fairytale' which is a made-up story not intended to be taken as true. Connell, on the other hand, makes it clear in her discussion that she sees 'legend' in similar terms to the sense in which it is used in most of her early modern English sources, meaning a narrative that used to be credited as true but is now considered false or doubtful.[89]

Irish usage of *finnscéal* between Keating's time and today similarly hovers in the grey area between fact and fiction. In 1808 the Irish scholar Theophilus O'Flanagan explained the word *finnscéal* in 1808 as 'an ancient romantic story', and he went on to describe his main subject, the story of Deirdre (one of the Ulster sagas retold by Keating), in similar terms.[90] In his view, this was 'a *tale* poetically embellished, though founded on fact'.[91] O'Flanagan repeats this insistence on a kernel of truth, and the folly of rejecting the whole as a fable, throughout the notes to his edition of the Deirdre saga: 'A vast deal of poetic fiction is mixed by our old poets with their details of absolute historic facts .... From ancient documents of this nature, however, it is limited, if not ignorant fastidiousness to scorn all endeavour at enucleating truth'.[92] Keating would surely have said the same about the Deirdre saga, since he tried to 'enucleate' its truth by presenting a condensed and rationalized version of it as part of his history. But, as we shall see, Keating certainly did not view this saga, or the other sagas he retold as historical accounts, as examples of *finnscéal filidheachta*. On the contrary, it can be shown that Keating used the phrase *finnscéal filidheachta* to denote a completely untrue story or claim that was deliberately made up from the outset. As we shall see, for Keating this category did not hover in the grey area between fact and fiction, but was equivalent to fiction.

As will become clear below, in all but one attestation of *finnscéal filidheachta* in *Foras Feasa*, Keating places this category in direct and overt opposition

[87]For discussion of this mediaeval attestation and its meaning, see O'Connor, 'Semantics of *scél*', 37–40. The entry in *eDIL* ('story, legend') seems to conflate the meanings of the mediaeval and early modern attestations in a rather ambiguous way: *eDIL*, s.v. 1 *finn* II(b).

[88]I am grateful to Barbara Hillers for advice on this point.

[89]A clear opposition between 'history' and 'legend' emerges in Connell, 'Poetics and politics', 84: 'Keating occasionally informs his reader that certain episodes included in the *Foras Feasa* are not to be regarded as historical and should instead be considered legends'.

[90]Theophilus O'Flanagan, *Deirdri, or, The Lamentable Fate of the Sons of Usnach, an Ancient Dramatic Irish Tale* (Dublin, 1808), printed as the fourth run of pages in *Transactions of the Gaelic Society of Dublin* 1 (1808), 59–60n.

[91]O'Flanagan, *Deirdri*, 103–4n., emphasis original.

[92]O'Flanagan, *Deirdri*, 134n.

to the term *stair*, a longstanding Irish borrowing from *historia* in the sense of a true historical narrative (and in that one remaining attestation, the same opposition is clearly implicit). Every time he uses the phrase *finnscéal filidheachta*, it labels a narrative or a historical claim not merely as doubtful, but as fanciful, lying, fictitious. Here is more evidence that Keating was adopting the Renaissance habit of treating the creative imagination as something that existed in tension with (or opposition to) the narrating of historical truth, rather than something that was felt to reinforce or complement historical truth as in mediaeval epic or saga-writing. The root meaning of *scéal* was 'reported information', often by implication in narrative form but also connoting news more generally. To this root meaning, with its baseline connotations of true reporting, *finnscéal* adds an epithet connoting aesthetic adornment (*finn-* 'beautiful'), connotations that are then reinforced by the adjective *filidheachta* 'poetical'. The resulting phrase resembles the contemporary English phrase 'poeticall fiction'.

Indeed, the first time that Keating uses the phrase *finnscéal filidheachta*, he is referring to poetry: specifically, to the English poetry of Edmund Spenser. In his defensive introduction, after refuting various statements made in Spenser's *View of the State of Ireland* as *breugach* (false/lying), Keating wonders aloud why Spenser had chosen to write about things of which he was so ignorant. He suggests that, because Spenser was a poet himself,

> tug cead cumadóireachta dhó féin; mar fá gnáth leisean …, iomad finnsgeul filidheachta do chumadh agus do chórughadh le briathraibh blasda, do bhreugadh an léaghthóra.
>
> 'he allowed himself liberty of invention, as it was customary for him … to invent and arrange many poetical *finnscéala* with charming words, to deceive the reader.'[93]

This description sets up the category *finnscéal filidheachta* by associating it with invention in the fictive sense (*cumadóireacht*), deception and aesthetic beauty. There is also a note of disapproval: the category *finnscéal filidheachta* is invoked on its first attestation to explain why Spenser told so many lies about Ireland. The Classically educated reader would perhaps have recalled Cicero's speech *Pro Caelio* in which he had defended Marcus Caelius Rufus against an accusation of attempted murder made by his wife, the renowned poetess and playwright Clodia Metelli. Cicero dismissed the truthfulness of her account by calling it a *fabella* (a 'little *fabula*') made by a poetess who had composed *plurimae fabulae* ('many *fabulae*').[94]

This cluster of associations brings Keating's phrase *finnscéal filidheachta* into the orbit of *fabula* and *figmentum* in early modern scholarly discourse more generally. This context requires some illustration. Later in the seventeenth century the word *finnscéal* (with or without a further qualifier) was

[93]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 30.

[94]Cicero, *Orations: Pro Caelio, De provinciis consularibus, Pro Balbo*, ed. and trans. by R. Gardner (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958), 486 (section xvii).

used pejoratively to gloss the Latin word *figmentum*, especially in confessional and theological polemics. The first attestations of *finnscéal* without any further qualifier were in the 1660s and 1670s, in a context where its basic equivalence to *figmentum* and/or *fabula* seems clear.[95] The use of the Latin terminology of imaginative invention to dismiss the religious beliefs of others, current since Antiquity (not only among Christians), had reached a new pitch in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, with *figmentum* much used by Protestants to castigate certain doctrines as merely human imaginings.[96] In his catechism *Lucerna fidelium* (1676), the Franciscan theologian Francis Molloy adapted this terminology into Irish with the word *finnsgeul* in order to explain what Protestants believed about Catholic doctrines. At one point Molloy states that, to non-Catholics, *Nach bhfuil acht finnsgeul a n-iodhbairt an aifrinn* ('the sacrifice of the Mass is nothing but a *finnsgeul*'); he cites as his source *Confess[io] Angl[icana], art. 31*, the 'Thirty-nine articles' of the Church of England.[97] Molloy's Irish sentence is a condensed paraphrase of a sentence in Article 31 which emphasizes that propitiation of God's wrath took place on the Cross and does not take place during Mass, so the *missarum sacrificia* (sacrifices of Masses) performed by Catholic priests to propitiate God *blasphema figmenta sunt et pernitiosæ imposturæ* – or, as the English version of 1571 put it, 'were blasphemous fables, and daungerous deceites'.[98] Molloy's *finnsgeul* renders Latin *figmentum* or English 'fable' – or both. Later in the tract Molloy amplifies *finnsgeul* into a tautology by adding the adjective *fabhall* ('fabulous, made-up'). He dismisses the logic of one argument by saying that if it is true, then Christ's promises are lies and *ata 'na fhinnsgeul fhabhalta an sgrioptur fein ar fad* ('Scripture itself is altogether comprised of

[95]The first attestation of which I am aware (thanks to Ruairí Ó hUiginn) is Richard Plunkett's unpublished *Vocabularium latinum et hibernum* (1662), a manuscript Latin-Irish dictionary in which *finnscéal* (unqualified) is one of numerous glosses for the word *fabula*. Other glosses in this entry include *braissgéal* 'boastful tale', *sgéal bréige no bréagach* ('lying tale'), and terms connoting mockery or jokes, as well as the direct borrowing *fabhall*: Dublin, Marsh's Library, MS Z 4.2.5, fol. 169r, s.v. *fabula*, available online at www.isos.dias.ie (accessed 26 November 2025). Several Latin words relating to *fabula* are glossed here in similar terms, and on fol. iii Keating is named as one of Plunkett's sources.

[96]Reijo Työrinoja, 'Fact, fiction, and fantasy: Luther and the medieval *de anima* tradition of imagination', in Vesa Hirvonen et al. (eds), *Mind and Modality: Studies in the History of Philosophy in Honour of Simo Kuutila* (Leiden, 2006), 239–54, at 251–2.

[97]Francis Molloy, *Lucerna fidelium*, ed. by Pádraig Ó Súilleabháin (Dublin, 1962), 138 (part 3, chapter 6).

[98]The Latin text of 1571 is quoted here from Gerald Bray (ed.), *Documents of the English Reformation* (Cambridge, 1994), 303. The English text is quoted here from *Articles Agreed on by the Archbyshoppes and Byshoppes in the Yere 1562* (London, 1571), 20. A clear picture of successive revisions to the Latin as well as English versions is given by Charles Hardwick, *A History of the Articles of Religion*, new ed. (Cambridge, 1859), 314–17. The 1553 Latin versions had *figmenta* without *blasphema*, and the equivalent English wording for *figmenta* alone was 'forged fables'. In the 1553 texts this section constituted Article 30, not 31 as cited by Molloy. The equivalent passage in the more detailed 1615 'Irish Articles' uses quite different wording and is numbered as section 99 (Hardwick, *History*, 366). Therefore Molloy must have been using the 1571 Latin or English version – probably the Latin, because his own paraphrase is in the present tense, like the Latin but unlike the English.

made-up figments of the imagination').[99] This usage bears a close resemblance to Keating's phrase *finnscéal filidheachta* and is further evidence that *finnscéal*/*finnsgeul* was understood to mean an untrue story or account in early modern Irish culture.

The same cluster of negative connotations, implying lies and falsehood, hovers around another key phrase in Keating's discussion of Spenser's poetical activities, *cead cumadóireachta* ('liberty of invention, freedom to invent').[100] Other ecclesiastically authored Irish texts from the same century use the word *cumadóireacht* (from *cummaid*, 'forms, shapes, composes') to translate *fabula* and/or *figmentum* (from *fingere* 'to form, shape, make up'), again in contexts of disapproval. For example, in William Daniel's 1602 Irish translation of the New Testament, in the Pastoral Epistles to Timothy and Titus, St. Paul's warnings against being led astray by heathen or Jewish *mythoi* or *fabulae* are translated using the phrases *sgéulta fábhuill* ('fabulous stories', 1 Tim 4:7, 2 Tim 4:4 and Titus 1:14) and *chumadóireachd sgéul* ('making-up of stories', 1 Tim 1:4).[101] Flaithrí Ó Maolchonaire's adaptation of *Desiderius* (1616) echoes these Pauline resonances in overtly Augustinian vein, with *cumadóireacht* used to denote pretence or deception, for instance in the recurring phrase *bréaga 7 cumadóireacht* ('lies and invention').[102] In one of these instances, *cumadóireacht* has been used to render *fingimiento* in the sixteenth-century Spanish source.[103] Later in the century, the Irish translator of a mediaeval Latin Life of St. Francis similarly rendered *figmenta*, described as emanating from the Devil and deceiving listeners, as *cumadóireacht*.[104] Finally, in his 1640 translation of a passage from Savonarola's *Triumphus crucis*, in which the author had said that if there were no hope of Heaven then the Christian faith would be *fabulosum ac commenticium* ('fabulous and made-up'), Bonaventure O'Conor rendered that phrase *fábhall agus comadóireacht* ('fable and invention').[105]

Keating's use of the phrase *cead cumadóireachta* ('liberty of invention') adds a further layer to this theologically weighted rhetoric of lying and deception, mirroring his use of the word *filidheacht* to qualify *finnscéal* in the same sentence. He treats Spenser's use of *cumadóireacht* as a natural aspect of

[99] Molloy, *Lucerna fidelium*, 164 (part 3, chapter 10).

[100] *Cumadóireacht* connotes invention in the sense of pretence or falsifying, a sense that Latin *inventio* also came to acquire in the early modern period. All the attestations of *cumadóireacht* in *eDIL* (s.v. *cummatóirecht*) are from the seventeenth century or later. The standard mediaeval Irish term approximating to *inventio* was *airec* (or *airec menman*), normally used to refer to the 'discovery' of something true rather than the 'making-up' of something fictive.

[101] Uilliam Ó Domhnaill (trans.), *Tiomna Nuadh ár dTighearna agus ár Slánuightheora Íosa Críost* (Dublin, 1602), viewed on Royal Irish Academy, 'Historical Irish corpus 1600–1926', https://corpas.ria.ie (accessed 16 November 2025).

[102] Flaithrí Ó Maolchonaire, *Desiderius*, ed. by Thomas F. O'Rahilly, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series 12 (Dublin, 1941), 68, 82, 131 and 309.

[103] Ó Maolchonaire, *Desiderius*, 309, s.v. *fimíneacht*, O'Rahilly's note to p. 82.

[104] Pádraig Ó Suilleabháin (ed.), *Beatha San Froinsias* (Dublin, 1957), 79, and *eDIL* s.v. *cummatóirecht*.

[105] For both source and translation, see [Girolamo Savonarola], *Triumphus crucis seu de veritate fidei* (Florence, 1497), book 2 chapter 6 (n.p.); Pádraig Ó Suilleabháin (ed.), *Buaidh na Naomhchroiche* (Dublin, 1972), 52.

his identity as a poet by adding the concept of *cead*, meaning permission or liberty. The resulting phrase looks rather like an Irish calque on the ancient rhetorical concept of a *licentia fingendi* ('licence to invent') associated with poets as makers of fiction. A key reference-point here is the ancient rhetorician Quintilian, who used this phrase to describe the actions of lying teachers who exercised *licentia fingendi* to invent *fabulae* and mislead their students.[106] In Europe generally, including the Insular world, this pejorative sense of poetic licence remained an important rhetorical resource throughout the Middle Ages (especially from Augustinian perspectives and in religious writings).[107] Admittedly, this pejorative usage was also balanced by more positive assessments of the possibilities of fiction, such as the Servian commentaries on Virgil's *Æneid* which identified epic poets' use of the same freedom, here termed *poetica licentia*: that perspective was applied much more widely from the twelfth century onwards.[108] But we can see in Keating's discussion of Spenser that he here takes the sterner line, like the early modern religious writers mentioned above, describing poets who use their freedom in order to deceive their audiences.

These closely overlapping clusters of connotations allow us to understand Keating's use of the phrase *finnscéal filidheachta* as an Irish equivalent to *figmentum poeticum* ('poetic invention', or 'poeticall fiction'). That Latin concept had been known to Gaelic scholars since at least the twelfth century, when it was used to refer to made-up material in a colophon to the saga *Táin Bó Cúailnge* ('The cattle-raid of Cooley') in the Book of Leinster, here reinforcing an opposition between the categories *historia* and *fabula*.[109] The point of the poetry-words *filidheacht* and *poetica* in Keating's phrase and the *Táin* colophon is certainly not 'poetry' in the metrical sense, nor is it *filidecht* in the very broad early mediaeval Gaelic sense combining compositional skill and performance with the utterance of reliable knowledge. Rather, the poetry referred to in Keating's *filidheacht* and the *Táin* colophon is something more recognizable from mediaeval and early modern *artes poetriae*: artful and pleasing literary invention in verse or prose, which is not to be mistaken for history.[110]

Keating's dismissal of Spenser thus positions his category *finnscéal filidheachta* as the fictional opposite of historical narrative, to be expunged from the kind of historical synthesis that he aimed to present. It is in this context that we must read his subsequent uses of the same category to label indigenous

[106] Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria: Books I–III*, ed. and trans. by H. E. Butler (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1920), 154 (I.viii.21).

[107] For some Gaelic examples, see Vivienne Margaret Bateman [= Meg Bateman], 'The themes and images of Classical Gaelic religious poetry', unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Aberdeen, 1990, 7–9; Coira, *By Poetic Authority*, 123–4.

[108] On these developments, see Päivi Mehtonen, *Old Concepts and New Poetics: Historia, Argumentum, and Fabula in the Twelfth- and Early Thirteenth-Century Latin Poetics of Fiction* (Helsinki, 1996), especially 119–44; Nicolette Zeeman, 'The schools give a license to poets', in Rita Copeland (ed.), *Criticism and Dissent in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1996), 151–80.

[109] *TBC LL*, 136; Toner, 'The Ulster cycle' (with further references). However, as I argue in a forthcoming study, the Latin term *fabula* did not automatically connote untrue narrative in mediaeval Gaelic textual culture.

[110] On fictionality in the *artes poetriae*, see Mehtonen, *Old Concepts*.

Gaelic narratives too. Later in his introduction, correcting colonial historians on errors about Fionn mac Cumhaill and his *fían*, Keating argues that, like several other Fionn-tales, *Cath Fionntrágha* ('The battle of Ventry') was not *meas stáire fírinnighe* ('judged to be true history') by former historians, and that it is, instead, *finnsceul filidheachta do cumadh mar chaitheamh aimsire* ('a poetical *finnscéal* invented as a pastime').[111] The tone here is not disapproving, unlike the tone of Keating's discussion of Spenser. Spenser's lies are harmful because they pretend to be truth, whereas the fictions invented by Irish storytellers are harmless because they do not pretend to be anything more than entertainment. Keating's scorn is here reserved for Meredith Hanmer and other colonial historians who had cited the exaggerations of romance-sagas like *Cath Fionntrágha* as evidence of the unreliability of Irish *seanchus*. Those colonial critiques explain why it was especially important for Keating to cordon off the less plausible sagas as fictions.

This strategic exclusion of certain well-known Gaelic sagas as fictional entertainments rather than historical accounts is repeated and amplified in Keating's main narrative when he covers the period of history when Fionn lived, the reign of Cormac mac Airt. Here Keating asserts that narratives such as *Cath Fionntrágha*, *Bruighean Chaorthainn* and *Imtheacht an Ghiolla Dheacair* are examples of *iomad d'fhinnscéalaibh filidheachta ar Fhionn* ('many poetical *finnscéala* about Fionn') written *mar chaitheamh aimsire* ('as a pastime'). This should surprise no-one, Keating says, because there is no country in which *nach scríobhthaidhe ré linn na pagántachta sceoil da ngairthi fabulae* ('*scéala* which are called *fabulae* have not been written during the period of paganism'). To illustrate this point, Keating mentions some romances from other countries, probably referring to their English versions: *Féach Ridire na Gréine, Bevis of Hamton, Huon of Burdex, agus a samhail oile sin do scríobhadh lé linn an Chreidimh féin* ('such as the Knight of the Sun, Bevis of Hametoun, Huon of Bordeaux, and others like these, which were written even during the Christian period').[112]

This list of foreign romances may recall the English *finnscéala filidheachta* by Spenser to which Keating had initially attached the label *finnscéala filidheachta*. Perhaps Keating was thinking there of romances like *The Faerie Queene*. But here, again, Keating's allusion to foreign romances is less waspish than is his discussion of Spenser. Indeed, a generous reading of Keating's discussion of Spenser allows for the view that Keating considered Spenser's own romances as harmless in their own terms, but that Spenser had wrongfully brought the poet's inventive art into the domain of historical discourse. Keating was not attempting to condemn the enjoyment of romances as such; he would have known that many among his primary target audience of Catholic Irish

[111] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 50.

[112] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 326. On the identity of these texts and their likely English provenance in this context, see Aisling Byrne, 'Writing westwards: medieval English romances and their early modern Irish audiences', in Matthew Woodcock and Andrew King (eds), *Medieval into Renaissance: Essays for Helen Cooper* (Cambridge, 2016), 73–90, at 73–4.

gentry eagerly commissioned such texts in the form of translations, fresh compositions or new copies.[113]

We know from other sources that Keating himself happily employed fictional narrative in certain contexts. In his earlier homiletic work *Trí Bior-Ghaoithe an Bháis* ('Three shafts of death') he had repeatedly used the compound *fábhaill-sgéal* ('fabulous story') without any disapproval whatsoever to refer to Christ's parables in the New Testament. The relevant parables, some mentioned more than once, are those of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–7, cited twice), the man whose house is burgled (Matthew 24:43–4), the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32), the rich man and the beggar Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31, cited three times), the man who invited his friends to a feast (Luke 14:16–24), the steward facing redundancy (Luke 16:1–8), the man who asks his friend for bread (Luke 11:5–10), the vineyard-owner (Matthew 20:1–16) and the sower (Matthew 13:3–8).[114] These are not 'fables' or *fabulae* in the Classical, Ciceronian sense of an unnatural or improbable narrative. Most of these examples of *fábhaill-sgéal* are entirely realistic, the only exception being the cosmic artificiality of the conversation between the rich man in Hell and Lazarus in Heaven in Luke 16. *Fábhaill-sgéal* here means simply 'made-up story', whether realistic or not, and this is in keeping with mediaeval and early modern understandings of *figmentum*.

In *Foras Feasa*, Keating's point about *finnscéala filidheachta* and *fabulae* is simply that they represent a literature of entertainment which should not be mistaken for history, and which is found in all countries. His alignment of historically dubious Gaelic sagas with mediaeval romances anticipates the more overt use of 'romance' by Celtic scholars to label native Gaelic sagas almost three centuries later.[115] Reiterating the *finnscéal-stair* opposition, Keating then insists there are nevertheless many *staire fírinneacha inchreidthe* ('true and credible histories') about Fionn's people. He goes on to repeat some of the contents of other mediaeval Gaelic texts about Fionn in his own history. Elsewhere he names the mediaeval saga *Agallamh na Seanórach* ('The conversation of the ancients') as a reliable source of information about the distant past via its long-lived protagonist, Fionn's sometime companion Caoilte mac Rónáin,

> do mhair tuilleadh agus trí chéad bliadhan, agus do nocht mórán seanchusa do Phádraic, amhail is follus i n-Agallaimh na Seanórach ...[116]

[113]Byrne, 'Writing westwards'.

[114]Geoffrey Keating, *Trí Bior-Ghaoithe an Bháis: The Three Shafts of Death*, ed. by Osborn Bergin, 2nd ed. (Dublin, 1931), 48 and 330, 71–2, 108–9, 194 (and 248 and 263), 215, 236, 237, 278, 316–17 and 323 respectively.

[115]On Eleanor Hull's and Edmund Quiggin's uses of the label 'romance', primarily of sagas in the Ulster and Finn Cycles, see Erich Poppe, *Of Cycles and Other Critical Matters: Some Issues in Medieval Irish Literary History and Criticism*, E. C. Quiggin Memorial Lectures 9 (Cambridge, 2008), 1 and 6–13.

[116]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 326–34; i, 150–2.

> 'who lived for more than three hundred years, and who made known much historical information to [St.] Patrick, as is evident in *Agallamh na Seanórach* ...'

Further confirmation that *finnscéal filidheachta* denotes an entertaining narrative with no historical veracity is found elsewhere in *Foras Feasa*, at other points where Keating's saga-strewn narrative is momentarily interrupted by his denial of the truthfulness of certain episodes in his mediaeval Gaelic narrative sources. Despite his willingness to credit the *Acallam*'s witness to Caoilte's extremely long life, the well-known notion that the sage Fionntain had lived even longer and survived the Flood itself is too much for Keating, in part because it had provoked the scorn of English scholars. He declares

> nach fuil acht finnsceul filidheachta i san stáir d'fhaisnéidhfeadh Fionntain do mharthainn ria ndílinn, agus 'na diaidh ....[117]
>
> 'that there is nothing but a poetical *finnscéal* in the history that would recount [*or* explain] that Fionntain lived before and after the Deluge ....'

Here, as in the Book of Leinster colophon to the *Táin*, the phrasing implies that within a larger unit whose authenticity may be more robust, a passage that seems to be history (*stair*) can be identified as poetical fiction (*finnscéal filidheachta*), and that it is necessary to isolate these made-up passages from the historical record (*seanchus*) so as to leave that record unblemished in good humanist manner – and, by the same token, less vulnerable to the aspersions cast by colonial onlookers.

This is the context in which we must view Keating's inclusion of untrue stories about Lughaid Laighdhe and the hag-turned-beauty and Labhraidh Loingseach having horse's ears. As mentioned above, these are the only two instances where Keating repeats an untrue story for purposes other than immediately refuting it. Both stories are given the label *finnscéal filidheachta* and presented in explicit or implicit opposition to the category *stair*. The Lughaid story Keating calls an allegory of sovereignty: *go fáthach is í Éire an chailleach-so* ('symbolically, this hag is Ireland').[118] This is also, incidentally, the earliest unambiguous evidence that we possess for this *puella senilis* story or its analogues being treated allegorically. The Labhraidh story seems to have been included simply as an entertaining but factually untrue exemplum about kingship. Here again a direct opposition with *stair* is reiterated: *Is mó saoilim an chuid-se don scéal do bheith 'n-a fhinnscéal fhilidheachta ioná 'n-a stair* ('I consider this part of the *scéal* more [likely] to comprise poetical *finnscéal* than history').[119]

[117]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 150. On the contrast between Keating's assessment of this story and those offered by mediaeval Gaelic authors, see Emma Nic Cárthaigh, 'Surviving the Flood: revenants and antediluvian lore in medieval Irish texts', in Kathy Cawsey and Jason Harris (eds), *Transmission and Transformation in the Middle Ages* (Dublin, 2007), 40–64, at 62–4.

[118]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 148.

[119]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 174.

This last comment implies that the other parts of the *scéal* or saga on which Keating drew when narrating the life of Labhraidh are, in Keating's view, history. He did, after all, consider both Lughaid and Labhraidh to be historical kings, and as we have seen, in practice he treated a great many *scéala* as respectable historical sources. It would be tempting, then, to infer that the longstanding, essentially historical connotations of the simplex term *scéal* remain implicit in Keating's usage even when he writes disparagingly about the veracity of the compound category *finnscéala filidheachta*. Compare, for example, the way in which the Old Irish glosses to the Psalm-commentary in Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, MS C 301 maintain the historical connotations of *scél* by qualifying untrue *scéla* with a negative adjective, such as *scéla togaitacha* ('deceptive *scéla*').[120] Keating may be seen as doing something similar with his compound *finnscéala filidheachta*, adding emphatic qualifying terms to the base term to invert its meaning and thus hiving off a particularly suspect group of aesthetically pleasing narratives from the rank and file of *scéala* which he considers trustworthy. Elsewhere in *Foras Feasa*, too, Keating uses negatively loaded terms in compounds with *seanchus* (*claoin-seanchus* and *saoibh-seanchus*, both meaning 'erroneous history') to set suspect histories apart from the genuine article.[121] In the paragraph of a 2019 conference paper from which the present article grew, I suggested that for Keating a *scéal* was normally expected to be a true story, as it had been for his forebears in Gaelic learned culture.[122]

However, when we look more closely at Keating's use of the word *scéal* in *Foras Feasa*, and also at contexts in which we might expect him to use this term but he does not, a very different profile of connotations emerges. This profile shows Keating, once again in humanist vein, pulling the term *scéal* away from its longstanding associations with historical narrative.[123] His usage thus reflects the wider practice, in early modern scholarship, of separating out the concepts of 'story' and 'history' more sharply (and removing the former), despite the fact that narrative remained central to much historical writing.[124]

[120]For this phrase see Whitley Strokes and John Strachan (eds and partial trans), *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1901–10), i, 84. For discussion of this passage see Harriet Thomsett, 'Meeting on whose terms? The equation of Latin and vernacular literary terminology in the Old Irish glosses', *Quaestio Insularis* 3 (2002), 107–20, at 117; O'Connor, 'Semantics of *scél*', 30–1.

[121]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 152 (describing Gerald of Wales's work).

[122]I presented this view in 'Entertainment and instruction in *scéla*: two ends of a Gaelic storytelling spectrum?', Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge, April 2019.

[123]It has sometimes been suggested that a similar move was made in a scholastic note (thirteenth-century or later) surviving in the fifteenth-century Irish manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B. 512, in which *scél* is used to translate *fabula* in opposition to *stair* / *historia*: for the text see Brian Ó Cuív, '*Scél* : *arramainte* : *stair*', *Éigse* 11 (1964–6), 18. In a forthcoming article on the mediaeval Gaelic reception of Ciceronian literary theory, however (to appear in *CMCS* in Winter 2026), I have argued that story and history are not this note's primary concerns and that its key terms are to be understood in more specialized technical senses.

[124]Ó Buachalla ('*Annála*', 78) briefly noted the way in which Keating's preface made a point of separating *scéal* from *stair* as part of his adoption of humanist source-critical methods. Analysis of the wider context of shifting criteria for historical (and other) forms of plausibility in the early

4. Keating and the *scéal*

First, *Foras Feasa* makes much use of the widely attested non-narrative senses of *scéal*. Almost all attestations of the simplex *scéal* in *Foras Feasa* (i.e. without any qualifying prefix) use it to denote things other than narratives about former times. This is not at all unusual in mediaeval or modern literature in Irish, but it is worth noting here because it shows that Keating did not have anything against the word itself, despite using it so rarely to denote narrative as such. Sometimes its usage is part of a conventional greeting in which one speaker asks another what their news is, without anything hinging on this, or in other set phrases which do not necessarily imply the passing on of information and sometimes refer simply to an 'event'.[125] Especially in the sections dealing with eleventh- and twelfth-century events, it is often used in the sense of a message, 'sending word' to alert or summon another person, which may be considered as including information of a limited kind.[126] More frequently still, it is used in the sense of news or information, usually about events in the immediate past, sometimes (by implication) in narrative form.[127] It is occasionally used (in the plural) to denote information about a more distant past, not necessarily in narrative form: this sense overlaps with the strictly narrative sense of *scéal*, as when Keating wonders how *sceula* of the antediluvians could possibly have been transmitted to those living after the Deluge.[128] All these senses of *scéal* are absolutely conventional, and there is nothing unusual about Keating's usage of them.

What is unusual is that Keating very rarely uses singular *scéal* in the sense of a saga, tale or history about past events, a sense which is very widely attested elsewhere. This lack is striking in a work which draws so heavily on numerous sagas and other mediaeval Gaelic narrative compositions for which the standard mediaeval and early modern label was *scél*/*scéal*. Instead of this, Keating applies the labels *seanchas* or *stair* to his mediaeval narrative sources, and sometimes also the term *eachtra* in the sense of 'a narrative about great deeds': these alternative terms were normally treated as closely overlapping with *scéal*, but Keating held *scéal* at arm's length from them. When, in his

modern period has focused in particular on England, for example Barbara Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England: A Study of the Relationships between Natural Science, Religion, History, Law, and Literature* (Princeton, 1983); Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1994).

[125] For examples, see Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 154, 206, 272; iii, 98. On the 'event' sense of *scél*/*scéal*, see Ralph O'Connor, *The Music of What Happens: Narrative Terminology and the Gaelic and Norse-Icelandic Saga*, E. C. Quiggin Memorial Lectures 23 (Cambridge, 2023), 46–59.

[126] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 144; ii, 40, 226, 402; iii, 120, 180, 250, 270, 272, 318, 324, 326.

[127] *Scéala* denotes information about occult matters, including the future, in Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 350. For *scéal(a)* as news or information about the immediate past, see ibid., i, 124; ii, 16, 154, 164, 192, 218, 226, 350, 362, 406, 410; iii, 60, 98, 226, 254, 332, 338, 344. Examples from the latter list where some kind of narrative is implied in the information delivered include the swineherds' reports (*sceul*) of their vision at Cashel (ibid., i, 124) and Aaron telling Niúl *scéala* about the deeds of the Israelites and Pharaoh (ibid., ii, 16).

[128] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 146 and 150; ii, 82. Some of Keating's usage of the word-form ending in *-a* may reflect instead the alternative singular form as seen in Old Irish *scélae*, but the meaning is the same.

defensive introduction, he describes the range of reliable vernacular sources on which he has drawn, he lists several individual sagas, mostly king-tales, but refers to them as *iomad do stáiribh eile* ('a great many other histories') which contain *mórán seanchusa* ('much historical learning'). Together with the other sources he mentions, these sagas collectively present *seanchus Éireann* ('the history of Ireland').[129]

Similarly, the detailed resumés of individual sagas presented as historical events in the main body of *Foras Feasa* are never introduced as *scéala*. When apologizing to his readers for not repeating every single Ulster story, he recommends that they read the various *tána* and *aideda* listed by title, and *a samhail oile so do stairibh* ('and other such histories'), in which they will find *a bhfios go foirleathan* ('extensive information about them', i.e. the Ulster warriors).[130] The death-tale of Conchubhar is referred to twice as *an stair* ('the history'), and both it and the story of Deirdre are introduced initially as *éirim na heachtra* – a 'course' or summary of the story – as if to highlight the content rather than the form. The full range of Ulster sagas are referred to in a similar content-oriented manner, as *cuid dá ndálaibh go cumair* ('some of their affairs in brief').[131] Sagas and poems about Níall Naoighiallach are referred to as *laoi nó leitir* ('lay or document'), and different versions of the mediaeval saga *Esnada Tige Buchet* are introduced in the phrase *do réir dhruinge ré seanchus* ('according to some investigators of *seanchus*').[132] Trustworthy narratives about Fionn mac Cumhaill, distinct from made-up *finnscéala filidheachta*, are referred to as *scríbhne* ('writings') or *staire* ('histories') and are said to have been sourced *a seinleabhraibh an tseanchusa* ('from the old books of the *seanchus*').[133] The notion that these narratives are, or were originally, *scéala* is comprehensively buried beneath the more emphatically veracious, and general, categories *stair* and *seanchus*.

On the few occasions in *Foras Feasa* when *scéal* is used in the sense of a narrative about the historical or legendary past, doubt is voiced concerning the narrative's veracity, and the story is usually rejected. The only instance I have found where *scéal* is used of an account whose veracity Keating seems willing to accept, and to include in his authorized account, is a reference to historical traditions about St. Patrick which appear in one Life but not another (*scéal nó míorbhál ar Phádraig*, 'a story or miracle of Patrick') but which should not be doubted for this reason.[134] The specific piece of information that Keating is trying to defend in this passage is not a story as such, but a claim about the chronology of his time in Ireland (i.e. it is news or information). And even this

[129]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 80.

[130]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 220.

[131]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 204, 198, 188 and 196 respectively.

[132]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 398 and 300. For early mediaeval parallels to the pairing *laoi nó leitir* as proofs of authenticity, see Toner, 'Authority', 61.

[133]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 324–6 and 330.

[134]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, iii, 30. There is one more exception, but this appears in a poem quoted by Keating rather than being Keating's own usage: ibid., ii, 344. Here *scéal* is translated by Comyn and Dinneen as 'gospels', which is probably too narrow (see O'Connor, 'Semantics of *scél*', 34 n. 76), but the context implies that these *scéala* are to be trusted and are of a devotional nature.

context, settling the reader's doubts about such diverse traditions, could be said to reinforce Keating's association of *scéal* with doubt.

This association of *scéal* with doubtful narrative applies even more strongly to the ambiguously narrative uses of *scéala* as applied to antediluvian history or information. Besides the passage quoted above on this subject, Keating also briefly mentions the possibility that antediluvian lore might have been carved on stones which remained visible after the floodwaters subsided, *dámadh fíor an sceul* ('if the *scéal* be true') – hardly a ringing endorsement.[135] As discussed above, Keating's treatment of these antediluvian *scéala* is highly sceptical, casting doubt on the possibility that any information about Irish antediluvians could have survived the Flood, so his emphasis is on questioning the veracity of accounts containing that alleged information and asserting that they do not contain *stáir fhírinnigh* ('trustworthy history').[136] As for Hanmer's claim that the Gaels gave credence *ar sceulaibh Fhionntain* ('to the *scéala* of Fionntain') that were later told to St. Patrick, Keating flatly denies that Fionntain ever passed on such lore. As Keating puts it, this is just another *do bhreughaibh Hanmer* ('of Hanmer's lies'), to be contrasted with the *iomad seanchusa* ('abundance of *seanchus*') which Caoilte mac Rónáin gave to Patrick concerning more recent Irish history.[137] So, leaving aside that one example about St. Patrick which is not a story as such, *scéala* are stories credited by other people but not by Keating, whereas stories credited and used as sources by Keating are referred to as *staire* or *seanchus*.

The same pattern, with its emphatic contrast between *scéal* on the one hand and *stair* or *seanchus* on the other, runs throughout Keating's other uses of *scéal* (unqualified) in an unambiguously narrative sense. Elsewhere in his defensive introduction he expresses the hope that his readers will trust his own *stair* (history) rather than the biased and lying *innisin sceul* ('storytelling') of foreign historians.[138] He rejects the tradition that Donnchadh mac Briain had children by a Roman emperor's daughter while on pilgrimage to Rome: *ní héidir an scéal-so do bheith fírinneach* ('it is not possible that this *scéal* [can] be true').[139] And in some of his identifications of doubtful narratives as *finnscéala filidheachta*, mentioned above, Keating brings in the word *scéal* in simplex form to reinforce the point. After denying that *Cath Fionntrágha* was *meas stáire firinnighe* ('considered to be a trustworthy history'), despite its having been mockingly cited as such by Hanmer, Keating says that the same applies *ar gach sceul eile d'á gcuireann síos ar an bhFéinn* ('to every other *scéal* that he writes down about the Fían').[140] The doubtful anecdote about Labhraidh with horse's ears is described as *an chuid-se don scéal* ('this part of the *scéal*') about Labhraidh: this allows the rest of that *scéal* to escape charges of falsehood by implication, but confirms Keating's association between the term *scéal* and

[135]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 146.
[136]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 146.
[137]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 152–4.
[138]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 76.
[139]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, iii, 292.
[140]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 50.

doubtful veracity.[141] Most strikingly, in his discussion of fictional Finn-tales as kin to English romances (contrasting these with *staire fírinneacha*, 'trustworthy histories'), he refers to fictional tales composed for entertainment as *sceoil da ngairthi fabulae* ('*scéala* which are called *fabulae*').[142] By itself this phrase could be read as implying that only a subset of *scéala* are called *fabulae*, but in the context of Keating's usage throughout *Foras Feasa* it comes close to a definition of *scéal* in Latin terminology.

The pattern is reinforced by the remaining attestations of *scéal*, qualified by prefixes or adjectives, in the sense of a narrative about the historical or legendary past. These share with the unqualified and simplex attestations a clear association with lies, unreliability, error and bad faith: the *bhréig-sgeulaibh* ('lie-*scéala*') and *innisin sceul ainteasdach* ('telling of *scéala* by false witnesses') spread by enemies of Ireland who knew nothing of its *seanchus*;[143] the *fuair-sceul fabhaill* ('fabulous idle *scéal*') about St. Peter knocking St. Patrick on the head at the gates of Heaven, told by Campion in order to show that the Irish were credulous, a device that Keating likens to a *cluithcheoir* ('comedian') recounting *sceul sgigeamhail* ('derisive *scéala*') on a stage instead of writing as *stáraidhe* ('a historian');[144] and of course the poetic fictions or *finnscéala filidheachta* whose connotations have been explained above. The welter of negative epithets around *scéal* in these instances cannot be taken as evidence that negative qualification was needed to imply that a *scéal* was untrue, because Keating treats the simplex *scéal* (in its narrative sense) in a similar way.

Consciously or not, the profile of connotations built up by Keating around *scéal* as a category of narrative composition is, then, one of clear contrast with *stair* and *seanchus*. The word *scéal* comes close to being defined as *fabula* in the sense of an untrue or dubious account. It would be hard for a reader to come away from Keating's *Foras Feasa* with a sense that *scéala* were considered by him to narrate reliable history. And, as we have seen, on the many occasions when Keating endorses and/or repeats the account of a mediaeval *scéal* as history, he studiously avoids using that term to label it.

The novelty of this move is underscored by the fact that Keating was elsewhere happy to use *scéal* in its traditional sense of a veracious narrative. In his two earlier major works, *Eochair-Sgiath an Aifrinn* ('An explanatory defence of the Mass') and *Trí Bior-Ghaoithe an Bháis*, he frequently uses the simplex term *scéal*/*sgeul* to refer to a wide range of exemplary narratives that are presented as if true, without attaching any negative connotations to the term.[145] Several of the miracle-narratives to which the term *sgeul* is applied in *Eochair-Sgiath* are clearly intended to be taken literally, since they are followed by a statement emphatically encouraging belief in the event: *Is inchreidthe*

[141] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 174.

[142] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, ii, 326.

[143] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 10 and 74.

[144] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 62.

[145] See, for example, Keating, *Trí Bior-Ghaoithe an Bháis*, 163–4, 193 and 286; Seathrún Céitinn/Geoffrey Keating, *Eochair Sgiath an Aifrinn/An Explanatory Defence of the Mass*, ed. by Patrick O'Brien (Dublin, 1898), 40, 61–3, 80–1, 88, 91, 101, 102, 113–14 and 115–16.

as an sgeul so go mbí Corp Chríost dá ríribh 'san abhluinn ar an altóir ('it is believable from this story that the body of Christ was actually present in the wafer on the altar').[146] It is only in *Foras Feasa* that Keating suddenly shies away from using *scéal* to refer to historical narratives or literally true stories.

I suspect that the reason is rooted in genre. *Foras Feasa* is, very self-consciously, a history, based on older narrative sources which are claimed to reveal what really happened in the past. The individual narratives from which *Foras Feasa* is constructed may *also* carry higher, non-literal levels of meaning (political, moral, ethnic or spiritual),[147] but their literal truth-value is the foundation of their testimony. The two earlier works, by contrast, are not primarily histories.[148] They use narratives primarily to illustrate doctrinal and devotional truths, and many of these narratives are drawn from earlier exemplum-collections such as *Sgáthán na Sompladh* ('The mirror of exempla').[149] As long as these narratives help to teach the point under discussion, their literal truth or falsehood is not at issue. Indeed, some of them are acknowledged to be made-up stories, for instance the parables of Christ which (as noted above) Keating sometimes introduces via the compound *fábhaill-sgéal*. This term, for Keating, clearly denotes a very different conceptualization of *fabula* from that which is enshrined in *Foras Feasa* in the analogous compound *finnscéala filidheachta*. Unlike the latter, which Keating sees as designed primarily to amuse, the *fábhaill-sgéala* so frequently cited in *Trí Bior-Ghaoithe* are held up as containing important ethical or spiritual truths, sometimes in allegorical guise. They are also given the additional term *fáithsgéala* ('allegorical narratives'), and as noted above, the contents of the parables which Keating cites as *fábhaill-sgéala* are much more verisimilar than the *finnscéala filidheachta* mentioned in *Foras Feasa*.[150] Where *Trí Bior-Ghaoithe* does include a story that Keating labels *finnscéal filidheachta*, it tends to be non-verisimilar, for instance an animal fable.[151] All in all, the argument of *Trí Bior-Ghaoithe* can be said to rely almost as heavily on made-up stories as *Foras Feasa* does on stories that Keating insists are true.

Why, then, did Keating shrink from using the term *scéal* to denote a true story in his historical writing, whereas he happily used *seanchus* or *stair* for this? His discomfort with *scéal* in this capacity is likely to relate to the marriage between entertainment and information conventionally enshrined in the

[146] Keating, *Eochair Sgiath*, 62. Some of the exemplary *sgeula* in this text are followed by a slightly different comment introducing the moral, *Is ionntuigthe as an sgeul so* ('it may be understood from this story', e.g. ibid., 90 and 91), which could be taken as suggesting that the literal veracity of the narrative is not as important in such cases.

[147] On these levels of meaning in *Foras Feasa*, see the studies cited in n. 44 above.

[148] Complicating this opposition, parts of *Eochair-Sgiath an Aifrinn* do present historical claims about the early church. Those parts of *Eochair-Sgiath* insist on the literal veracity of the sources, supporting Keating's claims by presenting eyewitness testimony from ecclesiastical authorities (whose writings he saw as *seanchus*). But *Eochair-Sgiath* is not, as a whole, a complete history of the church. I am grateful to Feliks Levin for discussion of this point.

[149] Cited many times in Keating, *Eochair Sgiath*, e.g. 112 and 115.

[150] For these *fábhaill-sgéala*, see above, p. 448 and n. 114.

[151] For example, Keating, *Trí Bior-Ghaoithe an Bháis*, 233–4.

mediaeval and early modern practice of *scélaigheacht*. As I have suggested elsewhere, in the Middle Ages and beyond, a *scéal* was understood to be a means of imparting – or rather, performing (virtually or in person) – true information about the past through artful and dramatic narrative. Its dramatic, aesthetic and entertaining aspects were not generally felt to compromise its veracity. Quite the reverse: the most important historical events and figures were thought to be worth commemorating in the most dramatic manner.[152] Even a figure that we would associate today with a purely entertaining function, the *scélaige*/*scéalaighe* ('storyteller'), was invoked by mediaeval and early modern Gaelic writers as a historical authority, sometimes in a near-synonymous alliterating pair with *senchaid*/*seanchaid* ('historian').[153] Humanist historiography, however, was often sceptical about the veracity of narratives that were so openly designed for entertainment as well as (purported) instruction, especially those that dealt with a past so remote that it was now increasingly termed 'the age of fable'.[154] It was natural to translate mainstream European humanist suspicion of mediaeval epics and romances about the remote past into suspicion of the narrative category that performed a similar function in Gaelic culture, namely the *scéal*.[155]

Keating was well aware that he was bringing traditional Gaelic *seanchus* into a new and modern scholarly tradition in which scepticism about the fabulous element in legendary history had to be tackled head-on, so he had to tread very carefully to ensure that his sources maintained their credibility in this new scholarly environment. The colonial and confessional contexts in which he was writing heightened these concerns. Keating's project was primarily to defend Ireland against her foreign critics, especially those from the island of Britain. Some of those critics, as Keating himself observes, had used the alleged exaggerations of mediaeval Gaelic sagas or *scéala* as rhetorical ammunition against the Irish and as a means of falsifying Irish claims about their own history.[156] In order to counter this colonial rhetoric effectively, Keating chose the strategy of accepting the general critical animus against exaggerated legendary narratives of the remote past (as was consistent with international humanist practice) and displayed this animus in his dismissal of certain mediaeval stories, yet at the same time retained the content of many

[152]For discussion, see references in nn. 14 and 24 above.

[153]See, for example, Alexander Bugge (ed. and trans.), *Caithréim Cellacháin Caisil: The Victorious Career of Cellachan of Cashel* (Christiania, 1905), 2, citing storytellers as authorities for a summary of the historical situation described: *do reir scriptra na scelaige* ('according to the writings of the storytellers/historians'). For other examples see *eDIL*, s.vv. *scélaige* and *scélaigecht*.

[154]A still-useful exploration of this concept and its literary ramifications is William Nelson, *Fact or Fiction: The Dilemma of the Renaissance Storyteller* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1977).

[155]*Scél*/*scéal* typically referred to sagas (prose or prosimetrum) but was also frequently used to refer to verse narratives. On this fluidity, and on medieval understandings of *scél* generally, see O'Connor, 'Semantics of *scél*', and O'Connor, *Music of What Happens*. On the comparable flexibility of cognate Welsh terminology, see Proinsias Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland* (Dublin, 1980), 31–2 and 132–41; Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Some functions of origin stories in early medieval Wales', in Nyberg et al., *History and Heroic Tale*, 97–31, at 98–102.

[156]Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 50 and 62–4.

saga narratives as sources by quietly repositioning them as something other than *scéala*.

Accordingly, on the many occasions when Keating's account draws on the rich tradition of Gaelic *scélaigheacht*, he ignores the more openly Otherworldly sagas, glosses over the more obviously performative and entertaining aspects of his selected sources (for instance, resorting to condensed synopses rather than narrating episodes in all their drama), downplays or removes what he feels to be the fabulous elements of some of these stories, and refers to the resulting repackaged *scéala* using a narrower historical terminology. Rather than *scéala*, in Keating's work these texts have become sources of historical information (*seanchus*) or *stáire* ('histories'). It is a measure of Keating's rhetorical skill in carrying out this subtle transformation that the ensuing reworkings nonetheless retain a narrative appeal and charm that is fully equal to that of Early Modern Irish saga-writing, albeit in a more self-consciously sober vein.

5. After Keating

Keating's *Foras Feasa* gave these narratives about the early history of Ireland a new lease of life and became the primary basis for subsequent historians' discussions of that remote period. The extent to which it became a standard historical reference-point is seen in the scale and rapidity of its circulation. It is the most popular long prose work in the Gaelic manuscript tradition. Some thirty manuscript copies survive from the seventeenth century alone; copies continued to be made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Individual episodes were absorbed and retold in Irish by early modern bardic poets and modern storytellers, thus ensuring the continued oral as well as literary transmission of much of its content. Several printed and manuscript translations into English and Latin were also planned or made, as were various imitations of Keating's overall design.[157] Its authority is seen in its treatment by several Gaelic scribes as a relatively 'fixed text' by comparison with the much more fluid and creative scribal transmission practices seen in early modern Gaelic sagas.[158]

At the same time, Keating's artfully condensed retellings of his saga sources had a decisive impact on the ongoing manuscript tradition of some of those sagas, which continued to be copied and reworked into the nineteenth century. For example, over thirty late manuscript copies of the hugely popular Early Modern Irish saga *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach* ('The death of the offspring of Uisneach') incorporate long passages from Keating's retelling of the Deirdre

[157] On these various impacts see Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, 173–225; Meidhbhín Ní Urdáil, 'The literary legacy of *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*', in Ó Riain, *Geoffrey Keating's Foras Feasa*, 52–67, at 56–7; Bruford, *Gaelic Folk-tales*, 93–104.

[158] This point, which deserves a fuller study, is mentioned in Caoimhín Mac Giolla Léith (ed. and trans.), *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach: The Violent Death of the Children of Uisneach*, ITS 61 (London, 1993), 22, and with more specific indications of the relevant scribes by Diarmuid Ó Murchadha, 'Keating: traditionalist or innovator', in Ó Riain, *Geoffrey Keating's Foras Feasa*, 90–102, at 92–3. Variant redactions of *Foras Feasa* did, however, circulate: see Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, 178–81.

story. The authority of Keating's account is confirmed by the fact that, in these Keating-influenced copies, the saga is typically adjusted to accommodate his narrative rather than the other way around.[159] Fifty-two copies of the Early Modern Irish battle-saga *Cath Cluana Tarbh* ('The battle of Clontarf') preserve a version containing material derived directly from *Foras Feasa*.[160] And some newly composed Modern Irish Ulster sagas, such as the possibly eighteenth-century *Eachtra na gCuradh* ('The adventure of the warriors'), include in their introductory sections a passage about Ulster Cycle personnel that seems to have been paraphrased from *Foras Feasa*.[161] All in all, *Foras Feasa* was accorded much authority by Ireland's professional scribes and those for whom they worked.

The authority of Keating's history was not undisputed in these Irish scholarly communities. But the sharpest criticisms came from a different context, when English translations brought it to the attention of a wider anglophone readership on both sides of the Irish Sea. The existence of these translations indicates the strength of Keating's reputation as a historian well into the eighteenth century, but they also brought *Foras Feasa* into the contentious world of printed historiography in English. Here Keating's work was exposed to ongoing confessional and political conflicts. His advocacy of Catholic Ireland naturally brought down criticism of his whole project from Protestant commentators, dismissing it as a heap of fables just as he had similarly dismissed Protestant historical claims in his own work. *Foras Feasa* also became embroiled in the fierce early-Enlightenment controversy about the principles of historical practice between the so-called 'ancients and moderns' in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. For the 'moderns' in this debate, *Foras Feasa* (like many other humanist histories of the distant past) appeared overly deferential towards the authority of mediaeval narrative sources, with too little source-criticism or philological analysis, too much reliance on narrative as a medium of explanation, and too little attention to material 'monuments' such as coins and inscriptions. Keating had spoken out in favour of attending to mediaeval Gaelic manuscripts, but from the moderns' perspective he had lacked sufficient skill in weighing up their testimony. His own critical humanist principles were thus extended by historians of a later and different stamp.

In this context Keating was often seen as not having gone far enough in classing certain Gaelic narratives as fictions. The 'moderns' set much stricter criteria for using ancient and mediaeval sources as authorities, and in their view *Foras Feasa* was undermined by giving too much credence to mere sagas. For Irish adherents of the 'modern' position, his perceived credulity regarding

[159]Mac Giolla Léith, *Oidheadh Chloinne hUisneach*, 21–2 and 56–8; Mathis, 'Evolution of Deirdriu', 18.

[160]Ní Urdáil, 'Literary legacy'.

[161]I owe this point to Ruairí Ó hUiginn, pers. comm. See Meadhbh Ní Chléirigh (ed.), *Eachtra na gCuradh* (Dublin, 1941), 1–2, echoing Keating, *Foras Feasa*, II, 220–2 (lines 3430–8). On this saga's date, see Ruairí Ó hUiginn, 'Some late tales of the Ulster cycle', in Ailbhe Ó Corráin (ed.), *Celebrating Sixty Years of Celtic Studies at Uppsala University: Proceedings of the Eleventh Symposium of Societas Celtologica Nordica* (Uppsala, 2013), 99–111, at 102–3.

the veracity of (for example) mediaeval accounts of prehistoric settlements in *Lebor Gabála Érenn* risked undermining the dignity and validity of Irish history and its sources.[162] This view echoed Keating's own sentiments regarding the inappropriate use of *finnscéala filidheachta* in summaries of Irish history, which now came back to bite him in his turn.

This position is exemplified by the lengthy preface that Thomas O'Sullevane contributed to a history of the Irish confederate wars of the 1640s and 1650s, the *Memoirs of the Marquis of Clanricarde* (printed 1722). O'Sullevane's 'Dissertation' illustrates the very different approach to history-writing seen in Enlightenment print culture. It requires specific comment here because his remarks on Keating have sometimes been used, uncritically, to hammer the final nail into the coffin regarding the claim of *Foras Feasa* to be history-writing at all. According to O'Sullevane, after having completed *Foras Feasa* Keating discussed it with 'judicious men' and realized that it was not worthy of the name of history:

> 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; as having ever been exploded by all Criticks, … but because in the second, which reaches down from the said Conquest; … those [accounts] also were so blended and interwoven with Fables, that they would carry no greater Weight than the first.[163]

Keating then allegedly tried to suppress *Foras Feasa*. Since it was 'not in his Power' to claw back the copies already in circulation,

> he desir'd it should never be translated into any other Language, nor otherwise regarded, than as a Miscellany of indigested things, wherein judicious and discerning Natives might find something worth their perusal at Leisure Hours.[164]

Both Ó Cuív and Ó Corráin present this anecdote as if it mitigates their negative judgements of his historical acumen ('In fairness to Keating I must add …'):[165] he may have written bad history, but at least he eventually recognized it as such.

This anecdote is not supported by any external evidence. The same is admittedly true of much of the other biographical information about Keating provided in O'Sullevane's 'Dissertation'. This work is, unfortunately, our main primary source on Keating's life and career, and its importance in this regard may explain why several recent studies of Keating have been reluctant to question O'Sullevane's claims about *Foras Feasa* and have tended instead simply

[162] See, for example, O'Halloran, *Golden Ages*, 26–7.

[163] Thomas O'Sullevane, 'Dissertation', in [Ulick de Burgh], *Memoirs of the Right Honourable the Marquis of Clanricarde* (London, 1722), i–clxxxiv, at cxxx (emphasis original).

[164] O'Sullevane, 'Dissertation', cxxx–cxxxi.

[165] Ó Cuív, 'Literary creation', 237 n. 3; Ó Corráin, 'Seathrún Céitinn', 64.

to repeat them, allowing them to speak for themselves (unintentionally echoing a technique sometimes used by Keating himself).[166] Some critique is offered by Cunningham, who alludes delicately to the possibility that O'Sullevane may not be the most reliable witness on *Foras Feasa*. She calls his comments about Keating 'sometimes mischievous', questions his portrayal of Keating as a dilettante for being inconsistent with the high level of scholarship displayed in *Foras Feasa* itself, and states that O'Sullevane 'had his own reasons for seeking to underestimate if not discredit Keating's work', but she does not explain this last point further beyond mentioning that O'Sullevane was writing just before the publication of an English translation of *Foras Feasa*.[167]

It is worth setting out the grounds for scepticism more clearly. When O'Sullevane's discussion of Keating is read as a whole, it comes across not as underestimating his work, but as utterly damning of its historical value. Again and again O'Sullevane invokes the history-fable dichotomy, placing *Foras Feasa* on the wrong side as 'an heap of insipid, ill-digested Fables'.[168] Its earlier portions, he claims, consist of 'idle Stories, first vented by Druids or Bards' and subsequently used 'for Pastime and Diversion only', which were later mistaken (including by Keating) 'for Genuin and good History'. O'Sullevane's examples of these druidical fables are disingenuous, relying on one of the doubtful antediluvian anecdotes from Book I which Keating himself had labelled a *finnscéal filidheachta* in order to help readers to discern Ireland's true history.[169] But O'Sullevane tars all the postdiluvian invasion-accounts up to the Gaels or Milesians with the same brush. He also claims that Keating's entire narrative of pre-Milesian settlements rested on the authority of a supernaturally long-lived 'druid' who had been reincarnated in various animal forms before living into St Patrick's time as a human – in other words, that this history was 'gather'd from empty Notions of the *Metempsychosis*, or Shape-changing Doctrine of the Druids',[170] a doctrine that O'Sullevane spends much of his critique scorning or refuting. He is here alluding to the mediaeval story of Tuán mac Cairill (who is not, in fact, a druid, but does reincarnate in different animal forms), ignoring the fact that Keating had removed all reference to reincarnation in his allusions to this figure. Keating had presented 'Tuan' or 'Roanus' as a variant name-form of the long-lived Caoilte mac Rónáin: not a druid or shapeshifter, but a wise and unusually old man (albeit far less old than in the mediaeval story) who had passed on to Patrick historical information that his own ancestors had told him.[171]

[166] Besides the works of Ó Cuív and Ó Corráin already cited, see also Diarmaid Ó Catháin, 'Dermot O'Connor, translator of Keating', *Eighteenth-Century Ireland* 2 (1987), 67–87, at 67–8. A sharper critique of the reliability of O'Sullevane's biographical information about Keating is offered by Ó Murchadha, 'Keating: traditionalist or innovator', 91–2 (including allegations of fraud), but no reference is made here to O'Sullevane's comments on Keating's *Foras Feasa* itself.

[167] Cunningham, *World of Geoffrey Keating*, 59–60. More detail about the English translation is given in ibid., 220–2.

[168] O'Sullevane, 'Dissertation', cxviii. The same label is used in ibid., cxxx and cxxxi.

[169] O'Sullevane, 'Dissertation', cxix–cxx.

[170] O'Sullevane, 'Dissertation', cxix–cxxi and cxxx.

[171] Keating, *Foras Feasa*, i, 150–2. Similar scepticism about Tuán's transmigrations was expressed

Nonetheless, for O'Sullevane, the mere inclusion of pre-Milesian settlements in Keating's history laid it open to the charge of 'exploded' druidical superstitions.

O'Sullevane's local motivations for condemning *Foras Feasa* become clear from the way in which Keating's work first emerges in his 'Dissertation'. O'Sullevane defends his own production of a new historical account by highlighting the defects of previous histories. Keating's history is his prime exhibit because it is about to appear in the form of 'an *English* version'. Here we return to the translation alluded to by Cunningham. O'Sullevane's comments on Keating are framed, in their beginning and end, as an attack on that translation, which was being prepared by the unscrupulous scribe and con-artist Dermot O'Connor. The whole section on Keating ends: if 'another new Translation of the Fables above-mentioned be obtruded upon the World', every true Irishman will view it 'as an Injury done to their Country, and explode it accordingly'.[172]

Everyone who came into contact with O'Connor seems to have had something bad to say about his character and habits, so O'Sullevane's animosity fits into a wider picture, and his condemnation of Keating's original work can be seen as simply another level on which to undermine O'Connor's project in advance.[173] But O'Sullevane also claimed that some interpolated portions in O'Connor's translation were the unacknowledged work of an even more controversial figure, the freethinking philosopher John Toland, who had died in 1722 and was notorious for his attacks on revealed religion. Druids were central to Toland's works both as negative exemplars of 'priestcraft' (a veiled attack on established churches) and, just as worryingly for the establishment, as proponents of a conception of the soul's immortality that seemed to Toland far superior to the debased Christian versions of that principle.[174] The controversy surrounding Toland's writings helps to explain why anything smacking of 'druidry' required such a heavy put-down in the early eighteenth century, and this in itself may explain why druids take up so much space in O'Sullevane's critique. It is also possible that O'Sullevane was using that controversy, and the fears that it would awaken in church establishments, to tarnish O'Connor's work still further.

The fact that O'Connor, not Keating, was O'Sullevane's primary target, may explain why O'Sullevane included the anecdote about Keating having repudiated his own work later in life: Keating the man could be forgiven, but O'Connor could not. *Foras Feasa* itself emerges in O'Sullevane's account as 'far from being an History', and as suitable only for light entertainment. Thus O'Sullevane depicts a later, wiser Keating attempting to persuade his patrons

by O'Flaherty, as discussed by John Carey, 'Druids and Buddhists in *Ogygia*', *CMCS* 66 (Winter 2013), 79–84, at 79–80.

[172]O'Sullevane, 'Dissertation', cxvii–cxviii and cxxxi–cxxxii.

[173]The most detailed account of O'Connor and his work is Ó Catháin, 'Dermot O'Connor'.

[174]For O'Sullevane's comments on Toland see his 'Dissertation', cxxiv. The 'priestcraft' aspect of Toland's work is used to contextualize O'Sullevane's hostility towards Keating in Eamon Darcy, ' "The footsteps of that custom … still remaining": medieval memory culture and Thomas O'Sullevane's portrayal of the Irish bardic tradition', *PRIA* 122C (2022), 203–26, at 213–14. On connections (and non-connections) between Toland, *Foras Feasa* and O'Connor's translation, see O'Halloran, *Golden Ages*, 77–8.

that *Foras Feasa* should be used only as a 'Miscellany of indigested things' to amuse Irish readers 'at Leisure Hours', not as a history.[175] Keating is here anachronistically made to echo the moderns' treatment of the remote past as 'the age of fable' by definition, and the emphasis on leisure and amusement prefigures the emerging opposition between historical writing and what a still later age would call 'literature'. Local controversies aside, this rhetoric is in keeping with Eamon Darcy's view that the historical methodology used throughout O'Sullevane's 'Dissertation' aligns squarely with the 'moderns' in the wider international scholarly controversy about the study of the past.[176]

Similarly critical (if less vituperative) judgements of *Foras Feasa* recur in later eighteenth- and nineteenth-century printed histories and commentaries. From their perspective, and that of the emerging Enlightenment in print culture, Keating's work was bound to appear increasingly outdated, even though admirers and detractors alike continued to imitate his overarching structure when presenting new accounts of Ireland's ancient history.[177]

But this only applies to the elite context of print culture and Enlightenment scholarship. As mentioned above, Keating's stock as a historian remained high in the scribal culture. Not only that, but Keating's humanist attempt to define history against storytelling, or *scéala*, left many seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scribes and storytellers unmoved. In these circles, despite lively debates about the truthfulness of specific stories, it remained a broad working assumption – or at least, an ostensible stance – that *scéala* were supposed to narrate history. Richard Plunkett's Latin-Irish dictionary, completed in 1662, glossed *historia* as *stair* and *sgéal* without showing any sense of dissonance between these two Irish terms.[178] Many Gaelic scribes and compilers continued to use the term *scéal* as had been done in the Middle Ages; storytellers continued to maintain a stance (at least) of telling a true story well into the twentieth century.[179] Attestations of *scéal*, *sgeul* and related terms in the Royal Irish Academy's 'Historical Dictionary of Irish' database suggests that, for many of these writers, *scéal* continued to connote truthful narrative.[180]

Keating's attempt to demarcate entertaining stories from historical narrative was specific to the cultural context in which he was writing and the educated target audience for whom he wrote. It reflects humanist concerns which were subsequently amplified and made even more stringent in the dec-

[175]O'Sullevane, 'Dissertation', cxxx–cxxxi.

[176]Darcy, ' "The footsteps" '.

[177]O'Halloran, *Golden Ages*, 19–22, 26–7 and 39.

[178]Dublin, Marsh's Library, MS Z 4.2.5, fol. 196r, s.v. *historia* (accessed via www.isos.dias.ie).

[179]For continued scribal use of *scéal* in rubrics and colophons, see Meidhbhín Ní Urdail, *The Scribe in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Ireland: Motivations and Milieu* (Münster, 2000), 150–4. For the storyteller's stance, see James H. Delargy, *The Gaelic Story-Teller: With Some Notes on Gaelic Folk-Tales* (n.p., 1969), 8 and 20 (reprinted from *PBA* 31 (1945), 177–221), and (for a more nuanced account that also documents twentieth-century challenges to such attitudes) George Denis Zimmermann, *The Irish Storyteller* (Dublin, 2001), 430, 448–9 and 558–73.

[180]Royal Irish Academy, 'Historical Irish corpus 1600–1926', https://corpas.ria.ie (accessed 16 November 2025); O'Connor, 'Semantics of *scél*', 42–3.

ades that followed *Foras Feasa*, especially when ancient Irish history moved into the polarizing hothouse of print culture on both sides of the Irish Sea. The Enlightenment intensified the process by which storytelling and information were held at arm's length from each other in the scholarly mind. With hindsight, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* can be seen as laying the foundations for the long, slow reconceptualization of mediaeval Gaelic sagas from histories to imaginative literature in Celtic studies. By the end of the nineteenth century, sagas about Ulster warriors could be labelled 'romances' without any hint of a pejorative meaning. On that basis they were successfully marketed in translation to wider anglophone audiences in and beyond Ireland.

The reputation of *Foras Feasa* moved in a similar direction as its narrative art flowed into new renderings of old sagas. Perhaps this was only to be expected. It embodies a radical tension between theory and practice: it preached the separateness of narrative entertainment from serious history, yet it presented Irish history in graceful, compelling and sometimes dryly humorous narrative prose which was surely designed, in Horatian terms, to delight as much as to instruct. Keating could hardly have foreseen that the first extract from *Foras Feasa* read by most twentieth- and twenty-first-century students would be the *finnscéal filidheachta* about Labhraid Loingseach and the horse's ears which he called fiction rather than history, presented in an anthology of narrative lollipops whose title now declared *scéalaigheacht*, storytelling, to be Keating's chief claim to fame.[181] With his keen sense of the ironies of history, Keating would surely have smiled.

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[181] Bergin, *Sgéalaigheacht Chéitinn.*