

Review: *Dindshenchas Érenn* (Theuerkauf)



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REVIEWS

Dindshenchas Érenn. Marie-Luise Theuerkauf. Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures 7. Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures, Cork, 2023. xii + 147pp. €15. ISBN 978-0-9955469-7-4.

This volume, focussed on the *dindshenchas*, sets out to provide ‘an accessible overview and entry into this complex literary creation’ (p. xii) and in this it certainly succeeds. Individual chapters provide introductions to the contents of the primary manuscripts that preserve *dindshenchas* collections (Chapter 1), previous scholarly work including editions and the disentangling of the recensions (Chapter 2), the dating of the different recensions, in which distinction is made between the compilations and the materials used within them (Chapter 3), a study of the methods employed in explaining the origin of names (Chapter 4), and finally a study of the relationship between the *dindshenchas* and Irish saga (Chapter 5). The emphasis throughout is on collections of *dindshenchas* material rather than individual accounts of placenames such as may be found in, for example, longer tales.

Chapter 1 points out that there is tremendous variety among the different collections. The largest group of manuscripts, including Rennes, Ballymote and Uí Mhaine, contain prosimetrical texts (pp. 10–12) while the Bodleian and Edinburgh manuscripts consist of prose usually followed by a single quatrain. None of these contain collections in verse form only, giving the lie to the distinction between metrical and prose *dindshenchas* which is based solely on the presentation in modern editions, a point rightly emphasized by the author. The one exception is to be found in the earliest manuscript, the Book of Leinster, which O’Sullivan originally noted included four different collections involving the work of four different scribes (A, U, F, T), sometimes working in collaboration (pp. 2–3). As Theuerkauf emphasizes, these collections are not described as *dindshenchas* or by its more common alternative, *Senchas Dind* (p. 2), and they frequently contain other historical (*laídshenchas*) and Fenian material (p. 4). Moreover, she justifiably casts doubt on whether the two folios at pp. 27–30, written by T, are to be considered as *dindshenchas*, except ‘in a very loose sense’ (p. 6). This questioning could be taken further. The section at pp. 151a1–158b described by Theuerkauf as ‘U’s metrical *Dindshenchas*’ contains some poems that could only be loosely connected to the *dindshenchas*, such as a poem attributed to Cináed úa hArtacáin beginning ‘Déccid ferta nithaig Neill’ (p. 154a). This text does indeed appear in other *dindshenchas* collections and is duly edited by Gwynn in his *Metrical Dindshenchas*, vol. 2, pp. 36–41, yet its narrative of the death of Níall Nóigíallach only casually mentions *in medias res* that the name Ochan (Faughan) was derived from the lamentation raised over him (*ba de boí iar*

mbaisse brón | *Ochan mór muintire Néill*, ‘thence was called, after grief and beating of breasts, great Ochan of the following of Niall’, ll. 35–6). A strict definition of *dindshenchas* would be helpful, although one suspects that it may not be attainable. In the formal *dindshenchas* collections, individual items are chiefly concerned with how places got their names, but there is a large body of material in which the interest lies more broadly in the history of events associated with places. Is Cináed’s poem truly a *dindshenchas* text rather than a versified narrative history that mentions the origin of a placename? Many longer texts, such as *Táin Bó Cúailnge* or *Lebor Gabála*, contain multiple episodes that explain the origin of a name, but they hardly qualify as *dindshenchas* texts. Theuerkauf’s approach of studying only those texts that occur in *dindshenchas* collections is a pragmatic solution, therefore, but we are sometimes left wondering where the *dindshenchas* begins and ends in the Book of Leinster.

Chapter 2 contains a description of scholarship on the *dindshenchas*, focusing mainly on editorial work and the relationship between different versions, and provides a very useful reminder of how misleading the existing editions are about the scope, sequencing, and contents of the different *dindshenchas* collections. Ó Concheanainn’s analysis of the relationship between the collections is dismissed, although the author does endorse the idea that the existence of single stanzas at the end of some prose articles indicates that they are derived from a prosimetrical source (p. 38). Chapter 3 deals with various aspects of the dating of the *dindshenchas*, paying particular attention to a small number of *roscada*. Attributions to named poets from the tenth and eleventh centuries are listed (pp. 50–1), although the earliest ascription, to Máel Muru Othna (†887), appears to have been accidentally omitted here despite the fact that the poem occurs among other *dindshenchas* material in the Book of Leinster and is accepted elsewhere here (pp. 60, 104). The chapter concludes with a discussion of the collections themselves in which there is an important corrective to Gwynn’s dating of the Edinburgh-Bodleian recension which he thought was based on a poem by Gilla na Náem Úa Duind (†1160) (p. 66). Theuerkauf further notes that, based on a possible reference to *Acallam na Senórach* noted by Gwynn, the *terminus post quem* of Recension C needs to be pushed into the thirteenth or fourteenth centuries (p. 66; see also Bowen 1975–6: 124).

Chapter 4 looks at the methods employed in the *dindshenchas* collections to explain the origins of the names, distinguishing three categories: 1) eponymy, in which the placename is derived from the name of a person associated with the place; 2) derivation, in which the name is derived from a noun; and 3) *bér-la n-etarscartha*, which Bowen (1975–6) terms ‘lexical fission’ and Ó hUiginn (2007: 57) calls ‘segmentation’, in which Isidorean etymology is deployed to examine the constituent elements of a single word. An interesting analysis shows that eponymy is by far the most common method (78% in Recension B, p. 81). Interestingly, segmentation is more common in the prose of Recension C and is more frequently used there than in metrical *dindshenchas* (pp. 81–2). A final section in this chapter (‘Etymology vs *Senchas*’) takes issue with my representation of the *dindshenchas* as *senchas*

and not ‘purely or even primarily an exercise in Isidorean etymology’ (cited p. 83), even though the author seems to arrive at the same conclusion herself when she writes ‘etymology is an integral part of the *senchas* being related’ (p. 84).

The final chapter explores the relationship between the *dindshenchas* and the early literature as divided into four cycles by modern scholarship. The author problematizes the frequent assertion that stories from the Mythological Cycle constitute the most common sources, noting that some, even those concerning the Túatha Dé Danann, may derive from *Lebor Gabála* (pp. 91–2). She reinforces Thurneysen’s observation that the number of items related to *Táin Bó Cúailnge* is remarkably small (p. 100), a feature that is particularly noteworthy given the prominence of placename legends in the *Táin*. The discussion of the relationship between *dindshenchas* and the Fionn Cycle (pp. 102–13) is very interesting and highlights the impact of transmission on Gwynn’s selection of Fenian material for inclusion in his *Metrical Dindshenchas* and thus on our perception of what constitutes *dindshenchas*. The author highlights a bias towards Uí Néill kings among those poems associated with the Cycles of Kings and suggests, but ultimately rejects (p. 119), the possibility that a collection of *dindshenchas* was first compiled during the reign of Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill (†1022). The argument is based on a number of poems that mention Máel Sechnaill and are mostly attributed to Cúán úa Lothcháin (†1024) but consideration should also be given to Cináed úa hArtacáin (†975) whose *oeuvre* indicates a keen interest in *dindshenchas* at Tara from at least the second half of the tenth century. A clear *desideratum* for the study of *dindshenchas*, therefore, would be to investigate the outputs of these two poets in their totality as it may reveal much about the evolution of the genre.

As this book demonstrates, *dindshenchas* is a rich field and the author helpfully gathers together the existing scholarship, offers constructive insights and lays out desirable avenues of study that would advance our understanding of the genre. The whole of this highly informative volume is carefully produced and is a welcome addition to the Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures series which is providing an important outlet for such studies.

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