

Reviews: *The Mythological Cycle of Medieval Irish Literature* (Carey); *Revisiting the Cycle of the Kings* (Murray)



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REVIEWS

The Mythological Cycle of Medieval Irish Literature. John Carey. Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures 3. Cork, 2018. iii + 78 pp. €12.00. ISBN 978-0-9955469-2-9.

Revisiting the Cycle of the Kings. Edited by Kevin Murray. Studies in Celtic Literatures 6. Cork 2022. viii + 150 pp. €15.00. ISBN 978-0-9955469-6-7.

To Marie Henri d'Arbois de Jubainville (1827–1910) we owe the commonly used classification of Early Irish narrative literature into cycles. In his *Introduction à l'étude de la littérature celtique* (1883) he identified three such 'cycles', which we usually refer to in English as the 'Mythological', 'Ulster' and 'Finn' or 'Fenian' cycles, designations that have been widely used since his time. Arbois de Jubainville also pointed out, however, that other literary cycles might be identified to classify some of the many other tales that could not be accommodated within any of the groupings he had established, and in due course a body of tales that had to do with the exploits of various legendary or historical kings was designated the 'Cycles of the Kings' by Myles Dillon in the title of his book (1946) on some of these compositions.

Classifying these medieval narratives into 'cycles' has not been unproblematic and several scholars have alluded to the difficulties of establishing criteria for assigning tales to one cycle or another or to instances where there is some overlap between the different groupings of tales. Many of these difficulties have been outlined and discussed at length in Erich Poppe's Quiggin Lecture published as *Of Cycles and Other Critical Matters: Some Issues in Medieval Irish Literary History and Criticism* (Cambridge, 2008). Despite their evident shortcomings, these cyclical designations are widely retained, both for ease of reference and for them having been sanctioned through usage over a long period. An alternative system, in which tales are classified according to theme, rather than chronology, is found in the Early Irish tale-lists. This has not enjoyed any great currency in modern scholarship but has served a useful purpose when tales are examined and compared from the perspective of their thematic structures. The basis for the classification of tales into cycles, on the other hand, is partly chronological and partly determined by the *dramatis personae*, although at an earlier period some scholars also took geographical factors into consideration in referring to tales about Fionn mac Cumhaill as a 'Leinster' cycle.

The first of these literary cycles, the Mythological, forms the subject of John Carey's booklet. Carey has already published a number of studies on aspects of this body of texts and many of the insights gained from these are included in this very interesting publication. Its six chapters deal in turn with the 'cycles' of medieval Irish literature, the Túatha Dé Danann, tales associated with *Táin*

Bó Cúailnge, other Old Irish tales of the cycle, 'Lore and fantasy in the Middle Irish period' and, finally, material from later tradition.

In his opening chapter he revisits and addresses some of the many questions and problems associated with the classification of narrative literature into cycles and proceeds from there to establish criteria for assigning tales to the Mythological Cycle. This rubric is of itself problematic precisely because most of medieval Irish saga literature can be seen to be 'mythological' in one sense or another. While he acknowledges the problems inherent in the label 'mythological cycle' and expresses his reservations about it more than once in this study, it is retained throughout the work. But the boundaries between these literary cycles do not always hold firm, as we know, and those of this cycle are not always clearly delineated. In seeking to determine what tales might be included in the 'mythological cycle', Carey has looked to those compositions in which the primary actors were viewed by the medieval literati as belonging to the otherworld, the *áes síde* of Irish tradition. By using this criterion, tales associated with the Túatha Dé Danann (or Túatha Dé Donann as Carey prefers to name them) or their opponents, the Fomoiri, establish the basis of his study.

Because of their immortal and timeless nature, Irish tradition did not subject the Túatha Dé Danann to the restrictions of chronology. This allows them to appear in texts associated with other cycles that are themselves fixed by the time-frame of Irish prehistory. We thus find that Lug makes a 'cameo' appearance in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the centrepiece of the Ulster Cycle, which was set just prior to the time of Christ, as does Aonghus an Bhrogha in *Tóraigheacht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* of the Fenian Cycle, the events of which are placed mainly in the third century AD.

Brief appearances such as these do not merit such tales being taken into consideration in the present study, but other compositions associated with the Ulster Cycle are. Chapter three deals with tales related to *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. In these tales, members of the Túatha Dé Danann appear alongside characters normally associated with the Ulster tales. These include the *remscéla* to *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, *De Gabáil int Sída*, *De Chophur in Dá Muicceda*, *Aislinge Óengusso* and *Echtra Nerai*. While some of these narratives serve to set the scene for certain important aspects of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, the connection of *Aislinge Óengusso* to the recensions of the epic that have been transmitted to us is at best tangential. While the Connacht rulers Ailill and Medb appear alongside the Dagda and his son Óengus in this tale, its conclusion which states that Óengus subsequently was to aid the Connachta in the *Táin* (*Is de sin do-cuaid Oengus, trícha cét, co Ailill ocus Meidb do tháin inna mbó a Cúailnge* 'it is as a result of that that Oengus went with a *trícha cét* to Ailill and Medb to drive the cattle out of Cúailnge'; F. Shaw (ed.), *Aislinge Óenguso* (Dublin, 1934) 64, §15), is not borne out in any of the versions of the texts that have been transmitted to us, for Óengus, son of the Dagda, is nowhere mentioned in them. But this reference and the inclusion of *Aislinge Óenguso* among the *remscéla* to the *Táin* may suggest that Óengus had played a prominent role in a version of the great saga now lost, and in an intriguing note (p. 21, n. 10), Carey draws our attention to a reference in the Middle Irish *Dúan in Chethrachat Cest* where we indeed

find Óengus cast in the role of a slayer of many Ulstermen, although the poem does not specifically reference the *Táin*.

The tale held by many to be the centrepiece of the cycle is *Cath Maige Tuired* (*CMT*), a story that presents us with many of the figures of the Celtic pantheon, a number of whom are also known from British tradition. *CMT* has been transmitted to us both as a text belonging to the Old Irish period and in a later version written in Early Modern Irish. Each of these has been the subject of a number of scholarly studies and both are dealt with in the present work. In his discussion of the earlier tale, Carey reiterates the view he has expressed in an earlier publication that *CMT* is not to be seen as a traditional tale but rather as an innovative composition of the ninth century concerned with potential changes in Irish society occasioned by the incursion of the Vikings (p. 37).

Seen as prehistoric settlers of Ireland, the role of the Túatha Dé Danann in the pseudo-historical *Lebor Gabála* is also here evaluated, as is the part they play in the creation of many Irish toponyms, events that are narrated in various *dindshenchas* legends. Several other items of tradition belonging to the Middle Irish period are also considered and, as Carey points out, many of these appear to be retellings of older tales or 'brief anecdotes absorbed in the great systematisations of lore that are so characteristic of that time' (p. 41). A dependence on earlier literature also characterises many tales concerning the Túatha Dé Danann that were composed in the later Middle Ages. *CMT* was modernised and remoulded as a new tale. This was subsequently used as a starting point for another later composition, *Oidheadh Chloinne Tuireann*. These and later tales, such as *Oidheadh Chloinne Lir*, are discussed, with the possibility that some of them may have been written with contemporary political or religious motives in mind being also considered.

One interesting issue that arises from this material is how the medieval Irish viewed figures such as Lug, the Dagda, and the other characters who appear in these tales. The divine origins of several of these have long been recognised, but how this status may have endured and how they subsequently may have been received in literature and in popular belief is a far more complicated matter. By the late medieval period we find a figure such as Manannán mac Lir being cast simply as an otherworldly mischief-maker in burlesque tales such as *Eachtra an Cheithearnaigh Chaoilriabhaigh* or in *Eachtra Bhodaigh an Chóta Lachtna*. From an earlier stage, however, Carey has collected a number of interesting references which suggest that such supernatural figures may once have retained part of their divine status and formed part of belief systems or cults sometimes associated with certain localities in the country. The possibility that some of our tales may preserve traces of a pre-Christian belief system is touched upon more than once in this study. But while this is an issue that many will find highly interesting, it is also one that is fraught with difficulty. Carey takes care to point out that such references as we possess have been 'preserved in a Christian literature, produced in an ecclesiastical milieu' (p. 13). Bearing in mind the ever-present possibility that material transmitted to us through such a conduit may have been subject to censorship, literary embellishment or other modification, this note of caution is quite apposite. We can call to mind an assertion

made by the redactor of the seventh-century legal text *Cáin Fhuithirbe* concerning the contents of the text he wrote: *ro dílsiged la dub in díchubus* ‘that which is contrary to [Christian] conscience has been forfeit in ink’ (*Peritia* 5 (1986), 43–4). In view of the central role the church played in the transmission of our sources, it is unlikely that full agreement will be reached on the possible presence or extent of such pre-Christian traces in the corpus of medieval Irish literature, but it will doubtless continue to be a subject of enduring interest and discussion.

The Mythological Cycle of Medieval Irish Literature provides us with a very useful survey of this body of literature and explores some of the issues associated with it. It will serve as a very useful companion to those who wish to examine further traditions associated with the Túatha Dé Danann. While of necessity brief, it is written in a clear and accessible style and provides the reader with a solid introduction and many useful references for exploring this body of literature further.

Revisiting the Cycles of the Kings, on the other hand, deals with a different ‘cycle’ of medieval Irish literature. Unlike Carey’s single-author study of the Mythological Cycle, this volume represents the proceedings of a conference on these tales which was held at University College Cork in September 2020 and contains contributions from five speakers at that event together with a foreword from the editor, Kevin Murray.

Whereas the presence of the Túatha Dé Danann can be seen as the link that brings tales of the Mythological Cycle together under that heading, no such cast of characters can be found to classify the Cycles of the Kings *in toto*. A definition provided in an earlier collection of essays on this body of literature would assign to it narratives that focus on one or more native rulers (Dan M. Wiley (ed.), *Essays on the Early Irish King Tales* (Dublin, 2008), p. 14). Not subject to the constraints of chronology or of the *dramatis personae* that serve to delineate other cycles, this classification is extremely broad and within its parameters almost 140 ‘king’ narratives have been identified (Wiley, *Essays*, 54–67). The kings with whom they are concerned range from figures located in a distant prehistoric past to historical personages known from our early medieval records but whose deeds are encrusted in legend (e.g. Muirchertach mac Erca or Díarmait mac Cerbaill).

We have already noted some of the difficulties involved in establishing the boundaries of the Mythological Cycle, but this applies in greater measure to the Cycles of the Kings. Several of the compositions that are included within its broad parameters could be assigned to more than one literary cycle. A tale included in that list that serves to illustrate some of the complexities associated with such a broad classification is *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. Its presence among the Cycles of the Kings can be justified because it deals with the life of Conaire, a legendary prehistoric ruler of Tara. However, Étaín, the mother of the tale’s main protagonist, is also the focus of *Tochmarc Étaíne*, a tale commonly regarded as part of the Mythological Cycle, while appearances made by Conall Cernach, Cormac Cond Loinges and other heroes in the narrative suggests an association with the Ulster Cycle. Indeed, because of this latter association both

Togail Bruidne Da Derga and the related *Tochmarc Étaíne* in its three versions are dealt with by Thurneysen in his *Irische Helden- und Königsage*, a volume otherwise devoted to the Ulster tales.

Within the extensive corpus of king-tales it is possible to identify groups of tales that are associated with certain rulers. A number of such minor ‘cycles’ formed the basis of Dillon’s 1946 work in which he translated and discussed the tales concerned with several different kings about whom we have a body of narratives. But the majority of king tales are concerned with individual kings who appear in one composition only and who do not fall into such groupings. This volume therefore does not attempt a wide-ranging survey of this body of literature in its entirety — and given its extent such would surely not be feasible — but each study focuses on aspects of the cycle or on individual tales or collections of tales, thus following an approach not greatly dissimilar to that adopted in Wiley’s collection of essays from 2008.

In the first paper, ‘*Scélsenchus* revisited: historical function and literary artistry in the Gaelic kings’ sagas’, Ralph O’Connor re-evaluates some of the different opinions expressed by scholars about the form and function of some of the tales assigned to this cycle. While certain scholars have praised the literary accomplishment evident in them, or bewailed the lack thereof, others have placed emphasis on the purpose that lay behind their composition in the medieval society in which they came into being. O’Connor’s wide-ranging discussion on the tension between the ‘literary’ and the ‘historical’ raises issues involving the entertainment value that such narratives may have had as opposed to their being seen simply as repositories of historical lore, or *senchas*. Other matters that arise out of this analysis concern how these tales might have been received by those who heard or read them and indeed how they might have been performed. O’Connor’s focus on the body of tales found in the twelfth-century manuscript Rawlinson B. 502 (Oxford) and referred to as *scélsenchus Laigen* provides the basis for much of his discussion. His conclusion that ‘the importance of any one saga as *senchas* did not, in itself, disqualify it from being an accomplished literary work’ (p. 24), is one with which few would disagree. This thought-provoking paper should inspire further engagement with the several issues raised therein.

Clodagh Downey, ‘Níall Noígíallach and the heroic biography’, examines the body of lore that surrounds the progenitor of the foremost dynasty in early medieval Ireland, the Uí Néill. In this essay she attempts to accommodate the biographical details that have been transmitted to us about Níall Noígíallach within the framework of the ‘international heroic biography’ as formulated by the Dutch scholar Jan de Vries and further modified by others. Examining ten of the key stages in Níall’s life, from his birth to his death, she attempts to see how the traditions about him conform to those of the international biography. The result she obtains is enlightening. While some of the details of this king’s biography might be assigned to the international pattern, it is only through special pleading and strained argument that others could be so accommodated. She wisely chooses not to follow this path and concludes that ‘the attempt to map Níall’s biography onto the international pattern cannot be said to result in a

very successful match' (pp. 55–60). This study shows that while the international pattern may have been applied with success to certain figures of Irish tradition, it clearly has its limitations. One should not expect to find this pattern or its components to be present in the biographies of every hero or king for whom tradition provides us with such details.

The text *Comthóth Lóegairi co Cretim 7 a Aided* is the focus of Ken Ó Donnchú's study, 'Interpreting Lóegaire mac Néill's conversion and death'. This brief narrative is concerned with Lóegaire, king of Tara and one of the more prominent of Níall Noígíallach's many sons. Although Lóegaire becomes a Christian through the agency of St Patrick, he is portrayed in a negative light in the literature and traditions surrounding his demise having ruled for thirty years have been the subject of a number of studies. O'Donoghue deals here with some of these traditions but also focuses on the manner in which contempt for the reluctant convert was expressed even after his burial.

Aogán Ó hIarlaithe's contribution, 'On the classification of Cath Cairn Conaill', considers the position of this tale within the Cycles of the Kings. *Cath Cairn Chonaill* (CCC) is an interesting composition which has been transmitted to us in three manuscript witnesses. Two distinct recensions are distinguished. The first recension, found in both Lebor na hUidre (LU) and in the Book of Leinster (LL), can be further subdivided between these two sources with the former containing material not found in the latter. As the version in the LL has no title and refers to a battle only peripherally, its classification as a *cath*-tale is dependent on additional information about the battle of Carn Conaill supplied in LU. This information and other supplementary material appears to have been entered at a date later than that of the original text and these additions betray political and ecclesiastical concerns one would associate with Clonmacnoise, the centre in which the LU text was most likely written. The second recension is found in a single witness, BL MS Egerton 1782, where it has been incorporated into an annalistic compilation, the saga here being formally counted as part of the historical record.

This detailed study of the different versions of CCC, and his consideration of the different focuses evident in them, lead Ó hIarlaithe to the conclusion that 'due deference must be shown to each manuscript witness to a text when attempting to categorise it' (p. 97), advice that could also be followed with profit in our analysis of other texts that are found in multiple manuscript sources. Few will disagree with his concluding plea that fresh reliable editions of very many texts are needed in order to facilitate our understanding of them and the manner in which they should be classified in the future.

The final essay in this volume is by Neil Buttimer, 'The *Bórama* revisited', who returns to a text which formed the subject of his 1983 doctoral dissertation. This lengthy prosimetrical tract is concerned with how many successive rulers of Leinster resisted paying a levy imposed on them by Túathal Techtmar, king of Ireland, for a crime carried out against his daughters by the Leinster king, Eochu mac Echach Domhlén. Having surveyed some studies that have been carried out in the course of the past four decades on the *Bórama* as a whole or on sections of it, Buttimer looks afresh at the tract and attempts to evaluate and

contextualise it in the period to which its composition is usually dated, that of late Middle Irish. Arguing that the text embodies ‘elements which came about in response to various emotive states linked to that age’ (p. 103), he lists and discusses some historical events that may have had a bearing on its composition and also looks at a number of texts likewise dated to that period that may have influenced the *Bórama* tract, or may share certain features with it that are reflective of the period in which they were written. Among these works are *Cogad Gáedael re Gallaib*, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, *Lebor na Cert*, elements of *dindsenchas* and the somewhat later *Acallam na Senórach*. This is a very wide-ranging study in which several thoughts about the development of the text are put forward, but many of these are presented simply as ideas that require further development. Detailed discussion of the evidence he sees for the possible influence on the *Bórama* of any one of the texts he mentions, for instance, would be very welcome. As is the case with other contributors, Buttimer concludes by appealing for a critical edition of this important text, accompanied by translation and detailed commentary. (p. 127, n. 89).

Although these studies serve further to show the limitations of categorizing medieval Irish into cycles, especially in the case of the two cycles with which they are concerned, it is unlikely that the cyclical designations will be abandoned, having been employed now for well over a century. *The Mythological Cycle of Medieval Irish Literature* and *Revisiting the Cycles of the Kings* are both welcome publications, as is the series of Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures to which they belong.

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Bone and Marrow / Cnámh agus Smior: An Anthology of Irish Poetry from Medieval to Modern. Samuel K. Fisher agus Brian Ó Conchubhair (eag.). Wake Forest University Press, Winston-Salem, 2022. 968 lgh. \$35.95–\$55.95. ISBN 978-1-943667-00-0.

Is achrannach an rud é an cnuasach filíochta. Cé na dánta a chuirtear san áireamh? Cé na dánta a fhágtar ar lár? Céard í an tslat tomhais? Ceist achrannach í ceist an aistriúcháin chomh maith. An fearr aistriúchán atá dílis don bhuntéacs, nó aistriúchán a dhéanann iarracht spiorad an bhuntéacs a thabhairt leis? Nó aistriúchán a dhéanann aithris ar mheadaracht agus ar struchtúr an bhuntéacs? Is é *Bone and Marrow / Cnámh agus Smior*, arna chur in eagar ag Samuel Fisher agus ag Brian Ó Conchubhair, an díolaim dhátheangach is deireanaí d’fhlíocht na Gaeilge le teacht ar an bhfód, agus is cinnte go spreagfaidh sí neart díospóireachta faoi cheisteanna dá leithéid. Síolraíonn sí as an traidisiún comhaimseartha duanaireachta lena n-áirítear *A Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry* (1967), *Nua-Dhuanaire 1600–1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (1981), agus *Leabhar na hAthghabhála* (2016). Is fairsinge agus is uailmhianáí í ná a cuid réamhtheachtaithe, áfach: 183 dán atá inti ó thréimhse na Luath-Ghaeilge go tréimhse na Nua-Ghaeilge comhaimseartha,