

THE HERONS OF DRUIM CEAT REVISITING, AND REVISITED

THERE is a particular set of medieval Irish stories the function of which, as noted by Robin Flower in *The Irish tradition* (1947), was to frame and legitimate the corpus of vernacular texts as a continuation of – or even an improvement on – a venerable oral tradition, and, simultaneously, to vindicate the oral tradition’s capacity to serve as a record of the past:

It has often been imagined since the advent of wireless telegraphy that those vibrations which are our voices, once surrendered to the air, never come to rest but wander about for ever in the ether as potentialities of sound. Thus, it is argued, if only an appropriate machinery could be devised and the wave-lengths of the innumerable periods of the past be established, we might listen in to history and eavesdrop upon all that part of action which is committed to the living voice. Even if this fond dream were realized, it would be a one-sided communication, for we could not catechize the voices of the past. Our Irish historians improved upon this idea: they brought the saints who were their warrants for history into a personal relation with those who had figured in past events, and fabled that their accounts were authenticated by the actual testimony of eye-witnesses and participants of the great deeds of the past (p. 6).

Among the tales that connect the literary present with the oral-traditional past in the way described by Flower, are the following: the accounts of the finding of the *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (Joynt 1931:1004–1303; Meyer 1907:2–6; Windisch 1905:līii [LL 245 b]; see Carney 1955:166–70), in which the poets of Ireland, assisted by the saints of Ireland, recover the text of the lost tale from the revived hero Fergus; the *Síaburcharpát Con Culainn* ‘Phantom chariot of Cú Chulainn’ (Best and Bergin 1929:9220–9548), in which King Lóegaire is regaled with story by the ghost of Cú Chulainn, courtesy of that perennial reviver of the dead, Patrick; the *Suidigud Tellaig Temra* ‘Settling of the Manor of Tara’ (Best 1910:121–72), wherein the men of Ireland are enlightened as to the arrangement and history of Tara, and of Ireland in general, by the antediluvian Fintan, who recounts to them an earlier meeting between the men of Ireland and an even more ‘primal’ source, the godlike Tréfhuingid Treochair; and the *Agallamh na Seanórach* (see Ó Cuív 1982), in which survivors from Finn’s *flan*, under the protection of Patrick and the king of Ireland, pass on their lore to the Christian world of scribes and literate performers.

Among the most important motival ingredients to be found in these tales and others like them, are the following:

(1) An explicit or implicit religious and cultural clash between Christian and pagan (or ‘native’) ways, and between their representatives.

(2) The production of a text or a 'textualizable' body of lore, following upon an oral performance.

(3) A configuration and interaction of three principal characters, or three groups of characters, that make possible the performance and/or its textualization (e.g. audience, performer, and 'inducer' of performance; or, pagan hero, Christian saint, and secular ruler).

(4) The releasing of one of the principals from some form of captivity, or his being freed from restrictive bonds of obligation – e.g. once they find the *Táin*, the poets of Ireland are released from the condition imposed upon them by Marbán; Cú Chulainn is freed from Hell and allowed to enter Heaven; the men of Ireland are released from their impasse by means of the information supplied to them by Fintan, while the grateful Fintan himself is finally 'released' by God from his lengthy cycle of corporeal existence; and, the Fenian heroes are dramatically relieved of their demons.

(5) The revival of the dead, or the appearance of a figure from the past who should long have been dead; the revenant or survivor imparts sought-after information. (It is this miraculous element in the story pattern that has attracted the greatest amount of scholarly attention – see Nagy 1983.)

In the texts that feature them, these five narrative elements overlap and combine in a variety of ways. Whether their recurrence together as a story pattern is a matter of literary imitation or the persistence of a traditional way of framing narrative or a body of lore, does not concern us here.

To my knowledge, it has not hitherto been noticed that there are marked parallels between the tales which reflect the story pattern outlined above and the legendary anecdotes about Saint Colum Cille's intervention in the so-called Convention of Druim Ceat (AD 575), as they have been preserved in commentary on the Old Irish poem *Amra Choluim Chille* (see Herbert 1989) and other sources, including Columban hagiography and Keating's History (Bernard and Atkinson 1898:162–7; Stokes 1899:36–55, 420, 426–7; Stokes 1890:309–315; Herbert 1988:244–7; O'Kelleher and Schoepperle 1918:338–76; Dinneen 1908:1407–1519; see also Ó Cuív 1967–8, and 1964–6:183–7). In the body of narrative centered on the Convention, we are told that Colum Cille's momentous trip to Ireland, which he had sworn never to visit again, was undertaken for three reasons: to mediate between the men of Ireland and the men of Scotland in their dispute over the territory of the Dál Riata; to mediate between the men of Ireland and their *filid*, whom the former wished to send into exile on account of the poets' insufferable arrogance and insupportable numbers; and to arrange for the release of Scannlán, a hostage unjustly detained by the Irish high-king Áed mac Ainmirech. Of course, Colum Cille's mission proves successful in every respect. Furthermore, as a result of the saint's negotiating a continuing co-existence

between poets and their clients, the chief of the *filid*, Dallán Forgaill, composes the famous *Amra* in Colum Cille's honor, but he is forbidden by the saint from completing it until after Colum Cille's death. That the legend of Colum Cille's championing of poets represents a 'mythologization' of a genuine gradual *rapprochement* between pagan and Christian possessor of knowledge, has been pointed out by Proinsias Mac Cana:

Ostensibly the changes reflected in the Druim Ceat legend concerned only the poets and the royal patrons disgruntled by their excesses, but it is none the less certain that they were largely set in train – like the indiscipline which preceded them – by the presence in the land of a rapidly increasing fraternity of clerics whose functions at so very many points matched and overlapped with those of the *filid* themselves. It is not without significance that Colum Cille's role as mediator and friend of the poets at this troubled time is a common-place in Middle Irish literature – its antiquity seems to be confirmed by *Amra Choluim Chille* itself – and one can hardly doubt that the reorganization of the *filid* associated with Druim Ceat was part of the evolution of the *modus vivendi* between *filid* and clerics which, amongst other things, was responsible for the remarkably early use of writing for the recording of secular oral literature (1979:476–7).

This tension between Christian and pagan, or at least between sacred and secular, comes especially to the legendary surface in the curious account of the problematically profound impression made upon Colum Cille by the performance of the poets assembled at Druim Ceat:

Táncatar iar sein na filid isin n-airecht 7 dúan molta léo dó 7 aidbsi ainm in chiúil sin 7 ba céol derscaigthech hé. . . . Co tánic míad menman don chlereoch corbo lán in t-áer húasa chind ó demnaib coro failsiged do Báithin sein 7 coro chairigside in clérech 7 co tuc in clérech iar sein a chend fo choim 7 co nderna athrige 7 co túargaib iar sein a chend asa choim 7 co róemid ceo mór dia chind 7 coro scaillit as na demna riasin céo sin (Best and Bergin 1929:327–40).

Then the poets arrived at the assembly, and they had a poem of praise for him [i.e. Colum Cille] – *aidbse* is the name of that kind of music – and it was splendid music. . . . So that [as a result of his hearing the music] pride of mind came over the cleric, and the air over his head was filled with devils. This was revealed to Báethíne [a fellow cleric], who then rebuked him, and so the cleric placed his head under his cloak [or 'hung his head'] and repented. When he raised his head from underneath the cloak [or 'raised his head'], a great mist burst from his head, and the devils dispersed because of it.

Alternatively, Colum Cille was saved from the power of the poets' music by means of the writings of St Basil (Stokes 1899:42), which, when

read to him, broke the spell that had been cast by the *filid* (ibid.:180). Thus, the conflict is not just between poets and clerics, but also between their respective media: the spoken or sung vernacular word, versus written Latin. As a result of this traumatic experience, Colum Cille, we are told, forbade future performance of the seductive *aidbse* (ibid.)

Despite the embarrassment brought upon him by the power of poetry, Colum Cille does come to the aid of its practitioners, and, as a direct result of the ecumenically-minded saint's rescue of the poets from their banishment (threatened by the men of Ireland), the notable oral performance-turned text – the *Amra* of Dallán Forgaill – comes into being. Thus we see here another of the narrative ingredients described above: the 'configuration of three' (poets, the men of Ireland, and Colum Cille) that leads to a memorable act of composition and its recording. The contents of the *Amra* represent a synthesis of old and new traditions; it succeeds the *aidbse* that nearly destroyed the delicate balance between ecclesiastical and poetic possessors of lore. Yet Colum Cille, still wary of the effects of poetry, does insist that the *Amra* be composed only after his death (ibid.). Hence it is a deferred performance that the configuration generates in this case.

A fourth element of the story pattern operating in the Druim Ceat legend is apparent in another incident resulting from the saint's attendance at the Convention – an incident upon which the tradition is notably insistent. A captive (the hostage Scannlán) is miraculously freed by an angel sent by Colum Cille, after Áed obstinately refuses Colum Cille's request to have Scannlán released into his custody. This is clearly an instance of the motif of release, although it is not as directly related to the process of composition/textualization as it usually is in other tales. Scannlán's confinement in a hut, however, is only one of the restricting circumstances from which the characters in the stories of Druim Ceat are freed. We note that the poets themselves are relieved of the pressure being exerted upon them, and that even Colum Cille 'breaks free' – of the *míad menman* that temporarily paralyzes him with the hearing of *aidbse*.

Still missing from our analysis of the extant lore of Druim Ceat is the key motif of the revival of the dead, or the return of one thought long dead, who, upon rejoining the living, imparts to them information once thought lost. Arguably, the horribly starved Scannlán is like a person rescued from the dead, or at least a deathlike obscurity; but then it is emphasized in some texts that, on his return to the living, he proves remarkably, albeit understandably, uncommunicative when Colum Cille speaks to him (in terms, we might add, that could also be suitably addressed to an ancient who has 'news' or 'stories' [*scéla*] to tell):

Do imdighsit iar sin gu Doire. Tan boi an clerech im iarmerghe ic dol tar crann caingel siar, is e Sgannlan do frithoil a asa do, 7 is-pert Colum Cille: 'Cía so?' 'Sgannlan,' ol se. 'Sgela lat,' or Colum Cille. 'Deoch,' ol Sgannlan. 'In tugais bennachtain,' ol Colum Cille. 'Deoch,' ol Scannlan. 'Indis cindus tancaduis,' ol Colum Cille. 'Deoch,' ol Scannlan. 'Dolma n-athisg ar fher h'inaid do gress,' ol Colum Cille. 'Na habair,' ar Sgannlan: 'a cís 7 a cobach 7 a mbés duitsi do gres.' 'Espuic 7 righ dot' tshilso,' ol Colum Cille. 'Hendig duit,' ol se '.i. dabach trir do lind.' Do togaib iar sin eter a dí laim in dabaig, 7 da ib ina endig. Do caith iar sin a pro[inn], sec[h]t n-asli senshaille 7 .ix. mbairgena do cruithnecht (Herbert 1988:246).

They [i.e. Scannlán along with the angel sent by Colum Cille to rescue and protect him] proceeded to Derry [where Colum Cille was staying]. As the cleric was going west [or back] past the chancel screen at nocturns, it was Scannlán who took care of his sandals [as Colum Cille had predicted he would]. Colum Cille asked, 'Who is this?' 'Scannlán,' he responded. 'Do you have news to tell?' 'A drink!' 'Did you bring a blessing?' 'A drink!' 'Tell how you got here.' 'A drink!' 'Slowness to respond upon your descendants forever!' 'Do not say it; they will pay you tax, tribute, and rent forever.' 'Bishops and kings will come of your seed. A single drink for you: a vat of ale enough for three.' Thereupon he [i.e. Scannlán] raised the vat between his two hands and drank it [all] in one swig; then he ate his meal, consisting of seven pieces of aged bacon and nine loaves of wheaten bread.

Scannlán's enormous appetite is suggestively reminiscent of that of the 'folk' version of Oisín after the Fianna – a survivor who becomes a living reminder of the past in Patrick's household (see Bruford 1986–7:53–4) – as well as of the appetite of another 'old-timer', the *athláech* Máel Uma mac Báltáin, who eats a whole ox, generously provided and prepared for him by Colum Cille, as a demonstration of how much the old warrior could eat in his youth (Herbert 1988:239; O'Kelleher and Schoepperle 1918:204). Elsewhere, we learn that Máel Uma – like Oisín and the other Fenians – was a *fénnid* (specifically, a *rígfhénnid*: O'Brien 1976:135; Meyer 1910:xiii; Herbert 1988:285 ad line 460). We may speculate about the status of Scannlán, of whom surviving tradition tells us little else: as the son of a king still on his throne, does he perhaps share in that same marginal status which characterizes *fénnidi*? Scannlán, however, is not the only candidate for the role of (quasi-)revenant. Another intriguing variation on the theme of the long-lived informant in the Druim Ceat legend is commented on in Brian Ó Cuív's 'The two herons of Druim Ceat' (1986). The subject of this brief article is the tradition according to which Colum Cille – after having cursed the son of Áed mac Ainmirech's queen at the Convention, or boasted that he would free

Scannlán with or without the king's help – changes the impiously mocking queen and her servant into herons or cranes (*dá chuirr*). Ó Cuív observes that the legend is quite consistently given a 'contemporary' twist, from its first appearance in the Middle-Irish commentary on the *Amra* to Keating's History. For, as a coda to the legend, the authors who tell it, living centuries after the purported event, commonly remark that the same birds can still be seen at Druim Ceat in their day; a wondrous presence which serves, in Maghnus Ó Domhnaill's words, as *comartha na mirbul sin* (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle 1918:348). The herons, however, can still be not only seen but also heard, as a line in a poem quoted by our sources makes clear: *Marait beus, dogniat cnetá* (Stokes 1899:40), 'They [yet] remain, they [yet] groan'. It is precisely such a *corr* of long standing that Oisín encounters in the Early Modern Irish *Agallamh* (Ní Shéaghdha 1945.III:84–110; see Christiansen 1931:418–19): a long-lived woman-turned-heron (over two centuries old) who attracts the attention of the old Fenian warrior as she lingers conspicuously by the side of the road. Knowing what can be expected of such a creature, Oisín makes a request of the *corr*:

Innis dhúinn, a chruaidh-luirccneach chian-áosda, ní dott imtheacht-
uibh 7 cionnus do cuireadh isin ccorrcoisg sin thú ionnus go madh
húrghairdiughadh meanman 7 mōir-aicceanta dhúin bheith acc eist-
eacht riot . . . (ibid.).

Tell us, O hard-shinned aged one, something of your adventures
and of how you were changed into a heron, so that listening to you
may be entertainment of the mind and spirit for us. . . .

Oisín here is in effect playing the role of modern auditor, assumed by Patrick in relation to Oisín himself: the saint is enjoined by his guardian angels not only to listen to but also to write down what the old Fenian says, for the same purpose as that which Oisín states here – for the 'entertainment of the mind and spirit' (*do ghairrriughadh meanman 7 mór-aigeanta*, Ní Shéaghdha 1942.I:27). The heron obliges Oisín and tells her tale, at the end of which she in turn requests a tale from Oisín. This is therefore an *agallamh* within an *agallamh* – a true 'Colloquy of Ancients'! Furthermore, it resembles yet another informative exchange between contemporaries (or 'old' and 'elder') in the *Agallamh*: that between the equally aged Caoilte and the seafaring Lí Bhan, who had not raised her head out of the waters for a hundred years before she re-met her friend of old (Ní Shéaghdha 1945.II:143–6).

Are we perhaps to think of the *dá chuirr* of Druim Ceat as similarly condemned to carry their story through time? That there is a well-established tradition in Ireland and Scotland according to which the *corr* is associated with longevity, is indisputable (see Ross 1967:282–3; in Scottish folk belief, one can bring about the death of a person who has lived too long by ritually suggesting that he or she has eaten the flesh of

a *corr*). There is, however, no mention in our Columban texts of the two herons' *speaking*, only of their making noise. Yet we do find references beyond the *Agallamh* episode to the speech of the *corr* as being human, or understandable to certain humans (on the supernatural significance of long-legged marsh birds in Celtic traditions in general, see *ibid.*:279–92; Ó Cuív 1961–3:337–8; and Wagner 1962). There are, for example, the three inhospitable *corra* of Midir (Thurneysen 1918:398–9). Although their cries of 'Na tair', 'Airc as', and 'seuc teg' ('Do not come', 'Go away', and '[Go] past the house') would hardly seem to invite further communication, it is perhaps significant that in the Book of Leinster anecdote in which they are mentioned, the *corra* end up in the possession of Athirne, who as a *fili* is a 'communicator' par excellence (albeit an unfriendly one). Closer to home, in Ó Domhnaill's *Life* of Colum Cille, we find that the saint himself – labelled, after all, by Áed's queen a *corrchléirech* ('crooked' or 'heron' cleric) – has a remarkable capacity for communicating with his pet *corr*. When Saint Finnian sends one of his people to spy on Colum Cille as he furtively copies a book lent to him by Finnian, the chagrined plagiarist orders his pet to peck out the eye of the intruder through the hole in the door; the *corr* swiftly obeys (O'Kelleher and Schoepperle 1918:176, 178; for hagiographical analogues, see MacNickle 1934:176–7). Elsewhere in Ó Domhnaill's *Life*, we are told that Colum Cille understood the birds' speech of lamentation as well as he understood the lamentation of humans (*Agus do tuigedh se-sium a n-urlabhra ag denam na tuirsi sin, amail do tuicfedh se ó dainibh hí*, O'Kelleher and Schoepperle 1918:194). In a later episode of the same work, the saint interprets the noises made by a *corr*, for the benefit of his fellow monks; the coming of this Irish heron, which flew across the sea to visit Colum Cille in Scotland, had been predicted by him (*ibid.*:270–71; see also Adomnán's *Vita*, Anderson and Anderson 1961:312, 314). In these instances from the *Life* of Colum Cille, the *corr* brings a special message to the saint, receives a message from him, is the subject of a special (prophetic) utterance, or facilitates the transmission of information (that is, Colum Cille's copying of a manuscript).

Admittedly, the evidence presented here still does not make the *dá chuirr* of Druim Ceat into the long-lived bearers of information we see featured in the tales listed at the beginning of this article. Nevertheless, given the connotations and contexts of other crying she-herons, the two birds, as they are depicted in the extant sources, at least represent either the vestige or the nascent presence of the motif to be found fully embodied in figures such as Oisín's *corr*, Oisín himself, and the several other (col)loquacious elders and revenants conjured up in medieval Irish literature. If we grant this connection or allusion, then the legend of the herons presents an unusual twist on our story pattern: for the Colum Cille of Druim Ceat, it would seem, is engaged in the business not of evoking the memories of the past, as are his saintly and secular colleagues in parallel tales, but of setting up a memory or memorial (the

comhartha of the ever-returning herons) of what happened at Druim Ceat, which will last far into the future.

This article is dedicated to Professor Ó Cuív, whose innumerable explorations of the world of medieval Irish literature are consistently so inspiring. Like the Colum Cille of the Druim Ceat legend, he has provided for the enlightenment of many generations to come.

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