

CRANNGHA(I)L 'A SOUND OR EFFECT IN MUSIC'

IN *Celtica* 20 (1988) 132–40, I suggested that *cranngha(i)l* 'cran', the term used by Irish pipers for a particular ornament on the chanter, which originally had the abstract meaning 'a sound or effect in music' and which came to mean 'ornamentation in music', belonged to the first of the three stages in the development of the compounds of *gal* 'valour, steam', when *gal* was compounded with nouns to form nouns of action and could also be compounded with nouns to express sound or noise. This meaning, therefore, though rarely attested, is older than the common meaning of *cranngha(i)l*, 'woodwork', 'an artifact made of wood', which belongs to the third stage in the development of *gal*-compounds, when the word had become a mere collective suffix.

At the time of writing, I knew of no example of this rare meaning of *cranngha(i)l* in a source earlier than the late nineteenth century. However, my attention has been drawn to what is, apparently, such an example in a poem of Dáibhidh Ó Bruadair's. Verse xxix of 'Créacht do dháil mé',<sup>1</sup> a poem composed, according to most manuscript copies, in 1652, the year which saw the end of the Eleven Years War,<sup>2</sup> reads:

Mar a mbíodh dámhscol báird is reacaigh,  
cleasaidheacht rinnce, fionta is fleadha,  
fastaoim ríghthe is míleadh meara,  
is crannaoil ríghin dá sníomh i gcreataibh.

Ó Bruadair's editor, Father Mac Erlean, translates this quatrain as follows:

Where flourished banded schools of bards and story-tellers,  
The dance's subtleties, abundant wines and banquets;  
Where unending pastime reigned and dashing soldiers  
Pierced with sturdy tourney lances writhing bodies.

As translated, the last line of the quatrain is clearly at odds with the preceding three lines. Taking *crannaoil*, in its usual collective sense, as 'spears', a meaning attested elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> and *creataibh* in its literal meaning of 'trunks', 'bodies', Father Mac Erlean deduced from the collocation of these two words that the line, picking up a thread from the previous quatrain, referred to military activity, and translated accordingly.

But the three preceding lines mention the aristocratic pastimes once to be found in pre-Cromwellian Ireland – poetry, dancing, wine and feasting – and the abrupt change to 'sturdy tourney lances' piercing 'writhing bodies' is jarring. In the context of the quatrain we might

<sup>1</sup> J. C. Mac Erlean (ed.), *Duanaire Dháibhidh Uí Bhruadair I* (Ir. Texts Soc. XI, London 1910 for 1908) 38.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 26.

<sup>3</sup> See *Dictionary of the Irish language s.v. cranngal*.

expect a reference to music, since the other aristocratic entertainments are mentioned, and were the fourth line shown to be such a reference, it would agree with the thrust of the preceding lines. Such a meaning can be extracted from this line without straining if *crannaóil*, in its abstract sense of ‘a sound or effect in music’, ‘ornamentation in music’, is taken to mean ‘ornamented music’, and the rest of the line translated accordingly. The adjective *righin* could be translated in the figurative sense ‘slow, slow-moving, stately’, rather than in the concrete sense ‘tough, hard, unyielding’; and the noun *creataibh* taken to mean not ‘bodies’, ‘trunks’, but ‘frameworks’,<sup>4</sup> used figuratively for ‘harps’. The verbal noun *sníomh* ‘bending, twisting, shaping’ presents no problem: ‘shaping’, ‘creating’ would suit the context. With the insertion of a comma after *dámhscól* in the first line, the quatrain might then read in translation:

Where there were poets, bards and reciters,  
acrobatic dancing, wines and feasts –  
the pastime of kings and spirited warriors –  
and stately ornamented music was created on harps.

While not beyond contradiction, this translation of the last line of the quatrain certainly seems better than Father MacErlean’s, and gives the quatrain a unity that is missing from his translation.

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<sup>4</sup>See *ibid.*, s.v. *crett*.