THE VIRGIN’S TEARS OF BLOOD

FEW MEDIEVAL legends are more striking than that of the tears of blood wept by the Virgin Mary as she watched Christ being crucified, and few have a more distinctive literary history. First recorded during the thirteenth century in Latin, German and English poetry, this tradition was clearly known in the fifteenth to Welsh and Irish bards, as well as the author of the play on Cain and Abel in the Cornish Ordinalia. However, despite its popularity in medieval Britain, the story in our time survives within the British Isles only in the Irish Gaeltacht. In Britain itself it apparently died out with the Reformation.

Unfortunately, the popularity of this tradition in medieval Britain and Ireland has passed unnoticed by modern scholars of Welsh and Cornish, who have misunderstood the passages where its influence appears. Celticists have also failed to appreciate that, since the legend appears in Ireland, Wales and Cornwall as a result of English and continental influence, it owes nothing to the secular tears of blood frequently mentioned in early Irish literature. The conclusion suggested by the evidence presented below is thus somewhat paradoxical: that the Virgin’s tears of blood of modern Irish folklore, far from being ‘native’ or ‘Celtic’, are actually a relic of an international European tradition that was particularly well developed in England.

The earliest source mentioning the Virgin’s tears of blood appears to be the text Vita Beatae Mariae Virginis et Salvatoris rhythmica, allegedly written by a German speaker in Istria or Friuli about the year 1200. In it we hear how the Virgin ‘weeps tears of blood and finally lies in a dead faint across her son’s body’. Aided, no doubt, by such religious sensationalism, the poem had enormous influence on German vernacular poetry, including the lives of the Virgin by Walther von Rheinau, Bruder Wernher, and Bruder Philipp der Karthäuser, as well as the Grazer Marienleben.¹

However, whether the tradition of the Virgin’s tears of blood actually begins with the Vita Beatae Mariae rather than elsewhere in Europe is more difficult to say. It may have done, since the weeping of bloody tears was already a topos in German. The aged Charlemagne shows his grief by weeping blood in the Rolandslied, the Middle High German translation of the Chanson de Roland made about 1170. Tears of blood were, therefore, a recognized literary motif for German speakers. The question

¹ Hilda Graef, Mary, a History of Doctrine and Devotion, i (London, 1963), 261. The Latin poem is 17250 in Initia Carminum ac Versuum medii aevi posterioris latinorum, ed. Hans Walther (Göttingen, 1959).
also arises as to whether the tears of blood appear in England through German influence, and if so, in what way. Here, although we can point to at least one copy of the *Vita Beatae Mariae* in England, at Canterbury, where it belonged to a monk at Christ Church, we are perhaps on safer ground in talking of oral transmission. We have, after all, only to look to modern Irish folklore to see the theme of the Virgin’s tears of blood still surviving in that form. Our German and English written texts are no doubt vital in helping to date and locate the spread of the theme. But there is no good reason why it need not have been passed on by word of mouth any less readily in medieval Europe than it has been in twentieth-century Ireland.  

The earliest English sources mentioning the Virgin’s tears of blood date from the thirteenth century. One of the first of them is a dialogue of the Virgin with Christ crucified, found in several thirteenth- and fourteenth-century manuscripts, in which Christ tells his mother to have pity on her child, and to wash away her bloody tears which grieve him more than his death.

> Moder, rew upon they beren!  
> Thou washe away thy bloody teren;  
> It doth me worse then mi ded.  

The same theme occurs in another lyric on the Passion, in Worcestershire dialect, from the (?) Franciscan manuscript Cambridge, Trinity College, 323. The themes of the poem are remarkable for their violence: we are told that the Virgin thought she would go mad, that her heart began to bleed, that she wept tears of blood.

> Hire thucte a miste aweden,  
> Hire herte bigon to bleden,  
> Teres hoe wep of blod.  

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Another thirteenth-century example of the tears comes from a springtime lyric on the Passion, ‘Somer is comen and winter gon’, of the mid-century or later:

Mayde and moder thar astod,  
Marie ful of grace,  
And of here eyen heo let blod  
Uallen in the place,  
The trace ran of here blod.  

Later examples are as common. In his prayer to Christ, a fourteenth-century knight of Christ says:

For loue thou tholedest woundes depe,  
Thin hondes therled, and eke thi fete;  
Thy modir blodi teres lete. . .  

This may be paralleled from many other fourteenth-century English poems, including ‘The Charter of Christ’, of which charter the Virgin is described as witness:

And namely my moder swete;  
That for me blody terys gan lete ;  

dialogues of the Virgin and St Bernard:

The blod out of hire ezen ron,  
Almost hire herte clef atwo . . . ;  

That sorow so to hir hert thrang  
That blude ran of hir eghen bright;  

and The Northern Passion, when Christ commits his mother to the care of St John:

Oure ladi herde tho wordis swete  
Teris of blod sche gan doun lete  

1 Silverstein, ed. cit., 28; Index 3221.  
Index 776. Note tholedest = ‘distrust’; therled = ‘pierced’.
THE VIRGIN'S TEARS OF BLOOD

Al was hire face hid in blod
Ther sche beheld ihesu on the rod.'

Of special interest amongst these examples, in the light of the instances in Irish quoted below, is one from London, British Library, Harley MS 913, a volume of Middle English lyrics compiled about 1330 in Ireland, well known as one of the earliest examples of Anglo-Irish literature. It speaks of the Virgin's shedding four tears of blood. The detail seems otherwise unknown in English, but is paralleled in Irish.

For to wep 30 nad no mo
Than .III. bitter teris of blode."

The theme of the Virgin's tears of blood continued to be popular in fifteenth-century England, whether in an appeal by the Virgin in a manuscript from Muchelney, Somerset,

Se my blody terys fro my herte roote rebowne;

a Scottish account of the Passion and the Virgin's part in it,

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' Quoted from The Minor Poems of the Vernon MS, ii, ed. F. J. Furnivall (EETS O.S. 117; 1901) 650; ib., i, ed. Carl Horstmann (EETS O.S. 98; 1892) 301; Yorkshire Writers, ed. Carl Horstmann (London, 1895) ii, 275; and The Northern Passion, ed. Frances A. Foster (EETS O.S. 145; 1913) 204. The poems are respectively 4154, 1869, 771, and 1907 in the Index. The Virgin's tears of blood in the Irish translation of 4154 cannot have influenced the Irish poems quoted in the present article, some of which in any case predate it: cf. Gearóid Mac Niocláis, 'Carta Humaní Generí', Íegis vil (1955-7) 216, and the present writer's 'The Charter of Christ in Medieval English, Welsh and Irish', Celtica xix (1987) 111-20, which proposes a date of 1461-3 for the translation.

"Die Kildare-Gedichte, ed. Wilhelm Heuser (Bonn, 1904) 111; Index 3366. Cf. Liam P. Ó Caithbhair, Apalóga na bhFilí 1200-1650 (Baile Ætha Cliath, 1984) 156, and the discussion by Alan Bliss in A New History of Ireland, ii, ed. Art Cosgrove (Oxford, 1987) 723. Another lyric in Harley MS 913 is a translation of the meditation Respite in faciem Christi tui, beginning,

Loke to thi louerd, man, thar hanget he a rode,
And wep hyf tho mist terres al of blode.

See Brown, Religious Lyrics, 2; Index 1943; and Bliss, art. cit., 726. The reference here must reflect the cult of the Virgin's tears of blood, suggesting how well known it was in the Irish Pale. This poem also occurs in Cambridge, St John's College, MS 15, which may also have had Irish connections. The manuscript belonged to Robert of Portland, who describes himself in it as Bishop elect of Dromore; in 1428 he was actually provided to Emly. See Rev. St John D. Seymour, The Diocese of Emly (Dublin, 1913) 113-4; Materials for the History of the Franciscan Province of Ireland, ed. E. B. Fitzmaurice, O.F.M., and A. G. Little (Manchester, 1920) 183-4, 197, 227-8; and A New History of Ireland, ed. T. W. Moody et al., ix (Oxford, 1984) 298.
Scharp bludy teris hir cristell eyne out ran;

or a ballad-like lyric on the hours of the Cross,

Hys mother wepte water and blode
    Standyng here dere sone by:
I can not tell wheder of them
    More rufull was to see.⁹

One late poem from northern England describes a *pietà* on which the Virgin’s tears have been painted, thereby providing proof for this theme in art. It is worth pointing out (a) that this detail on statues, carvings, images and book illustrations (in, for example, books of hours) would be important in disseminating knowledge of this motif; (b) that this fact is easily forgotten by us, since this detail would often be lost even if the work itself escaped the wrath of the reformer; and (c) at least one of the Irish passages below can be related to the tradition of the *pietà*.

Purtryd and peynid piteously
This ymage was with terys of blode,
As for a meroure veryly
Of oure lady I understode.
Hir sone uppon hir kne did ly,
    All rent and revyn brought fro the rode.¹⁰

So pervasive was the theme that it appears even in carols, including the following bittersweet English example from the fifteenth century.

Our dere Lady she stood him by –
    M and A, R and I –
And weep water ful bitterly
And teres of blood ever among

- i.e., the Virgin wept continuously as she stood by the cross.¹¹

The emphasis on the Virgin’s weeping water and blood also appears in carols to the Virgin by the minor Franciscan poet James Ryman, who was active towards the end of the fifteenth century, and whose work provides us with a final English example of this theme.

As Moyses yerde, that was so goode,  
    Turned the waters into bloode,  
So did Mary moost myelde of moode  
Under the cros, whereas she stoode  
    Ful sore weping:  
Her teres ran with blode bleding.\(^\text{12}\)

The above examples have been quoted at some length to emphasize how popular this theme was in medieval English poetry, how it appears consistently there from the thirteenth century up to the eve of the Reformation, and how it even appears in the English poetry of Scotland and Ireland. Even without the evidence of iconography or non-literary texts, what appears above suggests that a belief in the Virgin’s tears of blood must have been cherished wherever English was spoken.\(^\text{13}\)

How does what appears above compare with what we find in literature in the Celtic languages? The most detailed study related to this is by Vernam Hull, ‘Celtic Tears of Blood’, ZCP xxv (1956) 226-36. Hull certainly proves that, in Irish literature, tears of blood other than those of the Virgin Mary were a well-established feature from early times. To his examples may be added one of special interest in the present context, from the eighth-century religious poems of Blathmac, who writes of the witnesses at Calvary that it would be no wonder if there were ‘a heavy tear of blood, a drop of blood, upon every cheek keening the captive.’ But it is significant that Blathmac does not attribute the tears to the Virgin personally, and in fact places remarkably little emphasis on her grief.\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{12}\) The Early English Carols, ed. R. L. Greene (Oxford, 1977) 133, 397; Index 328.

\(^{13}\) The apparent dearth of material before the thirteenth century may or may not have something to do with the fact that tears were a particular cult of the later middle ages: Pierre Adnès, S.J., ‘Larmes’, Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, ix (Paris, 1976) col. 299.

\(^{14}\) Cf. The Poems of Blathmac, ed. James Carney (Dublin, 1964) 45. To Hull’s instances may be added one in Poems on Marcher Lords, ed. Anne O’Sullivan (London, 1987) 76, and cf. xxiv, 70, 74. I owe the references in the latter to the kindness of Mr William O’Sullivan. Mrs O’Sullivan’s reference in her notes to a line in Díoghlúim Déana, ed. Lambert McKenna, S.J. (Baile Átha Cliath, 1938), 101, seems misplaced, however. The line refers rather to a gruesome incident in the martyrdom of St Margaret, when her breast was cut off.
Despite the fact that Hull shows non-Marian tears to be well attested in Irish, he assumes that tears of blood in the other Celtic languages must be an inheritance from the days of Celtic unity. Nor does he make any reference whatsoever to the Virgin’s tears of blood, either in English or any other language. The approach to the Welsh, Cornish and Irish material in the present study thus differs considerably from that suggested by Hull.

The only Welsh instance of tears of blood quoted by Hull is one, unfortunately somewhat unclear, from the *Canu Heledd*. However, there are at least six more which are quite explicit. What seem to be the earliest come from two poems written about 1460 by Ieuan Deulwyn and Dafydd Epynt. In an elegy for two Powys men, Dafydd Fychan of Llanbister, and Ieuan ap Llwyelyn of Llangurig, murdered as they were travelling through the mountains of mid-Wales, Ieuan compares himself to the Virgin at Calvary:

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Yma 'ddwyf am y ddeufab,
Mal Mair am weliau 'i mab:
Gwaed oedd o'i llygaid iddi,
A gwaed ail o'm llygaid i.
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Here am I for the two sons, like Mary for the wounds of her son, with blood flowing from her eyes, and blood flowing from mine.

The reference from the Brecknock poet Dafydd Epynt comes in his unpublished praise-poem to the Virgin, *Mair Forwlyn mae ar foroedd*. Dafydd describes the crucified Christ entrusting his grief-stricken mother to the care of St John:

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Gwaed o'r iad a gydredodd
A gwaed y wraig gwedy rodd;
Wedi'r corff roi i waed er caith
Gwaed ai'n olwg dyn eilwain.
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After bestowal, the woman’s blood and blood from his brow streamed down together; after his body gave its blood for slaves, blood flowed again in the eye of the woman.

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15 *Canu Llywarch Hen*, ed. Ifor Williams (Caerdydd, 1935) 40.
17 Quoted from Aberystwyth, Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, MS Brogyntyn 2, p. 405.
THE VIRGIN’S TEARS OF BLOOD

A third reference to the Virgin’s tears of blood occurs in a *marwnad* by Gutun Owain (fl. 1450-98) for Alswyn Vechan, of Bersham, near Wrexham:

Gallwn wylaw, heb gellwair,
Gyda’i mam, ddagreu gwaed Mair.\(^{18}\)

Without jest, I could weep with her mother the Virgin’s tears of blood.

A fourth comes at the opening of a *marwnad* for Siôn ap Madog Pilstwn, or Puleston (Alswyn’s husband), by Guto’r Glyn (c. 1435-c. 1493):

Wylofus wyf fal afon,
Wylais waed ar wely Siôn.\(^{19}\)

I am as full of tears as a river, I wept blood on Siôn’s bed.

This fourth reference occurs specifically in the context of the Virgin and the Cross, since Guto goes on to speak of the gold which people placed on them to intercede for Siôn when he was ill. It seems, as Professor Bowen points out in his notes, that Guto refers to an actual image of the Virgin and the Cross at Bersham. This Bersham Virgin may well have been shown weeping tears of blood.

The Virgin’s tears of blood are also mentioned in an elegy by Dafydd Llwyd (c. 1420-c. 1500) of Mathafarn, near Machynlleth, for a young girl killed by the plague (its symptoms somewhat curiously described). With the grief he feels now, he declares, the earth itself would weep; he knows a stone once cried out under such duress;

A Mair gynt yn ei mawr gur,
Gwaed a wylodd, gyd-dolur.\(^{20}\)

And Mary once in her great affliction wept blood in like sorrow.

The last of these examples comes from an anonymous late fifteenth-century poem to the shrine of Our Lady of the Throne at Llanystumdwy, near Cricieth in north-west Wales. The Virgin speaks imploringly to the crucified Christ,

Ag a wylawdd o’i galyn
Dagrau gwaed er y grogwynn;21

And, from entreating him, she wept tears of blood for the holy Cross.

That the Virgin’s tears of blood must have been equally well known in Cornwall is proved by the words, quoted by Hull, in which Eve expresses her feelings of grief after the murder of Abel in the Cornish Ordinalia:

Yma ken th’m the ole
Daggrow gois in gvyr hep mar.22

Truly there is reason for me to weep tears of blood, without doubt.

The full significance of these words has not so far been understood by modern readers of the play, and it becomes clear only in the context of the Virgin’s tears of blood. Because in Christian typology the death of Abel prefigures the death of Christ, the unknown author of the Cornish play showed the first Eve weeping tears of blood at the death of her son, Abel, as he must have believed the second Eve wept tears of blood at the death of her son, Christ. The making of such a parallel would be a typically medieval approach to the Bible, not least in drama. This feature here is a tribute to the subtlety of the unknown author of the play, and perhaps even more so to that of his audience, if they could be expected to appreciate it.

No reference in Irish to the Virgin’s tears of blood predates the fifteenth century. What may be the earliest comes from a poem in praise of the Virgin by the Connacht bard Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (d. 1448), which repeats the motif of the numbered tears occurring in Harley MS 913. In Irish the tears are reduced from four to three:

An leanbh ré luigheadh an ógh
A fhear a nior cuireadh ar gcúl
nó gur dheonuigh Rí na ríogh
siadh ar a trí deoruibh dhún.

The child, the Virgin's spouse, did not put his anger aside until he granted our pardon at her three tears.\textsuperscript{23}

Tadhg Óg mentions this belief in another of his poems.

\begin{verbatim}
Trom ré n-ioc gion go mb’eadh leis
na trí déara do dháilis
it luighe a Mhoire ar do Mhac
is dá Mhuire oile iomad.
\end{verbatim}

Most precious did he consider the three tears you shed when fainting over your son, with the other two Mariæ at your side.\textsuperscript{24}

This second instance is of interest in giving a hint of the \textit{pietà} in fifteenth-century Irish poetry, at a time when this was a fairly common motif in English and continental art and poetry.

In these examples the three tears are not said to be bloody, as the four tears are in English. But in two anonymous bardic poems of this period the reference to the Virgin's tears of blood is clear:

\begin{verbatim}
Ag labhartír re a dalta dhí
uisge a dearc do dhóirt Muire:
geall caithmhe ar fhuil an abhra
do chuirt d’aithile a hagallmha.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{verbatim}

Mary wept while speaking with her foster-son [St John]; she wept more blood [than water] after her conversation.

\begin{verbatim}
Do cheannaigh – fa cunnradh sochar –
síoth a dalta ar a deoir ndeirg.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{verbatim}

With her red tear – blessed bargain – Mary bought her son’s appeasement.

\textsuperscript{23} Dáin Dé, ed. Lambert McKenna, S.J. (Dublin, 1922) 2, 70, and cf. xvi, 3, 20, 71, 87; and Dánta do chum Aonghus Fionn Ó Dalaigh, ed. Lambert McKenna, S.J. (Dublin, 1919) 51. For what little we know of Tadhg Óg see Alúthdúglúim Dána, ed. Lambert McKenna, S.J., i (Dublin, 1939) xxxv, where his death is misdated.

\textsuperscript{24} Dáin Dé, 11, 79; cf. Ó Caithinna, Apóide, 155. Cf. n. 10 supra. Such was the zeal of the reformers to remove every painted and carved scrap of Mary-worship almost no \textit{pietà} survives in England now. But there must have been thousands.

\textsuperscript{25} Dúglúim Dána, ed. Lambert McKenna, S.J. (Baile Átha Cliath, 1938) 85.

\textsuperscript{26} Ib., 91.
The same theme appears in a poem by the Observant friar, Philip Bocht (‘the poor’) Ó hUiginn, who died in 1487, but of whose biography little is otherwise known.

A sgarthain an uair do b’ál
ris an uaidh do athraigh seol
ar a leamb do luigh an ógh
nír mhór nar fhuil dearg a deor.

When they would lead her away from the grave, she turned and cast herself on his body: almost as blood was the red of her tears.27

That the tears of blood shed by the Virgin for her son are still a common motif in the laments of the Virgin collected from modern Irish speakers has been shown in Angela Partridge’s recent splendidly detailed study, Caoineadh na d’Trí Muire.28

What relationship do the Celtic tears of blood attributed to the Virgin bear to those in English and continental sources? It is argued here, first, that the Virgin’s tears in Welsh, and Eve’s tears in Cornish, must derive from English influence. The evidence in England for the Virgin’s tears of blood is strong: evidence in Wales and Cornwall for tears of blood not the Virgin’s is weak. Secondly, the Irish bards must also have received the theme from outside, i.e., in their case, from beyond the Irish-speaking part of Ireland. So much is shown by the fact that the theme appears in Hiberno-English a century before it appears in Irish; that the use of the theme in Irish displays details closely paralleled in English and continental sources: and that it occurs in Irish bardic poetry with other themes certainly of English or continental origin. Moreover, if this theme did not enter Irish from beyond Gaelic Ireland, why does it not appear until as late as the fifteenth century, when non-Marian tears of blood appear in other Irish religious poetry as early as Blathmac?

Finally, is it possible to suggest exactly how the theme might have reached the poets who used it, especially those in Ireland who were furthest from other European influences? What we know of fifteenth-century Irish literature provides some clues on this. First, the Irish instances of the Virgin’s tears given here are more varied than those in English. All the English examples, except that in the northern poem on

27 Philip Bocht O hUiginn, ed. Lambert McKenna, S.J. (Dublin, 1931) 62, 167, and cf. xvii, 18, 112, 139, 194. As translation of the last phrase Professor Ó Cuiv suggests ‘Her tears were almost as red blood.!

28 Angela Partridge, Caoineadh na d’Trí Muire (Baile Átha Cliath, 1983) 21, 45-46, 52, 79-80, 98, 204, 239, 290, and 291.
the *pietà*, describe the Virgin as standing by the Cross, and weeping blood in grief for her son. But two of the Irish poems speak of these tears as assuaging Christ’s anger, while another describes the Virgin throwing herself on to Christ’s body when about to be led away from his grave. (The last also contains the uniquely cautious phrase, ‘almost as blood’: Irish scepticism, against English credulity.) There is nothing at all like this in English. The differences shown by the use of this theme in Irish suggest that it entered Irish tradition in a variety of ways. The detail of the tears appeasing Christ’s anger might result from a process of oral transmission; that of the Virgin’s throwing herself on Christ’s body is close to that in a written source, the *Vita Beatae Mariae*; while Tadhg Óg’s description of the Virgin fainting over her son with the two Maries at her side may well be due to the visual influence of a *pietà*. This last would imply an influence entering Ireland during the fifteenth century, since (as Rosemary Woolf has pointed out) the *pietà* is unknown anywhere before that date.

In the diversity of the ways in which it apparently reached the bards, the theme of the Virgin’s tears of blood can be compared with that of the Charter of Christ. This is a devotional motif, certainly of Middle English origin, which appears in other poems by Tadhg Óg O hUiginn and Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn, as well as in a translation of an English poem on the subject by Philip’s contemporary Uílliam Mac an Leagha. In all this the Charter exactly resembles the Virgin’s tears. But the use of it by Tadhg Óg and Philip Bocht not only lacks the relentless elaboration of detail in the English texts, it also contains features (such as the Cross, not Christ, being the Charter) without parallel in English. The implication is that these two bards used an oral tradition which had become distorted in transmission. Uílliam Mac an Leagha, on the other hand, who had a written text before him, has left a translation remarkable for its accuracy. He includes all the features of the Charter, including the reference to ‘my moder sweete,/That for me blydy terys gan lete’ quoted above: *in ògh mhílis bhúidh charthanach do shil déir fola*.

If one was obliged to point to one particular movement by which these and other aspects of a wider spiritual life came to fifteenth-century Ireland, it would be that of the new Observant and Third Order Franciscan communities, whose oral and written influence comes as a second spring (or Indian summer?) in medieval Irish literature and devotion. It was, for example, apparently through the Third Order Regular house at Rosserk in north Co. Mayo, not so far to the west of Ó hUiginn territory, that the text of the pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes Vitae Christi* was brought to Connacht, where it was soon translated into Irish by a canon of Killala cathedral. This translation contains an interpolation on the
number of Christ's wounds which finds its parallels, not in the English literature of this period, but in the revelations experienced by St Frances of Rome (1384-1440). This Italian tradition then found its way, via the Irish translation of the Meditations, into the Irish translation of the Middle English poem on the Charter of Christ quoted above. The diverse histories of the themes of Charter and Wounds (both also found in Welsh) we are fortunate to know in some detail, and they certainly suggest the complex international patterns to be found in the late medieval poetry of the Celtic lands. It would not be strange if it was by similar routes, perhaps including those available to the new Franciscan orders, that the international theme of the Virgin's tears of blood reached Gaelic Ireland.  

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29 For the material in this paragraph cf. both the present writer's 'The Charter of Christ in medieval English, Welsh and Irish', Celtica xix, and the postscript in The Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies, xxxv (1988), to his article 'The Number of Christ's Wounds'. The Irish translations of the Vita Beatae Mariæ (n. 2 supra) and their influence on the bards also need more research. They must have helped to spread the continental theme of the Virgin's tears of blood throughout Gaelic Ireland; and the lines of Philip Bocht quoted above may show their influence.