

TWO TROUBLESOME ABBOTS

TO Professor Brian Ó Cuív Irish studies owe, *inter alia permulta*, a great deal of precise scholarship on Gaelic personal nomenclature. Much remains to be done, however, in applying knowledge of the forms, distribution, and development of personal names and bynames to the sometimes confused and apparently inconsistent evidence concerning particular historical characters. What follows is offered as a modest contribution to the solution of irritating problems posed by the names of two early medieval abbots.

I. CUMMÉNE, ABBOT OF IONA (657–69)

Abbot Cumméne has often been referred to in modern secondary literature as ‘Cumméne Ailbe’ or the like.¹ Although attestations of his name were listed and considered by the Andersons in 1961, with sensible conclusions reached,² nonetheless there is evidence from publications of the last year or two that bad old habits are reasserting themselves.³ Accordingly there would seem to be room for a fuller and more deliberate treatment of the evidence.

The supposed double name, ‘Cumméne Ailbe’, implies that this figure bore two personal names used in combination. Such a usage is not easy to parallel. There appears to be no Old Irish adjective which would account for the second element as an epithet. A toponymic explanation of ‘Ailbe’ might perhaps be offered by reference to place-names such as Mag Ailbe or Cluain Ailbe;⁴ but in that case one would perhaps first wish to be persuaded that these names were not themselves compounded with a personal name as the second element. And a further complication might appear to be that, while the Ailbe place-names belong to the Meath/Kildare region, Abbot Cumméne was genealogically located among a northern family, Cenél Conaill.

The annalistic testimony to Cumméne’s death, seemingly to be placed in 669, provides clear evidence for his name. It seems certain

¹See, for example, J. F. Kenney, *The sources for the early history of Ireland: ecclesiastical: an introduction and guide* (New York 1929; revised by L. Bieler, 1966) 391, 425, 428, 434, 803 (where sometimes Cuimíne *ailbe*, sometimes Cuimíne *Ailbe*, is found).

²*Adomnan’s Life of Columba* (ed. and transl. A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson, Edinburgh 1961) 91.

³M. Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: the history and hagiography of the monastic familia of Columba* (Oxford 1988) 24, 320; M. Richter, *Medieval Ireland: the enduring tradition* (Basingstoke 1988) 82 (with inaccurate abbatial dates); *Cummian’s letter De controversia paschali* (ed. and transl. M. Walsh and D. Ó Cróinín, Toronto 1988) 8–9, 11–12, 15.

⁴E. Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum locorum et tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae: an index, with identifications, to the Gaelic names of places and tribes* (Dublin 1910) 16, 254, 511–12.

that the lost 'Chronicle of Ireland', underlying all the extant texts,⁵ had a death-notice of Cumméne, derived no doubt from the annals of Iona, now equally lost.⁶ These were then altered slightly, in varying ways, by redactors and copyists.

Two texts surviving in seventeenth-century manuscripts provide the simplest account:

ARC § 137: Obitus Cumini albi abbatis Iae. . . .

CS 665.1: Obitus Cuimini albi abbatis Iae. . . .

Some development seems visible in a chronicle-text assigned to the eleventh century but also preserved only in a seventeenth-century copy:

FAI § 40: Cuimin fionn, ab Iae, quieuit.

It was such a text, perhaps, which Conall Mageoghagan translated in 1627 in the Annals of Clonmacnoise:

AClon 665: Comyn the white, abbot of Hugh, . . . died.

The same may be said of the source used by the Four Masters:

AFM 668: S. Cummine fionn, abb Iae Coluim Cille, décc an 24
Februarii:

Clearly underlying the modern names complained about above, however, are the forms occurring in those annalistic texts most popular with twentieth-century scholars:

AU 669.1: Obitus Cummeni ailbi abbatis Iae. . . .

AT [669.1]: Obitus Cumaine ailbe abaiteis Iea . . . (MS, f. 11 r a 15).

The conclusion would appear to be inescapable that, whether in the extant texts or in their ultimate common ancestor, a scribe or scribes had seen fit to indicate the palatal quality of the consonant-group *-lb-* of the Latin word *albi* when pronounced by an Irishman. We see the same again in the preceding annal (for 668) in the Annals of Tigernach where we read 'ad Insolum [*sic*] Uacce Ailbe' (MS, f. 11 r a 12-11), a mannered rendering of 'i nInsi mBó Finde'. The penchant for such gaelicised Latin orthography in AT is clearly displayed in the entry's next word after *ailbe*, *abaiteis*, viz. *abbatis*.

From the sum of the annalistic evidence, therefore, it is clear that there is no need to deduce from the Annals of Tigernach that Abbot

⁵For this and its derivatives see K. Grabowski and D. Dumville, *Chronicles and annals of medieval Ireland and Wales: the Clonmacnoise-group texts* (Woodbridge 1984). In what follows I use the same abbreviations for and editions of Irish chronicle-texts, save that *The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)* I (ed. and transl. S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill, Dublin 1983) must now be taken into account.

⁶On annalistic activity at Iona see especially J. Bannerman, *Studies in the history of Dalriada* (Edinburgh 1974) 9-26.

Cumméne bore a second name, Ailbe.⁷ Rather, he was Cummeneus albus or Cummíne find, both forms which are found in sources of the Old Irish period.

In the scribal insertion made in Dorbbéne's manuscript of Abbot Adomnán's *Vita Sancti Columbae Tripartita*, III.5 (Schaffhausen, Stadtbibliothek, MS Generalia 1, p. 108), a section is reproduced from Abbot Cumméne's otherwise lost Life of St Columba.⁸ The quotation begins, 'Cummeneus [albus], in libro quem de uirtutibus sancti Columbae scripsit, sic dixit quod. . .'. The adjective *albus* is interlined above Cummeneus, as if in an afterthought the scribe realised that the name needed further definition.

In *Féilire Oengusso*, the metrical kalendar written c.800, we read at 24 February of 'Cummíne find febdae'.⁹ The primary adjective recurs in the seventeenth century in the Four Masters' Martyrology of Donegal: Cuimmein fionn.¹⁰ A scholium to *Féilire Oengusso* in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B 512, offers what is perhaps a misleading reference to one Cuimíne mac Dínertaig, associated with Roscrea.¹¹ But the pedigree of Cumméne of Iona seems to be that given in a group of abbatial pedigrees which were probably compiled at Kells in the mid-tenth century and which place him securely among Cenél Conaill.¹² Cumíne mac Arnáine maic Fhiachna. . . . The pedigree, thus far, recurs in the

⁷We find the opposite error in *Codex Salmanticensis*. In *Vita I S. Fintani de Tech Munnu*, §§ 29–30, we read of *campi/campis Ailbe* (viz. Mag Ailbe: cf. note 4 above); in *Vita II S. Fintani*, §§ 25–6, this became *campo Albo / campum Album!* See *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae ex Codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi* (ed. W. W. Heist, Bruxelles 1965) 207, 254–5.

⁸Anderson and Anderson, *Adomnan's Life of Columba*, plate opposite p. 177, and pp. 474–7; for discussion, *ibid.*, 13, 30, 46–52, 55, 57, 91, 103–5, and Herbert, *Iona*, 24–6, 29, 43, 134–6. For the Schaffhausen manuscript, see E. A. Lowe, *Codices Latini antiquiores* VII (Oxford 1956) no. 998.

⁹*Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé: The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (ed. and transl. W. Stokes, London 1905) 62. In the Martyrology of Tallaght (ed. R. I. Best and H. J. Lawlor, London 1931), supposedly Oengus's principal source but surviving now in a version of c.900, we read at 24 February (p. 19), 'Cuimíne find mac Fhiachna meic Feradhaigh ab Iae': it is noteworthy that Arnán/Ernán, found in the corpus of saints' genealogies and in the 'Martyrology of Donegal' as Cumméne's father, is absent hence. Unfortunately this part of the text of Tallaght depends on an abbreviated seventeenth-century transcript in the hand of Míchéal Ó Cléirigh (Brussels, Bibliothèque royale, MS 5100–5104, ff. 209 r – 224 v), whose absolute faithfulness to its twelfth-century exemplar cannot be guaranteed.

¹⁰*The Martyrology of Donegal: a calendar of the saints of Ireland* (ed. and transl. J. O'Donovan et al., Dublin 1864) 56, 57. In the twelfth-century *Féilire Húi Gormáin* he is simply 'Cuimmein' (and an attached gloss reads *abb Iae*): *Féilire Húi Gormáin: The Martyrology of Gorman* (ed. and transl. W. Stokes, London 1895) 42, 43.

¹¹Stokes, *Féilire Óengusso*, 78, 79 (his MS R²); for recent but problematic comment see Walsh and Ó Cróinín, *Cummian's letter*, 10–11.

¹²P. Ó Riain (ed.), *Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum Hiberniae* (Dublin 1985) 54 § 338 (pp. 54–5 §§ 336–48, for the group in question); cf. Herbert, *Iona*, 36–7, 79–80. See also P. Walsh (ed.), *Genealogiae regum et sanctorum Hiberniae by the Four Masters* (Maynooth 1918) 39 § 10; cf. 40 § 16.

Martrology of Donegal ('mac Ernain mic Fiachna . . . do cenél Gulban mic Néill dó').

Cumméne's epithet has been translated as 'the white' and, more plausibly, 'the fair'.¹³ The latter is perhaps recalled in Cú Choigríche Ó Cléirigh's metrical *Naemshenchus naem Inse Fáil*, where we read 'Commán *caemh* mac Ernáin aín'.¹⁴ Why such a nondescript epithet should have been so carefully recorded and remembered in so many contexts is a question, however. And that it seemed a worthwhile interlineation to the addition made in Dorbbéne's manuscript of Adomnán's *Vita S. Columbae* perhaps speaks for the necessity to distinguish Cumméne find, abbot of Iona, from some other Cumméne. The clue is perhaps provided by annalistic evidence. In the decade preceding the death of Cumméne find in 669, four other leading ecclesiastics associated with major churches also died who bore the name Cumméne: at Nendrum in 659 (AFM 658), at Clonfert in 662 (Cumméne longus/fota: AU 662.1, etc.), at Clonmacnoise in 665 (AU 665.6 etc.), and at Bangor in 666 (AFM, AClon). In his ecclesiastical generation, then, Cumméne of Iona was surrounded by namesakes: was he perhaps the first of them to achieve recognition or position,¹⁵ or was he merely the fairest of them all?¹⁶ In any event – unless we reach for an as yet unavailable toponymic explanation for his epithet – the abbot of Iona was not the double-barrelled Cumméne-Ailbe but rather Cumméne find.

II. FLANN, ABBOT OF CLONMACNOISE (?724–732/3)

On the evidence of five surviving chronicles, we may be certain that the lost 'Chronicle of Ireland' contained a notice of the death of 'Fland aue Collae', abbot of Clonmacnoise. Three texts are in substantial agreement.

AU 732.1: Mors Flaind Sinnae aui Collę, abbatis Cluana M. Nuis.

ARC § 183: Mors Flaind Sinde ui Collae, ab Cluana Mc. Nois.

FAI § 224: Flann Sionna H. Colla, ab Cluana M. Nois.

¹³For the latter see Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)*, I.139 (AU 669.1).

¹⁴Ó Riain, *Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum*, 81 (§ 662.18c); cf. pp. xl–xlii on this text as a whole.

¹⁵On *find* (in opposition to *dub*, 'black'/'dark') as 'the former' (etc.), see A. P. Smyth, 'The *Black* Foreigners of York and the *White* Foreigners of Dublin', *Saga-book of the Viking Society for Northern Research* 19 (1974–7) 101–117.

¹⁶It is this proliferation of localisable persons called Cumméne (and it is not to be supposed that every learned ecclesiastical Cumméne of the period has a surviving annalistic obit) which, *inter alia*, must make one deeply suspicious of claims to have identified unattributed persons of this name with one another or with such localisable ecclesiastics: see, for example, Walsh and Ó Cróinín, *Cummian's letter*, 7–15, and D. Ó Cróinín, 'Cummianus Longus and the iconography of Christ and the apostles in early Irish literature', in *Sages, saints and storytellers: Celtic studies in honour of Professor James Carney* (ed. D. Ó Corráin et al., Maynooth 1989) 268–79.

A fourth witness differs only in its omission of the epithet:

AClon 729.1: Flann ó Colla, abbott of Clonvicknois, died.

As so often, we find the greatest differences in the Annals of Tigernach:

AT [732.]1: Bass Flaind Chaland, ab Cluana maic Nois, .h. Colla; do Uib Cremtaind dó.

The epithet *Sinnae* has been replaced by another and his lineage traced to Uí Chrimthainn; the latter at least is quite typical of the process of redaction of the 'Chronicle of Ireland' at Clonmacnoise.¹⁷ With editorial emendation of the new epithet, Flann has been assigned to Cualu (in Leinster) but the Uí Chrimthainn in question have been deemed to be those of Airgialla.¹⁸ But abandonment of the epithet *Sinnae* is secondary, as the evidence of the Four Masters shows:

AFM 726: Flann Sionna Ua Colla, abb Cluana mic Nois; do Uibh Cremhthaind dó.

Sinnae, 'of the Shannon', is a quite common epithet attaching to the names of early medieval Irishmen; indeed, one of the most famous persons to bear that appellation was another Flann Sinna, Southern Uí Néill king 879–916, who was himself significant in the history of Clonmacnoise.¹⁹

In view of the foregoing, it is surprising to find in the Annals of Ulster for 733 the following entry:

AU 733.9: Flann Fine, abbas Cluana Moccu N., obiit.

The immediate supposition must be that we have here a doublet of the entry 732.1, and that confusion of Insular *f* (ḟ) with Insular low *s* (ḟ) has produced the variant epithet. But if this is a doublet, it is very unusual, for abbots of Clonmacnoise are not a normal target for doubling in the Annals of Ulster. Nor is it clear whether the absence of extended genealogical information from AU 733.1 makes it more or less credible as an early record than AU 732.9. On the other hand, if it is not a doublet, we are faced with a short-lived homonymous successor to Flann Sinnae, who was distinguished from him by a different epithet, *Fíne*. The specific argument against this solution is that the second Flann is unknown to the other chronicles, thus casting doubt both on

¹⁷[Grabowski and] Dumville, *Chronicles and annals*, ch. 2.

¹⁸For Cualu see W. Stokes, 'The Annals of Tigernach: third fragment', *Revue Celtique* 17 (1896) 119–263, p. 236; for Airgialla see J. Ryan, *Clonmacnois: a historical summary* (Dublin 1973) 34, and also 'The abbatial succession' (note 20 below), 499 no. 18. In both, Ryan took 'Fine' to be the primary byname.

¹⁹F. J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973) 91, 266.

his place in the mainstream of annalistic textual history and on his very existence.²⁰

AU 733.9 stands in a block of entries unique to the Annals of Ulster: 733.5–10. It is possible that they belong, as a group, to a (known but problematic) independent strand of the textual history of the Annals of Ulster.²¹ Other options exist, however. It could be argued that in the Annals of Tigernach, which have a different block of text at this point, the redactor has simply replaced these entries with others of his choice, a phenomenon encountered elsewhere. On the other hand AU 733.8 ('Iugulatio Dunlainge filii Dunchon') stands in the same relationship to AU 747.9 ('Mors Dunlaingi filii Dunchon regis Ceniuil Arddgail') as 733.9 does to 732.1. A more complex explanation of the relationship of AT and AU in the annal for 733 is thus perhaps a necessity. The interpretation of the information provided by AU 733.9 accordingly remains uncertain.

Interest attaches to this entry especially because of the name 'Flann Fíne'. That name, in the form 'Flann Fína', was to become famous, perhaps in the course of the Middle Irish period, in the Gaelic literary tradition.²² To assume the equivalence of Flann Fína and Flann Fíne is to make some possibly prejudicial assumptions when satisfactory explanations of the second elements are still wanting. Nevertheless, the similarity encourages one to pursue the question a little further. And in the Annals of Inisfallen one can find warrant for so doing. Eventually, not later than the eleventh century, Flann Fína is attested as the name of a son of Oswiu, king of Northumbria (642–70),²³ and in particular that of Aldfrith, who ruled Northumbria from 686 to 705. The annalistic sources provide some evidence.

AU 704.3: Aldfrith m. Ossu, sapiens, rex Saxonum, moritur.

ARC § 162: Et Aldfrith m. Ossa, sapiens, rex Saxonum, moritur.

AClon 700.2: Alfrith sonne of Ossue, the prudent king of ye Saxons, died.

²⁰For the early abbots of Clonmacnoise, see J. Ryan, 'The abbatial succession at Clonmacnois from the foundation of the monastery to the coming of the Norse (A.D. 545–799)', in *Féil-sgríbhinn Eóin Mhic Néill: Essays and studies presented to Professor Eoin MacNeill* (ed. J. Ryan, Dublin 1940) 490–507; on the early Clonmacnoise contribution to the 'Chronicle of Ireland' see K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: introduction to the sources* (London 1972) 138–40.

²¹On this strand, see I. Henderson, 'North Pictland', in *The Dark Ages in the Highlands* (ed. E. Meldrum, Inverness 1971) 37–52, especially 43–9.

²²On him see R. M. Smith, 'The *speculum principum* in early Irish literature', *Speculum* 2 (1927) 411–45, especially 432–4, and 'The *Senbriathra Fithail* and related texts', *Revue Celtique* 45 (1928) 1–92; cf. V. E. Hull, 'The Wise Sayings of Flann Fína (Aldfrith, king of Northumbria)', *Speculum* 4 (1929) 95–102, and P. Walsh, 'A poem on Ireland', *Ériu* 8 (1916) 64–74.

²³In the early twelfth-century manuscript, containing secular genealogies, edited by M. A. O'Brien, *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae* I (Dublin 1962; revised imp., introd. J. V. Kelleher, 1976) 135, but not yet in the Laud text reported in O'Brien's apparatus (R 140 a 40 note m, ms La)

These entries define the reading of the lost 'Chronicle of Ireland' in the early tenth century and indicate (in view of the testimony of the Annals of Clonmacnoise and the Annals of Roscrea, two witnesses to the tenth-century 'Clonmacnoise Chronicle') that alterations by Clonmacnoise redactors were not immediate. We can see how the process of accretion and alteration began.

AT [704.]4: *Altfrith mac Ossa, .i. Fland Fina la Gaedhelu, écnaidh, rex Saxonum fuit, .i. dobí.*

(The incorporation of the italicised matter into the text of AT in fact caused severe disruption of the following entry, AT [704.]5.)

We can follow the progress of this notice through two further stages in the remaining witnesses.

AI [705.]1: Flann Fíne mc. Gossa, rex Saxorum, quieuit.

FAI §165: Mors Flainn Fíona mc. Ossa, rí Saxan, an t-eagnaíd amhra, dalta Ad(a)mnáin, de quo Riaguil Beanncúir cecinit 'Iniu. . . '.

Both these texts, in which Aldfrith's name has been replaced by that of Flann Fíne/Fína, may be assigned to the eleventh century. By the end of that century, then, the belief in Aldfrith's equation with Flann Fína had become sufficiently strong to displace Aldfrith's name from a literary context which knew nothing of this in the first half of the preceding, tenth, century.

There are two questions which deserve to be investigated separately – the literary history of Flann Fína in Ireland; and the biography of Aldfrith, king of Northumbria. It is possible that these may be brought into conjunction. But, until those tasks have been thoroughly executed, it would seem premature to rejoice in the equation of the English name with the Irish and to draw large historical conclusions therefrom.²⁴ For, to consider only the Irish side of the equation, we may have to allow that there was more than one Flann Fíne; or that one (whether the sole possessor of the name or not) was briefly abbot of Clonmacnoise in the first third of the eighth century; or that perhaps not earlier than the tenth century (when the history of the Annals of Ulster becomes independent of the 'Clonmacnoise Chronicle') this (by now) famous name had been associated with an abbot of Clonmacnoise.

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²⁴As so often in Anglo-Saxon scholarship the tone of discussion was set by Charles Plummer: *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica* II (Oxford 1896) 263–4. In this case, Plummer gave no consideration to the problem of the uncertain and varying evidential weight of those Irish sources which equate Flann Fína and Aldfrith.