

IMAGES OF WARFARE IN BARDIC POETRY

I HAVE argued elsewhere that historians seeking to identify the underlying political message of any medieval bardic eulogy are well advised first to make themselves familiar with the range of recurring motifs in this genre. Once they can recognise stock images for what they are as they meet with them in the body of the poem, they may more easily winnow out the comparatively few verses that contain original matter prompted by the particular moment in time and patron in question.¹ However, this is not to dismiss the greater part of any bardic ode as a meaningless recital of clichés. The imagery was functional. In the formal eulogies to secular patrons, which comprise the mainstream of bardic verse, the three most frequently occurring themes are praise of the patron's personal appearance, kingship motifs (such as the fertility of the land in the just king's reign), and motifs connected with warfare.²

F. J. Byrne, in a thought-provoking passage near the beginning of his *Irish kings and high-kings*, has suggested in effect that every bardic praise-poem is a kind of inauguration ode, a celebration of kingship. Praising a patron's beauty can be regarded as a kingship motif because the patron is essentially being extolled as a bridegroom, a fitting mate for the woman of sovereignty.³ In the same way it is even clearer that the theme of warfare is related to kingship, because the king's prowess as a military leader is vital both to protect his country from external aggression and to enforce the rule of law and order internally. As the Old Irish tract on kingship, *Audacht Morainn*, proclaimed: 'It is through the justice of the ruler that he dispatches (great) battalions to the borders of hostile neighbours'.⁴ Again in the Middle Irish *Teguscc Cuscraidh* the prince is told: 'Be a zealous and mighty champion . . . ardent, warlike, contending against foreign lands for the protection of thy great territories'.⁵

The pattern of Irish warfare in the high Middle Ages meant that there was a practical advantage for a chieftain's subjects in the assurance that their leader was not merely a good general but an effective hand-to-hand fighter himself. The commonest form of campaign was the cattle-raid, in which the bare-footed, almost unarmed foot-soldiers were chiefly employed in burning thatched houses and rounding up herds of

¹K. Simms, 'Bardic poetry as a historical source', in T. Dunne (ed.), *The writer as witness* (Historical Studies XVI, Cork 1987) 58-75, p. 71.

²The frequency with which certain motifs occurred in this material was noted as part of a survey of bardic poetry I commenced 1977-80 under the watchful eye of Professor Ó Cuív, with the hope of eventually producing a descriptive catalogue of extant poems. Some five hundred published and unpublished poems have been dealt with so far, but a further twelve to fifteen hundred items remain to be examined.

³F. J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973) 16.

⁴F. Kelly (ed.), *Audacht Morainn* (Dublin 1976) 7.

⁵R. I. Best (ed.), 'The battle of Airtech', *Ériu* 8 (1916) 170-90, p. 180. See further K. Simms, *From kings to warlords* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 1987) 51.

cattle, while the bulk of the fighting fell to the armed horsemen, that is, the chieftain himself, his nobles and kinsmen, who rode first into enemy territory and last out of it,⁶ as a bardic poem boasted of the chief of Teallach Eachach: 'The rear of the troop is the place of dark-browed Niall when leaving a fight, the vanguard his place during it; he always asked his companions to let him go first into any dark house'.⁷ Historically the Annals record many Irish kinglets as having been killed in the rear of a raiding-party while defending their prey, or in the forefront of the pursuit while reclaiming prey taken from them.⁸ It was above all the leaders, and not the rank and file, who were expected to man the gap of danger and sacrifice their lives in defence of their followers.

This being so, it is not surprising that we find evidence of a cult of reckless personal bravery, not only in the poems themselves, but in the society which gave rise to them. Looking back to the early period, modern readers may experience a flicker of amusement when told that while a king's honour-price is reduced to that of a commoner if wounded in the back when fleeing the battlefield, he receives full payment if wounded from behind after breaking right through the enemy ranks.⁹ However this situation may have arisen in practice more frequently than one might at first expect. In 1256 Aodh Ó Conchobhair is credited in the *Annals of Connacht* with a solo charge well in advance of his troops:

'he was within hailing-distance in front of the armies as they approached the forces of the Ui Briuin; and he uttered his high-king's war-cry and his champion's shout in the midst of the fight and never stopped on that charge and onset until the ranks of the Ui Briuin were scattered'.¹⁰

The same suicidal eagerness is referred to repeatedly in bardic poems. It was said of the late fourteenth-century Niall Óg Ó Néill: 'He will lead his own soldiers to the fight, and his hired men will hardly be able to keep up with him; the prince is first at the danger-point, outstripping all the race of fair Eoghan'.¹¹

An actual incident is recalled by another poet, from the career of the fifteenth-century Niall Garbh Ó Domhnaill:

'Being over-eager, he did not wait for his followers. While he had not troops equal in number to the Goill of Meath and the King's army, he charged them; his men had to fight an unequal combat.

⁶K. Simms, 'Warfare in the medieval Gaelic lordships', *Ir. Sword* 12 (1975) 98-108, pp. 103-6.

⁷L. McKenna (ed.), *The Book of Magauran* (Dublin 1947) 397.

⁸Simms, *Ir. Sword* 12 (1975) 104 nn. 37-8.

⁹See D. A. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship* (O'Donnell Lectures, Oxford 1970) 17-18; F. Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law* (Dublin 1988) 19.

¹⁰A. M. Freeman (ed.), *The Annals of Connacht* (Dublin 1944, repr. 1983) 117.

¹¹L. McKenna (ed.), *Aithdioghluim dána* II (Ir. Texts Soc. XL, Dublin 1940 for 1938) 33.

The wounding of Niall Garbh son of Toirdhealbhach when charging the battle-front only roused his wild courage in the fray'.¹²

On this occasion the chief escaped, but a similar act of rashness some years later led to Ó Domhnaill's seizure by the English and eventual death in captivity.¹³

Such factual accounts of past battles are an important feature of eulogistic poems. Three traditional functions of the *file* or court poet were preserving the memory of territorial boundaries and tributes, expounding his patrons' genealogies and recording their military exploits.¹⁴ In the poets' *apologia*, *A theachtairé tig ón Róimh*, somewhat doubtfully attributed to the thirteenth-century bard Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe, we are assured that the recounting of genealogies is essential to preserve due class distinctions in Irish society, while the versifying of battle deeds guarantees immortal fame for the chieftains concerned:

'The suppression of encounters and battles of the men of Ireland would be a faulty matter: there would be no interest shown in prince nor noble descendants after their death, though their courage had been good. . . .

If poems did not preserve all that they had done, even though they were noble heroes, there would long since have been a cloak of silence upon Niall, Conn and Cormac. . . .

Were it not for poetry, sweet-tongued harp or psaltery would not know of a goodly hero after his death, nor of his reputation nor his prowess'.¹⁵

However, it was even more important for a ruler to be reputed victorious in his own lifetime. The Old Irish law-tract *Din Techtugad* numbers 'his defeat in battle' as one symptom of a king's falsity, and the gloss implies his honour-price is diminished in consequence.¹⁶ We have no evidence that a legal process was ever set on foot to enforce such a principle, but to have this kind of attitude enshrined in custom redoubled the political risks normally brought on by a king's defeat. In these circumstances to accuse a king of cowardice is in effect to brand him as unfit for kingship, as in the fifteenth-century Scottish bard's satire against Tomás Mag Uidhir, king of Fir Mhanach:

¹²ibid., 51.

¹³K. Simms, 'Niall Garbh II O Donnell, King of Tír Conaill 1422–39', *Donegal Annual* 12 (1977) 7–21, pp. 13–14, 18.

¹⁴K. Simms, 'The poet as chieftain's widow', in *Sages, saints and storytellers: Celtic studies in honour of Professor James Carney* (ed. D. Ó Corráin, L. Breatnach, K. McCone, Maynooth 1989) 400–411, p. 401.

¹⁵N. J. A. Williams (ed.), *The poems of Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe* (Ir. Texts Soc. LI, [London] 1980) 210–13.

¹⁶D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Corpus iuris hibernici* I (Dublin 1978) 219; see Kelly, *Guide to early Irish law*, 19.

'A lame big-bellied hack carries Maguire when he goes out. . . . A rusty coat of mail of most wretched appearance and a dirty shapeless shoulder-piece are on Maguire, the withered leper, who did not abide the payment due to barbarians. Tomás draws from his black sheath an old dull bilbo, blunt and ancient; Maguire with his palsied hand has a weapon which will not stand combat . . . like crazy Suibhne who wins no victory . . . a cowardly unhandy boor . . . Maguire the mean-spirited is a stick from the rotten alder brake. . . .'¹⁷

This kind of negative description seems to have the force not so much of a criticism as a curse, and similarly the more usual passage in a praise-poem which eulogizes a patron's armour and weapons, his skill and courage in battle, is not only a compliment but a kind of blessing. This is particularly obvious when a king's ability to ward off weapons aimed against him is stressed, as in this early thirteenth-century poem to Cathal Croibhdhearg Ó Conchobhair:

'He sets a shield to protect his skin against the spears that do not go past him; to the sharp spears he will fasten the famous left hand. . . . Good on horseback, excellent on foot, is the shooting of Cathal of Dún Durlais: Conn's descendant catches a lance in flight between the horse's back and the sky'.¹⁸

For these two reasons, then, as a form of well-wishing for the patron's future campaigns and as proof of his fitness for kingship, passages which extol a noble's prowess in battle are as frequent and prominent in bardic poetry as those which eulogise his physical beauty. However, the theme can be treated very differently in differing types of poems. An unusual collection of unsophisticated poems in imperfect rhyme, or *brúilingeacht*, dating from the middle of the fifteenth century has been preserved in a Trinity manuscript.¹⁹ They are attributed to a certain Seithfín Mór and his sons Seithfín Óg and Maoileachlainn mac Seithfín, no surname being given, and here all the patrons are praised as great fighting men in primitive and savage terms. In a typical phrase a chief is said to charge into the fray like a mad dog (*cú chonfaidh*); his hand has participated in a hundred conflicts, his foot once it takes up position on the battlefield is immovable, skulls are split with axes, blood pours in rivers and the skyline is lit with burning castles. Most of the poems in this collection remain unpublished, but one example of Seithfín Mór's work has been edited by Bergin.²⁰

¹⁷K. H. Jackson, *A Celtic miscellany* (Penguin Books 1971) 233-5; W. J. Watson, *Scottish verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore* (Edinburgh 1937) 48-55.

¹⁸O. Bergin, *Irish bardic poetry* (ed. D. Greene and F. Kelly, Dublin 1970) 259.

¹⁹Dublin, TCD MS 1363 (H.4.22), pp. 125-54. Some of the poems are also found in TCD MS 1393 (H.5.21).

²⁰*Irish bardic poetry*, no. 40.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are the elaborate conceits found in the poetry of the schools, such as the late sixteenth-century ode to Toirdhealbhach Luineach Ó Néill, *An sluagh sidhe so i nEamhuin?* – ‘Is this a fairy host in Eamhain Mhacha?’.²¹ Here almost nothing is said about the actual fighting, but the preparations for war are given in loving detail, and the patron plays the central role in a set piece on ‘Arming the Hero’ which has parallels in all European literatures, and in Irish prose romances. This motif is a very old and well-established one – it is found repeatedly in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, for instance.²² It is a measure of the self-conscious artistry with which it is employed in the Old Irish text of the *Táin Bó Cúailgne* that the arming of Cú Chulainn before the battle of Breslech Mór Maige Muirthemne comes as a culmination, preceded by the arming of his charioteer.²³ After the Norman invasion of Ireland the armour to be donned on such occasions grew more elaborate, and many pieces in Toirdhealbhach Luineach Ó Néill’s accoutrement are necessarily described in foreign loan-words: his spurs, his padded jack, his *feilm* or helmet. Curiously, while the bards were prepared to admit a great deal of modern terminology dealing with armour into their rigidly standardised poetic vocabulary, they were usually very reluctant to deal with modern techniques of warfare, such as fire-ships, siege catapults and guns, although we know from entries in the Annals that these devices were widely known and used during the bardic period.²⁴ This is paralleled by the poets referring to wine and mead at their patrons’ banquets, but passing over in silence the whiskey which was also present in abundance from the fifteenth century onwards.²⁵ In other words, the picture of an Irish noble’s life-style in peace and war represented in these poems is based on literary models and deliberately archaized, with only selected features from contemporary life being admitted. Perhaps the earliest extant bardic poem containing an ‘arming the hero’ sequence with reference to the new Norman style of arms is *Cóir Connacht ar chath Laighean* addressed to Aodh son of Eoghan Ó Conchobhair, king of Connacht (d. 1309).²⁶

Another set piece often used by the poets was a contrast between the Spartan conditions which the king and his soldiers must endure while on campaign, and the pleasure and luxury of their peace-time lives, which

²¹T. Ó Donnchadha (ed.), *Leabhar Cloinne Aodha Buidhe* (Baile Átha Cliath 1931) no. viii lines 121–84.

²²Lib. viii, 608–629; xii, 87–106.

²³C. O’Rahilly, *Táin Bó Cúailgne, recension I* (Dublin 1976) 67–8, 185–7. Thurneysen saw the *Táin* as indebted to the *Aeneid* (*Die irische Helden- und Königsage* (Halle 1921) 96–7).

²⁴Simms, *Ir. Sword* 12 (1975) 107–8.

²⁵K. Simms, ‘Guesting and feasting in Gaelic Ireland’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 108 (1978) 67–100, p. 88.

²⁶P. Harbison, ‘Native Irish arms and armour in medieval Gaelic literature, 1170–1600’, *Ir. Sword* 12 (1976) 173–99, pp. 175–6. This article also gives a number of extracts from late medieval prose romances describing the arming of the hero, with a discussion of the realism or otherwise of such accounts.

they had sacrificed in the cause of duty.²⁷ Instead of drinking wine from gold goblets, they drink water from their cupped hands. Instead of soft beds, they must stretch on the cold grass in full armour, or pass the night watching. Again there are parallels outside Ireland for this motif.²⁸ A twist is given to the theme by Aonghas mac Doighre Uí Dhálaigh in his well-known *Dia libh a laochruidh Gaoidhiol*, when he contrasts the hardship endured by the Uí Bhroin on the Wicklow mountains, not with the ease they would have enjoyed in peace-time, but with the prosperity of their Anglo-Irish enemies occupying the fertile lowlands which were once the patrimony of the Uí Bhroin themselves.²⁹ Another more ironic variation comes in Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa's *Bíodh aire ag Ultaibh ar Aodh*, in which he warns the poets of Ireland that Aodh Mag Uidhir by forsaking poetry, music and feasting for perpetual campaigning is doing them out of a job, and he urges the chief to return to habits of peace and luxury.³⁰ Both these poems belong to the late sixteenth century, when the original idea of the contrast between ease and hardship had become perhaps a little hackneyed, and required some new slant to lift it out of the commonplace.

Closely related to the hardships of the warriors on campaign is the theme of the chieftain as a patient, ever-vigilant sentinel, guarding his people and territory from enemy attacks. He patrols the frontiers sleeplessly, even on a bleak winter's night, never lifting his hands from his horse's bridle, or unclenching his numbed fingers from his spear-shaft. The classic development of this motif comes in the early fifteenth-century *Foraire Uladh ar Aodh* by Maoileachlainn na nUirsgéal Ó hUiginn, addressed to Aodh son of Art Mag Aonghusa, chief of Uíbh Eathach, whose control of the Newry Pass played an important role in preventing the forces of the Dublin government from entering Ulster during an uprising of the Irish there,³¹ making him literally the protective sentinel of the province. This poem apparently became accepted as a masterpiece in the bardic schools, since it was the model for Eochaidh Ó hEoghusa's more tongue-in-cheek treatment, *Bíodh aire ag Ultaibh ar Aodh*, mentioned above. There was some factual basis for the imagery of the tireless watchman, since the Annals give evidence suggesting that during times of open hostility the frontiers of Ireland's small lordships

²⁷L. McKenna (ed.), *The Book of O'Hara* (Dublin 1951, repr. 1980) nos. vi §§ 15–18, viii §§ 31–6, ix §§ 24–7, xviii §§ 19–24, xxiv §§ 15–18; idem, *Aithdioghlaim dána*, no. 8 §§ 25–6, 35–7; idem, *Book of Magauran*, no. xi §§ 7–8; D. Greene (ed.), *Duanaire Mhéig Uidhir* (Dublin 1972) no. xii §§ 6–10, 25.

²⁸A passage in Aeneid lib. ix lines 603–20 has similarities. The emphasis laid on soldiers drinking water from the stream in their cupped hands may owe something to Judges 7:5–7.

²⁹S. Mac Airt (ed.), *Leabhar Branach* (Dublin 1944) no. 35.

³⁰L. Mac Cionaithe (ed.), *Dioghlaim dána* (Baile Átha Cliath 1938) no. 75.

³¹*ibid.*, no. 96; 'Lord Chancellor Gerrard's notes of his report on Ireland', *Analecta Hibernica* 2 (1931) 93–291, pp. 206–8; see K. Simms, 'Gaelic lordships in Ulster in the later Middle Ages' (Ph.D. thesis, TCD 1976), pp. 236–8.

were guarded by horse-patrols to give the inhabitants early warning of an approaching cattle-raid.³² However, in addition to reflecting current military practice, the image of the patron as a vigilant sentinel could be used to evoke a more radical symbolism of the king as cowherd or shepherd (*buachaill* or *aoghaire*) of his subjects,³³ standing between them and all perils, natural or supernatural. This idea is very strongly brought out in Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn's ode to Brian Mag Uidhir:

‘It is not the properties of stones, nor is it the veil of wizardry that guards the waters of (Fermanagh’s) far-spread lands; it is not the smooth slopes, or the wood, nor is it the sorcerous arts of druids. They have a better protection for all the boundaries – a shepherd sufficient for everyone is the man – one alone is their guard. Brian Maguire of the bared weapons . . . guarding buckler of Donn’s land . . . Fermanagh of the fortunate ramparts is the Adam’s paradise of Inisfáil; the descendant of the noblemen from Bregia’s castle is as the fiery wall surrounding it’.³⁴

A point of interest here, however, is that although the figure of the shepherd implies kingship, Brian, the patron in question, was not a king.³⁵

Another military image which has an underlying political meaning is the mustering of the host. Again this motif has widespread parallels, going as far back as the catalogue of Greek and Trojan forces in book II of Homer's *Iliad*. In the Irish context this mustering of the troops at the king's summons has most relevance in a poem addressed to a chief with hereditary claims to provincial over-kingship, an Ó Néill, an Ó Conchobhair or an Ó Briain. Each named contingent that arrives at the field of assembly represents one more territory which owes obedience to the so-called High King, the patron to whom the poem is addressed. Often the poet inflates a genuine list of vassal-chiefs by adding more and more far-flung territories over whom the patron could have only a tenuous historical claim. Thus for the original audience a long list of this kind was far from boring, because the longer it went on, the greater was the element of boasting, rhetoric and controversial political claims. One such cumulative list occurs in the poem to Toirdhealbhach Luineach Ó Néill already mentioned, *An sluagh sidhe so i nEamhuin?*,

³²Simms, *Ir. Sword* 12 (1975) 102–3; *Annals of Connacht*, 1420:4, 9; B. MacCarthy (ed.), *Annals of Ulster* III (Dublin 1895) 1456. Annals are cited by AD date unless otherwise stated.

³³E. Knott, *The bardic poems of Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn* I–II (Ir. Texts Soc. XXII–XXIII, London 1922–6) no. 9 § 43; J. Carney (ed.), *Poems on the O'Reillys* (Dublin 1950) no. x § 10; McKenna, *Book of O'Hara*, no. Ia § 4; Greene, *Duanaire Mhéig Uidhir*, no. x § 18.

³⁴Knott, *Poems of Tadhg Dall* II, 57.

³⁵On misleading allusions to royal status see Simms, in *The writer as witness*, 64–5.

and it may have drawn its inspiration from a similar address to the mid-fourteenth-century king Aodh Reamhar Ó Néill, *Ní triall corrach as cóir dh'Aodh*.³⁶

The fourteenth-century poem has a very Virgilian passage³⁷ describing the host preparing for battle, harnessing the horses, polishing the sword-blades and spear-heads, and binding silken pennons to the shafts of their lances. Thereafter it draws on an unmistakably native tradition to describe the spectres of war which precede the great host along its route, and trail after the scaldcrow as it hovers over the battle-standard uttering a frenzied lament for the carnage to come. For the audience these references to battle-apparitions were not as divorced from reality as they might seem to us. Gerald of Wales describes the earliest Norman invaders of Ireland camping in and around 'an old fortification' (a deserted rath?) in Ossory. 'Suddenly there were, as it seemed, countless thousands of troops rushing upon them from all sides and engulfing all before them in the ferocity of their attack. This was accompanied by no small din of arms and clashing of axes, and a fearsome shouting which filled the heavens. Apparitions of this sort used to occur frequently in Ireland around military expeditions'.³⁸ A thirteenth-century preaching friar, Tomás Ó Cuinn, later bishop of Clonmacnois, complained of a plague of such apparitions in the diocese of Clonfert: 'For when men went out to their fields to plough or work or walk in the woods they would see, so I was told, passing armies of evil spirits, which sometimes fought among themselves. Those who saw this vision were at once struck down by illness, becoming powerless and bed-ridden with torpor, and many died miserably thereby'.³⁹ Of course in the poem such apparitions function as part of a battery of special effects, reinforcing the grim impression made by the sights and sounds of an advancing army. The poet also depicts the spear-points massed above the soldiers' heads like a blue-grey forest, the dust-cloud stirred up by the hooves of innumerable horses, the banners flapping, the clash of weapons, the ceaseless noise of the war-trumpets echoing back from the hills.⁴⁰ Just such a mixture

³⁶Unpublished poem by Maolmhuire Mac Craith in Franciscan Library, Killiney, MS A 25, p. 146, and Book of O'Conor Don, f. 136 b. I am indebted to Professor Ó Cuiv for going over the translation of this poem with me in detail, while I was a postgraduate scholar at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. For the poem to Toirdhealbhach Luineach see above, note 21.

³⁷Aeneid lib. vii, lines 623-40.

³⁸A. B. Scott and F. X. Martin (ed.), *Expugnatio hibernica* (Dublin 1978) 39.

³⁹J. Watt, *The Church in Medieval Ireland* (Dublin 1972) 76. This link between the *sluagh sídh* and sickness may help to explain the reference in a little poem printed by E. Knott, *An introduction to Irish syllabic poetry of the period 1200-1600* (Dublin 1957, repr. 1980) 30 § 8.

⁴⁰See above, note 36. A similar passage occurs in the same author's address to Muirheartach Ó Briain (ob. 1343), *Abair frim a Eire ógh*, Book of O'Conor Don, f. 296 a, RIA MSS 3 (23 L 17), f. 25 a, 1387 (23 O 78), p. 116; see A. Nic Ghiollaímháith, 'Dynastic warfare and historical writing in North Munster 1276-1350', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 2 (1981) 73-89, pp. 80-81.

of the supernatural and the warlike is used by Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn to lend an air of extraordinary menace to his poem on the battle of Drumleene.⁴¹

Although the preliminaries to battle receive such extended treatment, there are very few narrative accounts of the fighting itself contained in such poetry. The patron's battle-roll or *caithréim* normally consists of little more than a list of placenames, with an explanatory couplet or quatrain attached to each. Exceptions can occur in elegies for kings slain in battle, such as Aodh son of Eoghan Ó Conchobhair (*ob.* 1309),⁴² though Fr Lambert McKenna is probably correct in assuming that the majestic and moving lament *Leasaighthear libh léine an ríogh* was composed to gloss over rather than to commemorate the precise circumstances of the patron's death. According to the Annals, King Aodh son of Toirdhealbhadh Ó Conchobhair was killed in 1356 in revenge for having abducted Ó Ceallaigh's wife. According to the poem he was surrounded by enemies while lying on his sick-bed:

'Toirdhealbhadh's son awoke when round the house was a ring of fire, an erection ever quivering (with flame) and threatening ruin – this is the time mentioned in the books.

Ó Conchobhair remembered no help was near, and drew his sword; then at his brave command the portcullis of the castle is raised.

The proud active hero clears the way from the castle, first for his leeches and maidens and poets.

Cruacha's captain-king next clears the way through the foes' fierce crowd for his chained band of hostages.

A third time after coming out he remembers his leashed dogs, and makes the journey back again to loose their thin leashes.

That proud heroic prince of the oft-mended tunic, had so often charged his foes that none of them now dared follow him.

Not far did Ó Conchobhair advance with his wounds; he poured forth his blood; even then it was not safe to strike him till he fell prostrate to earth'.⁴³

Clearly this is a romanticised account, but it brings out very well the native Irish version of chivalry, combining the non-combatant status of the women and men of learning found in Adomnán's Law of Innocents with the general expectation that the brunt of the fighting should fall on the rulers themselves.

The ideal of a lord dying to protect his people made it peculiarly appropriate for the bards to use the allegory of war in their religious poetry. The Harrowing of Hell is described as a cattle-raid (*creach*);

⁴¹ Knott, *Poems of Tadhg Dall*, no. 4.

⁴² *Beg nár bháith Aodh oighidh Coinn*, RIA MS 743 (A iv 3), p. 792.

⁴³ McKenna, *Aithdioghluim dána*, no. 3 §§ 18–24.

Christ mounted on his wooden steed (the cross) rides into enemy territory, rounding up human souls like cattle, or exacting them from the Devil as hostages:⁴⁴

'The young Christ pays no heed to death. . . . To save his race the Youth advances, braving wounds; Thy Son . . . took the shield of love into his hands. . . . Thou wert furious with Thy wounds and didst not hesitate to charge Thy foes; no wonder those wounds were inflamed as Thou wert advancing on Thy foe's fort'.⁴⁵

According to another metaphor God's war with the human race ends in peace with a banquet at his Easter-house.⁴⁶ God is repeatedly represented as a High-King claiming an impossibly high *éraig* (or murder-fine) from the rebellious subjects who slew his son,⁴⁷ so it is fitting to find that the Annals comment of a real High-King, Toirdhealbhaich Mór Ó Conchobhair, whose son Conchobhar had been slain by the rebellious inhabitants of Meath, that he inflicted such 'slaughter and loss on the Meathmen that the battle he delivered on the descendants of Senchán was like the Day of Judgement'.⁴⁸

Hitherto the bards' treatment of warfare in their poems has been shown as descriptive and allegorical, with no reference to odes which actually incite the patron to war. Such works are extremely rare among the surviving compositions of the schools, and tend to belong to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when nationalism and religious sectarianism had added new motivations to the existing bardic tradition.⁴⁹ It is, however, possible that in earlier times poems of incitement were common enough at a more popular, more purely oral level of composition. Not only do the fifteenth-century *brúilingeacht* poems of Seithfín Mór mentioned above have a more crude and violent approach to warfare, but in the prose saga *Caithréim Thoirdhealbháigh* the court poets of the Uí Bhriain are represented as uttering *roscadha* or rhythmical chants of incitement before battles, as for instance:

'Now march we on – a march of might
let's win the day – and scatter foes
their lands possess – their bodies gash
their sides bore through – on, on due west

⁴⁴ibid., nos. 58 § 18; 65 §§ 13, 20, 26, 32, 36; 66 §§ 5, 9, 14, 25, 31; 77 §§ 27, 35, 38.

⁴⁵ibid., no. 64 §§ 17, 21, 26.

⁴⁶ibid., nos. 60 §§ 1, 17, 39; 65 § 3.

⁴⁷ibid., nos. 59 § 17; 63 § 1; 65 § 19.

⁴⁸W. Stokes (ed.), 'The Annals of Tigernach', *Revue Celtique* 18 (1897) 9–59, 150–97, 267–303, pp. 163–4.

⁴⁹Watson, *Scottish verse*, no. xx; Mac Airt, *Leabhar Branach*, no. 35; see N. Canny, 'The formation of the Irish mind: religion, politics and Gaelic Irish literature 1580–1750', *Past and Present* 95 (1982) 91–116, p. 107; T. J. Dunne, 'The Gaelic response to conquest and colonisation: the evidence of the poetry', *Studia Hibernica* 20 (1980) 7–30.

than Teigue's stout son – no better man
e'er led a march'.⁵⁰

With the extension of Common Law to every part of Ireland under King James I, private wars were outlawed. The effectiveness of this prohibition in practice is the subject of an interesting exchange in the 'Contention of the Bards' anthology (a poetic debate c.1616 as to the claims of the northern or southern dynasties to inherit the high-kingship of all Ireland). Carried away by his enthusiasm for the north, Mac Diarmada of Moylurg threatened the southerners with violence:

'We could carry off in spite of them – by leave of the king and his power – their heads, as well as their tribute, from Leath Mogha so proud!'

This evoked a scornful rejoinder from the Munster chief, Art Óg Ó Caoimh:

'If you had been sure that you could get leave from the king, it is certain that you would not be long talking of taking our heads and our tribute!

Since you are trusting to the king's peace, my loquacious Northern friend – Oh! if we were at war! I will say no more!'⁵¹

The pleasures and profits of private war are nostalgically recalled in Lughaidh Ó hEachaidhéin's address to Art Óg Ó Néill, chief of Clan-deboy (1638–77), *Buime na héigsi Art Óg*. Since his master can no longer send raiding-parties past Cavehill as in his fathers' days, or plunder the woods from Belfast Lough to Dundrum, and thus levy tribute from all these areas, he is unable through poverty to support the poets' demands.⁵² This economic change was mirrored in the literary output. In a society where justice was controlled by the sheriff in the county court, where private armies and private wars were obsolete, there was no longer much point in eulogistic poems concerning the justice of a patron's reign, or his virtues as a war-leader. The traditional praise of a patron's personal appearance continued, together with a recital of his noble ancestry, but in seventeenth-century poems were joined by a new emphasis on the patron's cultivated taste, classical education, fine house and charming wife.⁵³ Such compositions constituted mere

⁵⁰S. H. O'Grady and R. Flower (ed.), *Caithréim Thoirdhealbháigh* (Ir. Texts Soc. XXVI–XXVII, London 1929 for 1924–5) I, 14; II, 15.

⁵¹L. McKenna (ed.), *Iomarbhágh na bhFileadh* II (Ir. Texts Soc. XXI, London 1920 for 1918) 226–31.

⁵²Ó Donnchadha, *Leabhar Cloinne Aodha Buidhe*, 246–7.

⁵³e.g. R. Ó Muireadhaigh, 'Moladh ar Ailín MacDubhghaill', *Éigse* 13 (1969–70) 211–20; P. Walsh (ed.), *Beatha Aodha Ruaidh Uí Dhomhnaill* II (Ir. Texts Soc. XLV, Dublin 1957 for 1943) 152–5; A. O'Sullivan and M. Herbert, 'The provenance of Laud Misc. 615', *Celtica* 10 (1973) 174–92, pp. 183–8; J. Carney, *Studies in Irish literature and history* (Dublin 1955, repr. 1979) 266–75; Bergin, *Irish bardic poetry*, nos. 14, 35, 36; Ó Donnchadha, *Leabhar Cloinne Aodha Buidhe*, no. xlii etc.

compliments rather than celebrations of kingship, and losing their political function, lost their market value also. 'It were more honourable' complained Mathghamhain Ó hIfearnáin, 'to become a maker of combs – what use is it to anyone to profess poetry?'⁵⁴ The complaint was echoed by many of his seventeenth-century colleagues, providing an unanswerable demonstration of the meaningfulness and political importance of the stylised motifs contained in the medieval bardic praise-poems. Without them the poems had no purpose.

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⁵⁴Bergin, *Irish bardic poetry*, no. 37 § 4.