SONG AND RECITATION IN EARLY IRELAND

IT IS well known that there is no word for 'sing' in present-day Irish and Scottish Gaelic, which use such expressions as *abair amhrán* and *gabh òran*. The corollary that there is no word for 'poem' is less well realised: English–Gaelic dictionaries give *dán*, which of course means a different sort of metre from *amhrán*, but does not define a different medium of performance; in Scotland they may add *duan* and *laoidh*, which are among the translations of 'song' given by de Bhaldraithe in Ireland, and even use the name of another type of verse which may well have been sung, *rosg*, to render 'prose'. In fact it can be said that any poem longer than a four-line epigram in Scottish Gaelic until the 1930s was intended to be sung – though perhaps it might have been spoken or tunelessly chanted by someone who could not sing, or read from a book without a tune in mind by someone who did not know the tune whose title was generally printed above the poem. In Ireland, the situation was less clear-cut, since from the seventeenth century on we find long poems of the *Cúirt an Mheadhon Oidhche* type which can hardly have been intended for singing, and I am told there is no evidence for tunes to the *trí rainn agus amhrán* verse form: but, as in Scotland, early printed collections often specify tunes for poems in *amhrán* metres.[1]

The tradition of less literate Scotland should be the older tradition, but is it reasonable to assume that the principle that every poem has a tune goes back to the period when *dán* reigned and *amhrán* had not yet appeared? The question is often ignored. We know from the few accounts of the formal performance of 'bardic' poems before the person they honoured – which, it is worth pointing out, constituted the real 'publication' of the poem: its subsequent writing into a *duanaire* was far less important at the time – that the *reacaire* was accompanied by a harper, who according to Thomas Smyth 'plays all the while that the rakry sings the rime'.[2] In English it can be clearly stated: he sang.

Whether the singing was melodious by modern standards or akin to the tuneless-seeming declamatory chants that have been recorded from recent Balkan epic singers, must remain a matter for speculation: but it may be worth taking another look at the lack of the word for 'sing'. A further complication here is that *canaid*, which one might expect to mean the same as Latin *canit*, from quite early times evidently includes not only singing and the recital of formal items of speech such as prayers and prophecies which might have been chanted or intoned, but ordinary conversation and the regular use of a word or name.[3] In spoken Scottish

[1] See B. Ó Madagáin, 'Functions of Irish song in the nineteenth century', *Béaloideas* 53 (1985) 130–216, pp. 137–41.

[2] Quoted by D. Greene, 'The professional poets', in B. Ó Cuív (ed.), *Seven centuries of Irish learning* (Dublin 1961) 38–49, p. 41.

[3] *Dictionary of the Irish language* [*DIL*] s.v. *canaid* (b). There seem to be no unambiguous cases of this usage much earlier than the Book of Leinster *Táin*.

Gaelic, at least today, *can* never means 'sing' and is the normal word for 'say'. One opportunity of checking the words used of the performance of poetry, though not what they meant, is in the introductions to the verse passages or *laoithe* quoted or deliberately added as decorations in prose tales from the Old Irish to the Early Modern period. I suspect that when the later romances were read aloud – as I have argued elsewhere they were intended to be[4] – before the native or Hiberno-Norman nobility until the sixteenth century, the reader, who might well also be a *reacaire*, would be expected to sing the *laoithe* and add a musical dimension to the performance. But this cannot be proved. At that period the performance is usually announced with a term such as *adubhairt an laoi* or *ro ráidh an laoi*, prefiguring the *abair amhrán* idiom perhaps, though since the assumption is that the poem was improvised by one (or sometimes two or more) of the characters on the spot, the description of the performance may be avoided by describing the composition – *do rinne an laoi, do chum an laoi, do rinneadar an laoi eatorra*.[5] Of the 31 poems which make up the greater part of the Middle Irish *Buile Shuibhne*,[6] nearly all are introduced with *adbert* (or variant forms or spellings: *co n-ebert* when the construction requires; once the later *adubairt*). The exceptions are *do rinne* twice, *ro ghabh* once, and for the penultimate trio *roráidhset an laoidh-si eatura ina ttriúr*. Even in Old Irish texts, though (*ro·*)*cachain*, *ro·cēt* and similar forms are a good deal commoner than the occasional *ro·chan* of later texts, my impression is certainly that *asbert* or *co n-epert* are the commonest forms, and even in Latin *dixit* outnumbers *cecinit*. Closer study might reveal special usages with *rosg* or single quatrains. In view of the modern idiom and such little evidence for performance as we have, I think it would be quite reasonable to deduce that *as·beir* when used of poetry normally meant 'sings' or 'chants', though this meaning does not appear in the *DIL*.

With the question how a syllabic metre with no fixed stress may have been set to music, we are on rather firmer ground. We do not have to rely on parallels from other cultures, for though only two recordings of a Fenian lay in syllabic metre are known from Irish traditional singers, there are thirty or more recordings of such lays from Scotland, apart from many versions of one syllabic-verse tune (usually known as *Alasdair a Gleanna Garadh*)[7] which continued to have verses written to it until recent times. There are one or two other relevant songs and several such tunes written down from oral tradition before sound recording was

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[4] A. Bruford, *Gaelic folk-tales and mediaeval romances* (Dublin 1969) 45–7.

[5] Generalised from manuscripts of *Eachtra Chonaill Ghulban*, together with Early Modern Irish romances available in print.

[6] J. G. O'Keeffe, *Buile Shuibhne: The frenzy of Suibhne* (Ir. Texts Soc. XII, London 1913 for 1910). Scribal preference is no doubt paramount, for the four poems in the Brussels manuscript are all introduced with *dorinne* (*doronsatt*). The proportions in the main text are very similar to those in the *Acallam* (S. H. O'Grady, *Silva gadelica* I (London and Edinburgh 1892) 94–233.

[7] See C. Ó Baoill, *Bàrdachd Silis na Ceapaich* (Edinburgh 1972) 240–41.

invented which are hard to interpret. I have outlined some of the strate-
gies used in the recorded Scottish lays (only) elsewhere,[8] though the
restricted number of music examples made the study less comprehensive
than would have been desirable. In brief and without musical technical-
ities, the possibilities can be described as follows: (1) The method some
might prefer to believe in involves singing the words virtually in their
natural speech rhythm, like recitative, to a fixed series of notes, more like
Anglican chant than plainsong.[9] Those who have been impressed by the
Rev. William Matheson demonstrating this, for instance in the perfor-
mance of *Laoidh Fhraoich* at the lecture-recital during the International
Congress of Celtic Studies at Edinburgh in 1967, must be warned that
his application of this technique is an imaginative reconstruction by a
scholar-musician, combining information from several sources in a cre-
ative manner. However, a number of recordings from unschooled singers
in the Uists and Barra – mostly women – confirm that a similar tech-
nique has survived in oral tradition. (2) In other cases the words were
fitted to a tune with a regular beat without losing the natural stress pat-
tern, by exploiting the ability of triple time – usually 6/8, like a slowish
double jig, but in at least one case 3/4, like a minuet – to accommodate
virtually any normal speech rhythm. (3) The conventions of the metre
best known from the waulking songs, which I propose here to call choric
metre, might be applied. These exploit the tension between a strong
musical beat and a more or less syllabic metre, creating stress patterns
which may be quite opposite to those of speech – the so-called 'wrenched
stress'. Accordingly, the distortion caused by fitting syllabic verse to a
tune with a regular beat becomes acceptable under the convention, just
as similar distortion on a lesser scale is regularly accepted in English,
Lowland Scots or Anglo-Irish traditional song.[10] Sometimes the lay is
actually fitted with vocable refrains and used as a waulking song.[11] (4)
The majority of recent recordings in practice display a hybrid between
two or all three of these treatments, most often (2) modified by (3). It is,
of course, impossible to prove that any of these is a survival of medieval
practice, and quite possible that more than one may have obtained at
different dates and places. Nor can we rule out the possibility that there
may have been other techniques, for instance a slower and more orna-
mental use of arhythmic chant than Scottish technique (1), which might
be an ancestor of the so-called *sean-nós* style in modern Ireland.

[8] 'The singing of Fenian and similar lays in Scotland' in H. Shields (ed.), *Ballad research* (Dublin 1986) 55–70.

[9] That is to say with frequent changes of pitch, rather than a 'reciting note' held for several words. William Matheson's *Laoidh Fhraoich* is completely transcribed with the music in *Tocher* 35 (1981) 292–7.

[10] The effect in English is more a matter of stressing monosyllabic words which would not be stressed in normal speech – 'Down *by* the Sally Gardens' – than shifting the stress within longer words, though this does occur – 'Spanish lad*ee*'.

[11] See J. L. Campbell and F. Collinson (ed.), *Hebridean folksongs* II (Oxford 1977) 16–27, III (1981) 40–45.

The question of what sort of accompaniment the harper may have
provided to this singing is a matter for speculation almost as wild as
'what song the Syrens sang'. In cultures little affected by Western art
music the accompanist of a singer is most likely to play some sort of vari-
ation on the sung melody, along with it or as an interlude. Anything like
a chordal accompaniment, such as a modern harpist is inclined to offer,
is much less usual. But by the sixteenth century, when Gaelic harpers
might be invited to play in Edinburgh or even London, they may well
have conformed to the usual European practice even when accompany-
ing their native music. The ingenious suggestion that vocable refrains
in choric metre represent instrumental interludes or ritornelli, such as
harpers might have played between the words of the song, does not
really stand up to examination. The refrains normally have contrast-
ing melodies stronger than those of the words and a system of vocables
which seem to many more Norse than Gaelic, and are designed for choral
singing in strict rhythm.[12] Though they have occasionally been fitted to
dán verses they belong to a totally different repertoire and a less courtly
setting.

Few people have troubled to ask what instrument the harper would
actually have played, though some harpers will know that even in
the eighteenth century their predecessors normally used metal strings
sounded with long fingernails rather than gut strings struck with the
fingertips as is usual today. But in the eighth century it may not even
have been a harp. The scholar of language or literature seldom bothers
with accurate definitions of musical instruments, as illustrated, I fear,
by *DIL*'s rendering of *crott* as 'harp, lute'. There is a vague feeling that
'lute' is a nice romantic name for an ancient stringed instrument, rather
than a realisation that lutes proper – plucked string instruments whose
strings may be stopped to vary the pitch on a finger-board like that of a
violin, on a long neck issuing from the resonating chamber across which
the other ends of the strings are stretched – have an Arabic name and
probably did not reach western Europe before the thirteenth century,
Ireland perhaps not until the sixteenth. Unfortunately, early sources
also define their terms less precisely than do modern musicologists and
tend to use words now more precisely defined to mean any string, or
any wind, instrument. *Crott* is often used to render Latin *cithara*, origi-
nally the name of the larger sort of classical lyre. Lyres are now defined
as instruments whose strings are attached to a yoke lying in the same
plane as the sound-table.[13] But to Giraldus Cambrensis *cithara* fairly
certainly meant something we would call a harp – with strings stretched
between a soundbox and a neck at an angle to it. Derivatives of the

[12] *Hebridean folksongs* I, 227–37; III, 318–23.

[13] This and following definitions are based on those in relevant articles of *The new
Grove dictionary of music and musicians* (ed. S. Sadie, London 1980), cited as *Grove
Dict.* Note that they apply to the structure of the instrument rather than the way
it is played – one can talk of a bowed lyre.

same word are now used for instruments of the lute family like the guitar and cittern; and for the zither, used as a generic term for instruments having 'a stringbearer with a resonator that cannot be detached' – meaning usually in Europe that the strings are stretched across the top of a shallow box. 'Harp' itself was probably originally used of lyres like that found at Sutton Hoo, and today can be applied to a zither (autoharp) or even to non-stringed instruments such as the Jew's harp and, in popular American usage, the mouth-organ.

There is no reason, therefore, to assume that because *cruit* in the seventeenth century meant the triangular frame-harp[14] – one like the 'Brian Boru' or 'Queen Mary' examples, very different from the 'Celtic harps' or 'clarsachs' played today in shape, stringing and playing technique – *crott* in the seventh century necessarily meant anything very similar. The only argument that tends in that direction is based on the suggestion in *DIL* that the related word for a hump, which appears not to be attested in Old Irish, but is commonly used still in both Irish and Scottish Gaelic, is a direct transference of the word for a harp. Indeed the curve of the neck of the late medieval examples mentioned is strikingly reminiscent of a hunchback. But John Bannerman has very recently pointed out[15] that the word *cláirseach* seems to appear in the fifteenth century almost simultaneously in Ireland and Scotland, in both Gaelic and anglicised forms, with many references to the *clarschach, clareschaw* etc. coming from the Scottish court, where this possibly new instrument soon found favour. Bannerman suggests that there may be a connection between the new term and the apparent change from the preponderance of rectangular stringed instruments shown in early carvings and other pictures to a later medieval preponderance of triangular ones. The latter are certainly frame-harps with three solid sides; the four-sided instruments could be lyres or zithers, hardly lutes or harps. Joan Rimmer[16] has no hesitation in saying that *cruit* originally meant a lyre and at some time in the later Middle Ages came to be used also of harps. Musicologists feel that there must be some relationship between the Celtic word *crott* (*cruit, crwth*) and Germanic *rotte, rote*,[17] used of medieval instruments generally of lyre form, whether plucked or bowed, but occasionally also of zithers (triangular psalteries). How to explain the loss (or acquisition) of the initial *c* they leave to philologists, who might perhaps manage it by postulating an intermediate Germanic *hrott or the like. But a quadrangular instrument could also be a *timpán*, quite regularly referred to in literature, and evidently a stringed instrument rather than a drum.

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[14]A frame-harp has a 'pillar' beyond the longest string, closing the side left open on 'bow' or 'angle' harps.

[15]In a seminar on 'The clarsach and the clarsair' at the School of Scottish Studies, University of Edinburgh, 3 May 1989. It is hoped the text may be published in *Scottish Studies*.

[16] *Grove Dict.* s.v. *cláirseach*.

[17] *Grove Dict.* s.vv.

Ann Buckley identifies it as 'probably a species of lyre',[18] but if *crott* normally meant a lyre, I am inclined to think the use of a separate word may indicate a different type of instrument, perhaps a psaltery (of the zither family).[19] A simple squarish instrument in a picture could be either, though a thickening of the bottom of the square would suggest the soundbox of the usual medieval European type of lyre.

In any case, there is reason to think that *cruit*, like *harp* itself, did not always mean a three-sided frame-harp. This is not true of *cláirseach*, and presumably the new word describes the new form in some way. Assuming that the basic element must be *clár*, which is difficult to avoid though it leaves the *s* to be accounted for,[20] the eponymous board is likely to be the soundboard which the strings go through at a near right angle, perhaps the most distinctive feature of the frame-harp – as distinct from most other string instruments where the strings are parallel to the soundboard and transmit vibrations to it by means of a bridge. I think Rimmer's translation as 'little flat thing'[21] can safely be disregarded.

One puzzling little problem in this connection is the meaning of the word *céis*. The plethora of meanings given by the commentator on *Amra Choluim Chille*, ranging from a small accompanying *cruit* to the bass string or drone (?) or the peg or fastening on one or other end of the string,[22] suggests that by his time the meaning of the word had been quite forgotten – perhaps because the harp had replaced the lyre. It seems to have been best known from the byword *crot cen chéis*, which suggests that it was an essential part of the playing of the early *cruit*; but the meaning of a small *cruit* seems to be deduced from such lines as *dia sephaind céis cendtoll céol*, 'when the hollow-headed *céis* played music'.[23] In a much older poem, *Ní ceilt céis ceól do chruit Chraiphtíni*, 'The céis did not hide music from Craiphtíne's *crot*',[24] suggests

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[18] *Grove Dict.* s.v. *timpán, tiompán*, based on her article in E. Stockman (ed.), *Studia musicae instrumentorum popularis* V (Stockholm 1977).

[19] Latin *tympanum* and derivatives were used of the dulcimer, which is a psaltery struck with hammers. Buckley is definite that there is no evidence for the *timpán* being played with hammers, but if the word were extended to a plucked string instrument (compare the 'Appalachian dulcimer'), it would most likely be one of similar construction.

[20] A feminine suffix -*seach*, attested in personal names and a few common nouns such as *céirseach*, seems the most likely explanation of the end of the word; how the term *cláirseoir/clàrsair* for the player is derived from it, remains to be explained.

[21] *Grove Dict.* s.v. *cláirseach*.

[22] W. Stokes, 'The Bodleian Amra Choluimb Chille', *Revue Celtique* 20 (1899) 30–55, 132–83, 248–89, 400–437, pp. 164–7 § 20. Stokes seems to take this comment as being of about the date of Cormac's Glossary, but since Flann mac Lonáin (below) uses a descriptive adjective with apparent assurance – unless the epithet was established by tradition – in the late ninth century, the commentator should be eleventh century or later.

[23] See 'Orgain Denna Ríg', edited by David Green in *Fingal Rónáin and other stories* (Dublin 1955) 21 line 411.

[24] ibid., 20 line 384.

that the *céis* was something that produced the music from the instrument, and I think it is consistent with the other quotations if we take it to have been some sort of plectrum. The *cendtoll* of the later poem (attributed to Flann mac Lonáin, who died in 896) suggests something like a ring-headed pin, of which hundreds are known from Dark Age Ireland. They have been taken for clothes fasteners, but might have served another purpose under another name than *delg*. It would be interesting to know if any are worn at the tip in a way which could indicate use to pluck metal strings. Other possibilities such as a ring or thimble with a protruding spike are known in other cultures, but perhaps not in the Irish archaeological record. At any rate we should think of an early Irish *cruit* as a lyre probably with metal strings struck with a metal plectrum, something sounding much more like a banjo than a modern 'Celtic harp'.

We are still not much closer to knowing what sort of music it may have played. The apparent lack of a native Gaelic word for 'dance' need mean no more than that formal social dancing was introduced as *damhsa/dannsa* and *rinnce* from France and England at the time when it spread throughout Europe. Ring-dances and solo dances, including dramatic rituals like the Hebridean *Cailleach an dùdain* and *Cath nan coileach*, probably go back further. *Gentraige* may mean a merry music to be danced to or even sung to as well as merely listened to. Terms for instrumental music seem to be used as variably as terms for instruments. *Port* now means a jig in Ireland but was certainly used of slow or slowish foursquare tunes before 1700. The twisty *cor* of the blackbird from the willow[25] seems to be a distinct, possibly faster instrumental form, contrasted with the *port* in a run from a sixteenth-century tale which lasted for centuries in oral tradition.[26] The third of the series there, *cuir 7 puirt 7 orgain*, must also be a musical form rather than an instrument, perhaps involving two-part harmony like early medieval *organum*. The only feature of surviving music that must surely have a long history is the fondness for dotted 6/8 jig-like rhythms, both as the standard form of military march and in a slower, gentler variant for the sort of tune Joseph MacDonald's treatise on piping calls Sicilianas, which may serve for lullabies, laments or love-songs like *Cailín ó Chois tSiúire mé*.

[25] G. Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics* (Oxford 1956) 6–7 § 6.
[26] The folktale version has *puirt agus uirt* for the romance's *cuir 7 puirt*: Bruford, *Gaelic folk-tales*, 203.

Returning to song, we have seen some reason to look behind the
metres of the poetry preserved in early manuscripts and consider the
possibilities of their musical performance. There is no reason to ques-
tion the accepted view that *amhrán* was a novelty introduced in the
late Middle Ages from England or the Continent, where the kinship of
some of the tunes now associated with the verses has been established.
This does not mean that there may not also have been native stress
metres and tunes in popular use, though despised by the practitioners
of *dán*, which combined with the exotic imports to generate the modern
repertoire. It can also be accepted that a thousand years earlier *dán*
was similarly generated by the imitation of foreign models, presumably
associated with the early ancestors of plainchant[27] in performance, but
again perhaps also adapting elements from existing native song, whether
in stress or syllabic metre. However, *amhrán* and *dán* are not the only
classes of metre in the Gaelic languages. On the one hand, there are the
traces of earlier unrhymed alliterative verse, preserved in the literary
rosg and probably still finding a practical use in the later Middle Ages
for incitements to battle. On the other hand, there are two classes which
are almost unknown or at any rate unrecognised in Ireland, but which
account for an important part – it might be claimed the most interesting
part – of Scottish Gaelic song; the strophic and choric metres. These
classes can usually be distinguished from *amhrán* and *dán* by the words
alone[28] which are seldom grouped in quatrains or octaves.

The so-called strophic metres, as defined by W. J. Watson,[29] appear
in most modern songs in clusters of three short, usually two-stress, lines
rhyming with each other and a shorter 'tail' with different end-rhyme.
These can be written as couplets and grouped into quatrains, making
a stanza which Watson compares to the syllabic *ochtfhoclach*, or into
octaves, like *ochtfhoclach corranach*, or in *amhrán*, for instance, the well-
known floating verses of Irish folksong beginning *'S é fáth mo bhuartha*.
In this form the strophes are easily enough fitted to tunes of common
European type and might be dismissed as a variety of *amhrán*, but there
is another way of performing them in Scotland. Here the strophes are
performed singly, not in pairs. Occasionally an entire strophe of three
lines and a tail may be sung twice to two halves of a tune, but normally
the third line and tail – what might be written as the second line of
a couplet – is repeated like a refrain to quite different music, usually
ending on an open cadence which invites the music to continue and

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[27] It is of course no longer believed that Ambrosian or Gregorian chant actually
represent singing styles of the time of St Ambrose or Gregory the Great rather than
tenth- or eleventh-century developments of an earlier style (*Grove Dict.*).

[28] In musical terms at least one further class should be distinguished, mouth music,
in which the words are written to fit pre-existing tunes; but since these are mostly
foursquare dance-tunes, the words often fall into quatrains and read much like
amhrán, but with many repeated lines.

[29] W. J. Watson, *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig* 3rd ed. (Stirling 1959) xlv–liv.

links one strophe to the next.[30] Though this musical practice is very
seldom recorded in print, it is implied by repeats in books of words, as
in the *Oranaiche* text of *Duanag a' chiobair*, 'The herd's ditty':

> Gu'm bheil mulad air m'intinn
> Bho'n a thàinig mi'n tìr so,
> 'S nach fhaic mi mo nighneag dhonn òg.
> > 'S nach fhaic mi mo nighneag, etc.[31]

Some seventeenth-century poets, however, also used a freer form of
strophic metre, with more than three lines before the tail. Mary Mac
Leod in several songs uses from five to eight lines in different strophes,
usually with two or, at most, three stresses to a line and either two
or three syllables to a stress consistently throughout a strophe[32]. This
requires an unusually flexible type of chant, quite different from regular
strophes, and has been assumed to be a more archaic form rather than a
development from the regular one. William Matheson, the only scholar
to have studied the performance practice of this early strophic song,
identifies it as 'the type of verse composed by the bards'[33] in the strict
sense of praise-poets of lower status than the *filid*. If, however, it may be
a survival of a sort of stress-metre antedating the introduction of *dán*,
the latter as an innovation seems originally to have been more readily
accepted by *baird* than *filid*, so historically the reverse of Matheson's
suggestion may be nearer the truth.

There is little such doubt about the users of the choric metres. These
are predominantly women's music. Certainly the waulking songs which
form the bulk of the repertoire accompanied a process from which men
were deliberately excluded[34] until recent times and the different circum-
stances of Canadian colonists. Some of the surviving songs admittedly
may be adaptations of *iorraim* or rowing songs, essentially men's songs
with a similar beat, and such songs seem to have been used in har-
vesting when men may have taken part, though Highland reapers with
the sickle were mainly women and Pennant's account compares them
to '*Grecian* lasses'.[35] Other work-songs were used for grinding with
the quern, spinning, milking and churning, all essentially women's work.

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[30] *Tocher* 35 (1981) 296–301, gives musical examples of each of these forms.

[31] Gilleasbuig Mac-na-Ceàrdadh, *An t-Oranaiche* (Glasgow 1889) 239.

[32] J. Carmichael Watson, *Gaelic songs of Mary MacLeod* (London 1934) 143–4,
describes the metre of four songs printed earlier in the book.

[33] W. Matheson, *The Blind Harper* (Scottish Gaelic Texts Soc. XII, Edinburgh
1970) 149–50.

[34] *Hebridean folksongs* I, 13, describes the rough handling of young men who came
into a house where a waulking was going on over a hundred years ago; but more
recently male onlookers have been tolerated, and eighteenth-century tourists were
often taken to see the scene. In Scotland certainly men never took part, and the
earlier foot-waulking was probably considered unfit for them to see.

[35] *Hebridean folksongs* I, 4.

The same metre may also be used in songs which have a narrative set-
ting (James Ross's 'fairy' and 'motif songs'),[36] but within that setting
function as lullabies or laments – *caoineadh*, in the Irish terminology,
a woman's lament as against *marbhna*, the male bard's elegy. The few
Irish parallels to choric metre that can be identified include *Caoineadh
Airt Uí Laoghaire*, a woman's lament similarly constructed without divi-
sion into verses, and the spinning-wheel songs quoted by Petrie,[37] used
at women's working parties very much like waulkings. John MacInnes's
suggestion[38] that two of the early functions of choral songs may have
been to accompany a women's welcome home to warriors or celebratory
dancing at seasonal festivals may account for only part of their early
use, but it is worth taking seriously. The line is the unit in most choric
songs, with the vocable refrain coming in usually after every line, and
sometimes also at a caesura in the middle of each line. The couplet
as a unit is generally thought to be a later development.[39] The lines
of meaningful words are often sung twice, but this need not detain us.
The basic line is often described as one of eight syllables. It might more
accurately be described as being of four stresses, each normally with
two syllables but occasionally with one or three. The resemblance to
Irish *caoineadh* is significant in view of what we have just said, but the
resemblance to the metre of the *Kalevala* may be more so. This is a
metre for improvising epics as well as keens. It gains added distinction
because of a conflict between the words, which are often in fact freely
arranged, almost as if in eight-syllable lines of syllabic metre, and the
music which, because it accompanies work, has a definite regular beat.
The result already referred to, 'wrenched stress', does not jar like the
false stresses in English song,[40] but rather enlivens the rhythm like the
irregularities in good blank verse. But the conflict of such lines as

> Di-Sathuirne ghabh mi mulad . . .
> Chuir Seumas duine gam ghlacadh . . .
> Iseabail dhonn a' chùil chleachdaich . . .[41]

with a basically trochaic stress may be imagined.

I do not know if anyone has drawn attention to the obvious descent
of this metre from James Carney's type I of archaic Irish accentual
verse[42] with four stresses and a caesura in the middle, though Carney

[36] J. Ross, 'A classification of Gaelic folk-song', *Scottish Studies* 1 (1957) 95–151,
pp. 134–6, describes fairy songs. 'Motif song' is a term Ross added subsequently to
his classification to cover songs with similar narrative settings but no supernatural
element.

[37] *The Petrie collection of the ancient music of Ireland* I (Dublin 1855) 82–6 (the
main description is by Eugene O'Curry).

[38] 'The oral tradition in Scottish Gaelic poetry', *Scottish Studies* 12 (1968) 29–43,
pp. 37–9.

[39] *Hebridean folksongs* I, 199 (type 4).

[40] See note 10 above.

[41] *Tocher* 13 (1974) 190; cf. *Hebridean folksongs* I, 62–7.

[42] J. Carney, 'Three Old Irish accentual poems', *Ériu* 22 (1971) 23–80, pp. 53–6.

pointed out its survival in *caoineadh*, which has been compared with choric metre.[43] The importance of the caesura is shown by the frequent use of refrains between the half-lines. The two halves are not necessarily linked either by internal rhyme, as in *caoineadh*, or alliteration, as in early Germanic verse, but this is also true in Old Irish, and both of these can be found as additional ornament in the song quoted already:

> Is guirme sùil na driùchd na maidne,
> Is deirge gruaidh na cuach air chrannaibh,
> Is gile taobh na faoileann mhara . . .
> Ceathrar air chùirt agus caiftin. . .[44]

The continuation of the same end-rhyme for every line is shared with *caoineadh*, though many waulking songs consist of several paragraphs which may have not only different rhyme-schemes but entirely different themes.

Carney's 'second important type is that referred to here as "eight-phrased", for some forms of which the early Irish metrists use the term *ochtfhoclach*',[45] and is equally clearly ancestral to the strophic metres, though to the regular rather than the irregular form. It may be, after all, that the latter is a further development by Scottish poets. Carney's sub-types rhyming on monosyllables, disyllables or trisyllables can all be attested in the Scottish derivatives. In type I, choric songs, disyllables are much the most usual and trisyllables (or trisyllabic phrases suitably stressed) are rare. In type II, strophic metre, a disyllabic tail-rhyme may be preferred in the irregular form, but trisyllables also occur. Regular forms usually have a monosyllabic tail. But all three lengths of rhyming word may also be found in the longer lines, though Carney does not bring this element into his classification and, in fact, puts one poem with trisyllabic rhymes to the longer lines, like Mary MacLeod's *Do Mhac Dhomhnaill*, into a separate class III(a).[46]

Though the Scottish metres have an obvious ancestry older than *dán*, we cannot deduce that the recent manner of performance goes back to

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[43] *Hebridean folksongs* I, 199.

[44] *Tocher* 13 (1974) 190. In *Hebridean folksongs* I, 64 (a South Uist text, not a Barra one like that in *Tocher*), the first two of the three lines describing 'Iseabail Dhonn' are recognisable, the third has a variant with a different rhyme, *'S gile a bian na cliabh na h-eala*, and there is a fourth with similar internal rhyme, *'S milse a pòg na òl na meala*. There is a rich repertoire of stock lines even for the praise of a female lover, which is not often found in these songs mostly written from the woman's viewpoint.

[45] Carney, *Ériu* 22 (1971) 56.

[46] ibid. Cf. Watson, *Bàrdachd Ghàidhlig*, 76–80. Carney's reason for the separate grouping, that 'a non-metrical fact' determines the line lengths, suggests that the trisyllabic epithets in the stanza in question were normal ones for the sons of Cathaír Már listed in it; but in fact Bressal Enechglas (ancestor of the Uí Enechglais: F. J. Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973) 288) is the only one to bear his regular epithet, while three others bear, not the epithet their descendants inherited, but others apparently invented by the poet to fit his metre.

the Dark Ages – but it may give some pointers. One significant conclusion may be drawn from the potential of waulking songs for improvisation. John Lorne Campbell's argument that they were originally largely improvised at the waulking board[47] has been challenged,[48] and there is certainly little evidence for recent improvisation, outside adding names to the formal phrases of matchmaking songs.[49] On the other hand James Ross and John MacInnes have drawn attention to formulaic elements[50] for which the lines describing a woman quoted above may serve as example. The lines with extra internal rhyme are drawn from a stock[51] to ornament a plainer narrative, as runs are used to decorate prose folktales and save the storyteller the trouble of finding new words. In any case it seems very likely that the earliest form of this metre, the pre-Christian ancestor of Carney's type I, which may have been unrhymed but alliterative like early Germanic verse, would have been comparatively easy to use in improvised singing which drew on a stock of long or short formulaic clichés that fitted the metre in the manner of the epic singers who still practice their art in the Balkans and the Near East.

The subject matter of such songs could no doubt have included praise of gods, kings and ancestors, prophecies and laments as well as narrative, but it is the latter which I want to consider here. The researches of the Parry–Lord school[52] can be said to have established a reasonable presumption that epic poems from the *Iliad* to the *Chanson de Roland* or later are based to some extent on orally improvised songs which in many ways, if not in all, used similar techniques to those of recent Balkan 'singers of tales'. The Celtic languages, particularly Old Irish, alone in Western Europe preserve an extensive body of early heroic narrative recorded almost entirely in prose with little trace of a comparable body of verse. At the same time the fragments of verse quoted as authentication in some prose texts suggest that such a body had existed and was regarded as embodying reliable historical tradition. It has been claimed that the mixture of prose and verse itself is an ancient Indo-European

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[47] *Hebridean folksongs* I, 18–19, and III, 6–8.

[48] Most trenchantly in a review article by Virginia Blankenhorn on *Hebridean folksongs* III, in *Celtica* 15 (1983) 181–4, pp. 182–3.

[49] See the descriptions by James Ross, *Scottish Studies* 1 (1957) 102–3; and 'The sub-literary tradition in Scottish Gaelic song-poetry: part 2, content and composition', *Éigse* 8 (1956–7) 1–17, pp. 4–5; and examples in Margaret Fay Shaw, *Folksongs and folklore of South Uist* (London 1955) 266–8.

[50] J. Ross, 'Formulaic composition in Gaelic oral literature', *Modern Philology* 57/1 (1959) 1–12; J. MacInnes, 'The panegyric code in Gaelic poetry and its historical background', *Gaelic Soc. Inverness Trans.* 50 (1976–78) 435–98, pp. 481–90, deal with choric songs in particular.

[51] See note 44 above.

[52] See A. B. Lord, *The singer of tales* (Harvard 1960), for the exposition of the theory; and R. Finnegan, *Oral poetry: its nature, significance and social context* (Cambridge 1977) chap. 3, for a critique.

narrative form[53], but this can hardly account for the very similar use of verse in the legal tracts, a parallel which cannot be ignored. We must reconsider the possibility of Bowra's Irish 'heroic poetry which for some reason failed to hold the field'.[54] The reason is quite simple if that poetry was recomposed each time it was recited, like most other heroic poetry. When syllabic metres of increasing complexity took over from a method of composing line by line, it was no longer possible to improvise in the same way. The *fili* who must originally have recited his own divinely inspired verse as he composed it in public now had to retire for hours or days to a darkened room to perfect his assonances and alliterations in his head, emerging too exhausted to sing his own songs. The narrative songs there had been, which lived as a whole only while they were performed, died out because they were not performed, and only a few useful clichés which had been memorised for frequent reuse survived.

The process can perhaps be reconstructed as follows: with the advent of Christianity (and Latin and writing) the pagan hymns, charter myths and heroic epics that the *filid* had improvised were condemned. The *baird*, whose function of praising kings rather than gods was not super-seded, were temporarily in a stronger position. They seized on the syl-labic quatrains of Latin hymns, which may also have been the source of rhyme, combined them as Carney shows[55] with elements of native stress-metres, and developed a new type of song to sing to their patrons, which, if it lacked the element of divinely inspired prophecy, was more sonorous and intricately beautiful than the old verse, as well as having the novelty of an import and the authority of a Christian model. The process may indeed have begun with Christian evangelists composing vernacular hymns for their converts to sing, and its development has not been fully charted, and perhaps cannot be. But the result is the same. The rise of monasteries endowed with land by the native aristoc-racy, and with aristocratic abbots, meant that by the end of the sixth century the traditional genealogies, charter myths and legal judgments, on which members of the former druidic order were still the authorities, were being sought from the poets and written down. And as Gregory the Great's ruling on adapting the less harmful elements of pagan culture took effect, the *filid* and their lore gradually regained much of their for-mer status in Irish society. Meanwhile, however, they had forgotten the technique of improvising oral epics and in any case the new type of verse had superseded the old. A new branch of the increasingly specialised poetic order, the *senchaide*, developed the art of reciting the gist of the

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[53] D. Greene, 'Early Irish literature', in M. Dillon (ed.), *Early Irish society* (Dublin 1954) 22–35, pp. 28–9, citing and endorsing Windisch. Finnegan, *Oral poetry*, 10 and 75, describes some epics mixing verse and prose, none Indo-European but the *Táin*!

[54] C. M. Bowra, *Heroic poetry* (London 1952) 15, cited by Greene (see previous note).

[55] Carney, *Ériu* 22 (1971) 55–6, 58–9.

old epics in prose, as they had done to monastic enquirers, occasion-
ally bringing in a few stock lines of verse which had been standardised
enough to be often used, or at least were striking enough to have lodged
in someone's memory. The idea became established that narrative was
told in prose, but verse was the proper way to express praise or emotion
of any sort. But the older verse forms, one of them probably already
allowed to be used by women by virtue of their function as composers of
improvised laments in keening their own dead,[56] were preserved largely
by women and the lower orders of society and are still sung in Scotland.

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[56]There must, I feel, be some element of confusion – if only in modern eyes –
between the enigmatic profession of *ban-cháinte*, 'female satirist', who sounds like
a sort of licensed witch, and *bean chaointe*, the professional keening-woman, who
continued to have a function in Irish society until quite recent times. If only from the
attribution of surviving laments, however, it is clear that ideally widows and other
bereaved women were expected to be able to keen for their dead menfolk themselves.