BLATHMAC AND THE CÉILI DÉ: A REAPPRAISAL

THE poems of Blathmac which Professor James Carney discovered in 1958 in manuscript G 50 in the National Library of Ireland and which he subsequently edited remain something of an enigma.[1] Although they have been called the finest product of a golden age of Irish spirituality,[2] they have yet to receive substantial critical attention. Blathmac has been praised for superb narrative sense and a sensitive and lucid style[3] and more recently for a remarkable attempt to accommodate narrative verse into mainstream Irish poetics.[4] An attempt has been made elsewhere to elucidate the structure of the poems.[5] Here an attempt is made to reassess the context in which the poems were made.

Carney saw the poems as belonging to the *Céli Dé* or Culdee reform movement.[6] The *Céli Dé* reform is generally described as a movement introduced in the latter half of the eighth century, centred on Tallaght. Its aim is thought to have been to counterbalance a tendency towards laicization of the monasteries: 'it sought by a return to the primitive spirit of the anchorite to banish worldliness and to restore the pure ascetical spirit'.[7] Carney's argument for identifying Blathmac with the *Céli Dé* reform[8] may be set out as follows:

- learned Irish monks were required to be able to write verse in Irish,

- Irish was used in the monastic schools as a teaching medium and verse was an important aid to memory,

- Blathmac's verses were written in simple unpretentious *deibide*,

- they were obviously intended for a popular audience,

- *Félire Óengusso*,[9] written 30–50 years after the Blathmac poems (c. 800) and undoubtedly part of the *Céli Dé* reform, has 'frequent similarities of diction'.

On the other hand, Carney identified the following contrasts between the work of Blathmac and of Óengus:

- Blathmac wrote simply, Óengus wrote in more elaborate metres,

- Blathmac's poems were written relatively quickly, Óengus's poem probably involved years of intense research,

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[1] J. Carney (ed.), *The Poems of Blathmac*, Irish Texts Society 67 (Dublin 1964).

[2] J. Good, 'The Mariology of the Blathmac poems' *The Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, 104 (1965) 7.

[3] D. Greene and F. O'Connor (ed.), *A golden treasury of Irish poetry, AD 600 to 1200* (London 1967) 36.

[4] H. L. C. Tristram, ' Early modes of Insular expression', in L. Breatnach, K. McCone and D. Ó Corráin (ed.), *Sages, saints, and storytellers: Celtic studies in honour of Professor James Carney* (Maynooth 1989) 444.

[5] B. Lambkin, 'The Structure of the Blathmac Poems', *Studia Celtica* 20–21 (1985–6) 67–77.

[6] Carney, *Blathmac*, xv.

[7] P. O'Dwyer, *Céli Dé: a spiritual reform in Ireland 750–900* (Dublin 1981) xi.

[8] Carney, *Blathmac*, xv.

[9] W. Stokes (ed.), *Félire Óengusso Céli Dé: the martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London [1905] repr. Dublin 1984).

- Blathmac's poem was intended for private devotional use, Óengus's poem was intended for liturgical use.

Mac Eoin has endorsed Carney's view, observing that 'the spirit of the poems is similar to that of other Old Irish documents'.[10] He goes further and notes a parallel with *Saltair na Rann*:

> bibilical incidents are visualised by the poet as occurring in a social milieu similar to that with which he was familiar in Ireland. Furthermore, the distorting simplicity of the poet's account of biblical incidents and the unreserved devotion of his spirituality foreshadows *Saltair na Rann* at a distance of over two centuries.

Carney suggests that Blathmac and Óengus 'both probably belonged to the Culdee reform'.[11] Mac Eoin says, unwarrantedly perhaps, that: 'Professor Carney is surely right in identifying in Blathmac's work the influence of the Culdee reform'. This view has been challenged by O'Dwyer:

> It has been suggested that the Blathmac poems belong to the Culdee reform as there are frequent similarities in diction between these poems and the *Féilire*. To me this seems unlikely unless some more substantial link, such as location, may be added. It is to be expected that religious poems of the length of these and belonging to the same century would have a good deal of similar phraseology. Blathmac's dates suggest the possibility of his being an influence on the literature which emanated from the reform.[12]

O'Dwyer's objection to giving the Blathmac poems a place within the *Céli Dé* movement is weakened when considered in the light of the substantial number of points of similarity between them and *Félire Óengusso*. Both poets do the following:

- address an intermediary: Mary (*Blathmac* 1, 573, 574, 567); *rígrad* (kingfolk, i.e. the inhabitants of heaven) (*Fél. Epilogue* 381, 388),

- ask their intermediaries to come to them (on a visit) (*Blathmac* 591, *Fél. Epilogue* 33–36)

- stand in a relationship of *célsine* (clientship) to God (*Blathmac* 565–8; *Fél. Epilogue* 425–6, cf. *Fél. Epilogue* 307),

- conceive of their poems as 'giving service': *dúthracht* (devoted offering, *Blathmac*, heading above line 1); *dúbart* (vehement prayer/supplication, *Fél. Epilogue* 153–4, 417–8),

- credit God with the authorship of the poem (*Blathmac* 537–8; *Fél. Epilogue* 89–92),

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[10] G. Mac Eoin, 'The Poems of Blathmac', *Studia Hibernica* 7 (1967) 223.
[11] Carney, *Blathmac*, xv.
[12] O'Dwyer, *Céli Dé*, 173.

- conceive of their poem as a petitition (*aicde*, *Blathmac* 549; *itge*, *Fél. Prologue* 17),

- make the following requests for:

  long life (*Blathmac* 553–4; *Fél. Epilogue* 204),

  escort/ welcome/ assistance from the Host of Heaven at the point of death (*Blathmac* 555–6; *Fél. Epilogue* 115–6, 563–4),

  a place amongst the Host of Heaven (*Blathmac* 556; *Fél. Epilogue* 271–2),

  Salvation for all reciters of the poem (*Blathmac* 539; *Fél. Epilogue* 113–4, 427–8),

  Salvation from Hell in particular (*Blathmac* 561, 564; *Fél. Epilogue* 481–2, cf. *Epil* 537–8),

- guarantee to the reciters of their poems the good offices of the intermediary by standing as 'guarantor' or 'surety' for the intermediary (*aitire*, *Blathmac* 572; *ráth*, *Fél. Epilogue* 165–6),

- conceive of the granting of the 'requests' as a 'reward' for the 'service' of the poem (*tuarastal*, *Blathmac* 571–2; *bendacht*, *Fél. Epilogue* 113–4, *irguis*, *Fél. Epilogue* 561, cf. also *Fél. Prologue* 53–6 and *Fél. Epilogue* 165),

- look forward to the punishment of those responsible for putting the martyrs to death (*Blathmac* 1023, 1031–2; *Fél. Prologue* 57–8),

- specify that for valid recitation the poem must be:

  sung (*Blathmac* 561, 571; *Fél. Epilogue* 1, 4, 180),

  with tears (*Blathmac* 563; *Fél. Epilogue* 173–4, cf. *Fél. Prologue* 24),

  in a state of purity (*Blathmac* 821–2; *Fél. Epilogue* 174),

  during a vigil (*Blathmac* 557–8, 561–2; *Fél. Epilogue* 199, 165–6).

All these common features amount to something much more than 'similarities of diction'. Although the poems are cast in different forms – Blathmac's in that of a keen (*coíniud/caoine*), Óengus's in that of a martyrology (*félire*) – both poets have a common intention: that their poems will help to gain them a place in Heaven. This might be said to be the ultimate intention of any Christian prayer but both poets refer overtly to the composition of their poems and stress the role of the poem in the process of salvation. Not only this but, as the points of similarity above demonstrate, there is a high degree of congruence in the ways in which both poems work.

Both are conceived in terms of legal procedure like the Old Irish poem, *Ísucán*. Quin pointed out that this poem had not hitherto been fully understood because of the failure to bear in mind the high proportion of legal terms contained in it which to a large extent set the tone of the poem. He showed that 'reference to the

early Irish legal system leads to a better understanding of what is in fact a far from simple poem'.[13]

In the case of both Blathmac and Óengus, the poet is a *céle* who asks a more powerful *céle* or *céli* (clients) to intercede on his behalf with the 'lord' which they have in common (God). The intermediary is asked to request the reward which only God may grant, namely a place in Heaven. The reward is to be not only for the poet but for all reciters of the poem. The poet 'encourages' the intermediary to act on behalf of himself and others by performing a service for him through the poem: Blathmac 'comforts' his intermediary, Mary, while Óengus 'praises and commemorates' his intermediaries, the 'kingfolk' (*rígrad*), the martyrs in Heaven.

The poet guarantees mediation to the reciter by standing as 'guarantor' (*aitire*) or 'surety' (*ráth*) for the intermediary. At the same time, he lays down certain conditions which must be fulfilled by the reciter in order for the recitation to be valid or efficacious. The central, motivating idea behind the *Félire* of Óengus is evident in the final stanza of the Prologue and the first of the *Félire* proper:

Flaithem nóeb na ndúile,	The holy prince (*flaithem*) of the
Críst macc Maire nóibe,	elements, Christ son of holy Mary,
Íssu inmain áge,	Jesus, beloved pillar, let him lead on
tóided ré síl dóine	before the race of men.
(*Fél. Prologue* 337–340)	Before mens multitudinous race let
Re síl dálach dóine	the pre-eminent king (*rí*) lead. . .
tóided in rí remain	
(1–2)	

The poet's idea is of Jesus 'leading' the *síl dálach dóine* (multitudinous race of men). The problem of the human condition is for each person to understand how he is placed or decide how to place himself in this scheme of things; to decide whether he will be a 'follower' or 'client' (*céle*) of Jesus or not. In the closing stanza of the Epilogue, the author, Óengus, makes his own position clear. He defines his objective in life and indicates how his objective is to be achieved:

Tan domm-í techt irguis	When the great boon (*irguis*) may
cid i caisc nó chorgus,	come to me, whether at Easter or
rom-snádat i pardus	in Lent, may the kingfolk (*rígrad*) I
ind rígrad imrordus.	have commemorated convoy me into
(*Epil* 561–4)	paradise.

Óengus has decided to become a 'follower' of Jesus who 'leads' the race of men. His objective is to reach Paradise in order to be at the side of his 'leader'. He intends to achieve his objective by asking Jesus to grant him a boon or reward (*irguis*). The reward is that when he dies he may be convoyed or escorted to Heaven by the *céli* (*rígrad*) of Jesus. In order to demonstrate his worthiness for such reward, Óengus performs in return a service to the *rígrad* by 'commemorating' them in the form of a poem which is a martyrology.

Blathmac shares the same view of the world and of the process of salvation. Both Blathmac and Óengus interpret salvation in terms of a quasi-legal procedure based on the relationship between 'lord' and 'follower' (*céle*). They share a

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[13] E. G. Quin, 'The Early Irish poem *Ísucán*', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 1 (1981) 39–52.

common cultural milieu. It is possible to go further and suggest an even greater degree of affinity between the two which amounts to the 'substantial link' of which O'Dwyer is sceptical.

Blathmac's incomplete second poem contains a sequence (stanzas 246–255) which names some of the martyrs and the manner of their deaths. The particular names and the order in which they are named are not random but serve Blathmac's poetic and religious purpose. Adam is named first, as the first victim of the power of Satan. Abel's is the first blood of the martyrs to be shed. The martyrdom of the Holy Innocents prefigures the Crucifixion of the one child who escaped and also suggests the plight of the bereaved mother. John the Baptist, although martyred during the lifetime of Jesus, is mentioned immediately after the Crucifixion, chronological order being sacrificed in deference to the supreme martyr, Jesus. Finally, Stephen is mentioned as the first post-Resurrection martyr.

Stanzas 248–251 name the apostles and also Paul, Barnabas and Mathias, including the authors of the Synoptic Gospels. Recalling the manner and death of these martyrs, the closest *céli* of Jesus, is intended by the poet to comfort his mother, Mary. This is also true of the recalling of Giurgius, the seven sons of Machabaeus and Quiricus: mention of Giurgius makes a connection with the Holy Innocents who form a troop (*drong*) in Heaven headed by Giurgius (*Fél. Epilogue* 265–268); the story of the seven sons of Machabaeus stresses the supportive role of the mother and the steadfastness of her sons and is therefore a particularly appropriate quotation in the context of giving 'comfort' to Mary on the loss of her son. Similarly, Quiricus is mentioned as another martyr put to death before the eyes of his mother.[14]

Blathmac's list of martyrs is substantial but he is quite aware that it is by no means comprehensive:

Ma ad-fés scél fothai fír	If I am to tell the true fundamental
boíthium de estecht martír,	account (*scél*) that I had of the death
a ndo-cóid di Chríst céilib	of marytrs, all the servants (*céli*) of
martrai inna prímféilib,	Christ who suffered martyrdom on
as-ingaib rim lia áraim	their principal feasts (*prímféil*)
(1013–7)	(it passes reckoning to count it)

Blathmac's statement that he has had (*bóithium*, 1014) a 'true fundamental account' (*scél fothai fír*, 1013) of the deaths of martyrs must mean that he acquired it in either oral or written form, or both. Given the implied extensiveness of the material and its complexity (implied by its calendrical organisation into 'feasts' and 'principal feasts' (cf. *prímféilib*, 1016), it is quite possible that Blathmac had access to his *scél* in written form. In other words, there are strong indications that Blathmac had access to a martyrology. From Blathmac's statement it can be deduced that the supposed martyrology was:

- in the form of a *scél* (account),

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[14] Cf. *Félire* June 16, *Fél. Epilogue* 265 and cf. also (as Carney has pointed out) the way Blathmac presents the victories that God has won for the Jews 'in somewhat the same manner in which a Bardic poet would present the *caithréim* or list of victories of his hero', J. Carney (ed.), *Early Irish poetry* (Cork 1965) 55.

- true (*fír*),

- fundamental (*fothai*), (i.e. definitive?),

- a list of all the *céli* (martyrs) of Jesus together with details of their deaths:

- each martyr has one or more *féil* (feast day),

- the *prímféil* (principal feast) was the one on which the martyrdom took place.

The *Féilire* of Óengus conforms very closely to these characteristics. The following events are referred to in it as *scél*:

the Resurrection (*scél ndermar* – a mighty tale, March 27),

the manifestation of Michael (*scél promthae* – a proven story, May 9),

the death of Thomas (*scél ningir* – a tale of torment),

Óengus claims his work to be 'true' (*fír*): *is félire fírchert* ('tis a truly accurate martyrology', *Fél. Epilogue* 156). His work is 'fundamental' in the sense that it is based on the best available to the author:

Félire ro scrútus	I have searched out martyrologies
i céin ocus acus	afar and anear.
(*Epil* 109–110)	

Each quatrain contains information in varying degrees about each named martyr, from simple mention of the feast day or 'principal feast' to details of the death.

- The martyrs in *Félire* are described as *céli*:
céli ind Ríg flaithgil	the *céli* of the bright-realmed *rí*
(*Epil* 239)	

- Each has one or more feast (*féil*):
cech caiptel col-luithi	every chapter swiftly will declare
sloindfith féil cech laithi	every days feast.
(Prologue 299–300)	
fria nestecht co nóigi	by their departure (*estecht* cf. *estecht*
ro cinnset a féli	*martir*, Blathmac 1014) they (ie
(*Epil* 107–8)	the martyrs) have determined their
	feasts.

In the case of a martyr with two or more feasts, the 'principal feast' is the one on which his martyrdom is commemorated. For example, the principal feast of Mark (*prímféil Mairc*) is June 10. Mark also has feasts on April 25 and October 3. Óengus identifies the sources which he used for the compilation of his *Félire* and states that they themselves were martyrologies (*Epil* 137–144). It has been demonstrated that the principal one of these was the late eighth century *Martyrology of Tallaght*.[15]

[15] O'Dwyer, *Céli Dé*, 139.

If Óengus used the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, Blathmac, writing between thirty and fifty years before Óengus, might also have had sight of it or some similar document.

Assuming that Blathmac did use a martyrology as a source for his poems, the document seems to have inspired awe in him. He says of the *scél* from which he had learned of the deaths of the martyrs:

> *as ingaib rím lia áraim*   it passes reckoning to count it
> (1017)

Óengus reacted in a similar way to his source:

> *Cé betis secht tengtha*   Though there were seven tongues in
> *im gin sóee suilgind,*   my sage, studious mouth, it is until
> *co bráth, mó cech delmaimm*   Doom – greater than any noise – if I
> *issed ma doruirminn.*   should recount them (i.e. the martyrs
> (*Epil* 125–8)   omitted from *Félire*).

Blathmac has a similar formulation:

> *Lín fertae maic Dé bí, de*   A hundred sages cannot tell the num-
> *ní r-aisnedat cét ecnae*   ber of miracles of the son of the living
> (*Blathmac* 141–2 and cf. also 371–2)   God.

Given the points of similarity between the *Félire* and the postulated source used by Blathmac, it seems likely that it was much more detailed than the *Martyrology of Tallaght*, which is an abbreviated form of the *Hieronymian Martyrology* – a list of bare names in the genitive case for each day with only some marginal notes and glosses appended. If Blathmac used a source as postulated, it probably represented a stage intermediate between the *Martyrology of Tallaght* and the *Félire*.

The argument for a 'substantial link' between the work of Blathmac and Óengus may be summarised as follows. The *Félire* may be viewed as a logical development of the 'spirituality' of the Blathmac poems. In the course of his keen (*coíniud*) Blathmac introduces a martyrological sequence (stanzas 245–246). He does so because, in the case of a violent death, part of the keen procedure is denunciation of the enemy of the deceased who is responsible for the death and assurance of the bereaved mother that the unjust killing will be avenged. The enemy in this case is Satan. Satan is denounced for his opposition to his Creator (977–8). In addition to that of Jesus, Satan is also held responsible for the deaths of many of Jesus's preceding *céli* (patriarchs and chief prophets) in the Old Testament (981–4) and succeeding *céli* from the New Testament onwards (the Christian apostles and martyrs).

An indication of the power of the 'lord' is the number of *céli* in his 'following'.[16] Blathmac's listing of martyrs is a way of praising his lord. He mentions twenty New Testament and early Christian martyrs and then gives up. The constraints of his poem do not allow him to continue. The very act of giving up, however, identifies a need, a need which could only be met by the composition of a separate devotional work. Such a work would need to identify comprehensively all the known *céli* of Jesus and do so in a devotional context (in contrast to the bare form of the *Martyrology of Tallaght* with its basic liturgical function).

[16] Cf. D. A. Binchy, *Críth Gablach* (Dublin 1941), 98–9 (and also *dám*, 82).

No doubt the *Félire* of Óengus did have, as Carney says, the same liturgical use as the *Martyrology of Tallaght*; Óengus's preoccupation with accuracy and completeness show that he hoped his martyrology would stand comparison with the best martyrologies of his day. However, the basic intention behind his composition seems to have been devotional rather than liturgical. Like Blathmac, he hoped that his poem would be 'sung' and sung 'every day' (*Epil* 155), not just consulted in the manner of the *Martyrology of Tallaght*. Both poet's must have derived satisfaction at the thought of their monastic confreres, contemporaries and successors, singing their poems frequently and receiving, eventually, the asked-for rewards.[17]

Blathmac's poems spring from the poets perception of the need for the 'universal keen' for Jesus to be completed.[18] In other words, Blathmac took the idea that he was a *céle* of Jesus to its logical conclusion in one particular direction. It is not difficult to imagine Óengus reading Blathmac's poems and being struck by the inadequacy of the praise of Jesus's *céli* in the martyrological sequence in the second poem. Such a perception might well have inspired him to compose his *Félire* and to base it on the same sort of 'legal' procedure as Blathmac had done. Whatever the exact nature of the relationship between the two, the centrality of the concept of *célsine* (clientship) to both the *Poems of Blathmac* and the *Félire of Óengus*, which is generally regarded as a *Céli Dé* document, compels us to find a context for the *Poems of Blathmac* within the literature of what is known as the *Céli Dé* reform movement.

The significance of the *Céli Dé*, however, continues to be misunderstood. They are generally considered to have been a 'monastic order' which was responsible for a 'reform movement'.[19] It is thought that 'during the latter part of the eighth century a *new order of ascetics* (my italics) appears who call themselves *céli dé* (culdees), companions of god'.[20] Tallaght, one of their most important centres, is described as a 'community of culdees'.[21]

Kathleen Hughes identified the following as being the distinctive characteristics of the Céli Dé:

- strict observance (in contrast with the lax old churches) of: celibacy; canonical hours; Sunday; Holy Orders; commutation of penance,

[17] Cf. Hennig's comment on the *Félire*: 'This whole idea originated from the fundamental conception of the precariousness of life without the assistance of the saints, or, conversely, is expressive of an extremely realist conception of the efficacy of the intercession of the saints.' J. Hennig, 'The Function of the Martyrology of Tallaght', *Medieval Studies* 26 (1964) 324. However, this observation begs the question of why Óengus should have had such 'an extremely realist conception of the efficacy of the intercession of the saints'. The answer must be that the *Félire* originated from the fundamental conception of *célsine*. Óengus believed himself to be literally a *céle* of God. Working on secular analogy, he believed that more powerful *céli* than he (i.e. the saints in Heaven) could speak effectively to their common lord (God) on his behalf.

[18] See Lambkin, 'The structure of the Blathmac poems', *Studia Celtica* and cf. Carney, *Blathmac*, lines 317; 509–512; 531–2; 581–4.

[19] D. A. Binchy, 'The Old Irish table of penitential commutations', *Ériu* 19 (1962) 53–4.

[20] K. Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish society* (London 1966), 173. Cf. also: 'Now groups of ascetics calling themselves *céli Dé* (anglicised culdees) meaning "clients of God" were formed. . . Not only were new religious houses of culdees formed. . . ' K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: introduction to the sources* (London 1972), 91.

[21] Hughes, *Church in Early Irish society*, 174

- isolation from secular politics,

- private devotion: martyrologies; litanies,

- unities (*óentu*), i.e. loose organisation based on: personal associations – not *paruchia*; no common level of discipline; soul friends (*anamchara*); friendly relations with Columban *paruchia*,[22]

- Southern Half distribution (probable Munster origin).

O'Dwyer analysed the meaning of *Céli Dé* as follows:[23]

céle translates Latin *servus* as in *servus Dei*;
a synonym for *céle dé* is *mog dé*;
céle dé and *manach* are convertible terms, cf. *servus Dei* and *monachus*;
céle indicates *servus* in the sense of total dependence;
Céli Dé transferred in meaning from 'monks in general' to 'a particular body of monks' (although the history of the qualification is not at all clear), to 'monks of the stricter observance' (9th century), to 'the poor of the monastery' (early 11th century).

O'Dwyer accepts Hughes's general view[24] but admits to certain difficulties: 'it is no easy matter to decide who were the culdees and how great a part they played in this movement'. He recognises the usefulness of Kenney's suggestion that the culdees were 'all who were leading a strict monastic life under spiritual direction and in accordance with the ideals of such men as Maelruain, Elair of Roscrea and Maeldithruib of Terryglass', but at the same time is perplexed that the term *Céli Dé* can be used to describe:[25]

- an entire monastic community, e.g. Terryglass;

- a separate community situated a few miles away from the older monastery, e.g. Roscrea;

- a group residing within the monastic enclosure, e.g. Armagh.

Similarly, O'Dwyer is puzzled by a reference to *Céli Dé* in the glosses to the secular Laws which distinguishes them from the poor and later references which identify them with the poor.[26] The three notices in the Annals referring to *céle dé* he describes as 'extremely interesting but most difficult to explain or interpret'.[27]

It is true, as O'Dwyer points out, that the Irish term *céle dé* is derived from Latin *servus Dei*. It is a mistake, however, to assume, as O'Dwyer does, that the *servus Dei* was understood in the sense of English 'servant'. This mistaken assumption leads to his confusion about the meaning of the term *céle dé* and to a fundamental misunderstanding of the religious movement itself. O'Dwyer says:

[22] F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings* (London 1973), 162.
[23] O'Dwyer, *Célí Dé*, 16–28.
[24] O'Dwyer, *Célí Dé*, xiii.
[25] O'Dwyer, *Célí Dé*, xiv.
[26] O'Dwyer, *Célí Dé*, 18–19.
[27] O'Dwyer, *Célí Dé*, 21.

> *Céle* is certainly used in the sense of *servus* with the idea of *total dependence*.
> Though a complete dependence, it is not a mere servile dependence. It is the
> recognition and admission of their position in life, their acceptance of it and
> their absolute abandonment to divine providence.[28]

This interpretation is wide of the mark. Jackson gave the clue to Hughes in observing that 'the *céle Dé* was the man who took God for his *flaith*, who entered into a contract of service (*célsine*) with him'. The importance of this observation seems to have gone unnoticed.[29] If the implications of it are considered, it is immediately apparent that *céle* cannnot indicate 'total dependence'. Such an idea was alien to the native Irish concept of *célsine*. There was a basic division of Irish society between the 'noble' and the 'base', between *sóer-chéle* and *dóer-chéle*. Unqualified, *céle* usually indicates *sóer-chéle*, i.e. a 'noble' man. Byrne explains the situation thus:

> In practice, every freeman was either a lord (*flaith*) or the client (*céle*) of a lord,
> and was thus involved in a nexus of mutual responsibilties extending beyond
> the confines of his fine (agnatic kindred group).[30] The man who lacked such
> ties of kinship and clientship was an outlaw, or at the best an exile (*déorad*).
> The support given to a man by his kin and his lord, and the sanctions which
> that entailed, ensured a reasonable rule of law in the small rural commuity
> of the *tuath*. Freemen, and not merely nobles, were land-owners: the client
> received a loan of stock from his lord. Cattle were apparently more valuable
> than land. The *céle giallnai* (later *called dóer-chéle* or unfree [sic][31] client) paid
> a food rent and performed certain menial services. He also provided the lord
> and his retinue with free hospitality at stated seasons. The *sóer-chéle* – the 'free'
> or 'noble' client – paid a higher rate of interest on his stock and gave the lord
> political suppport, becoming a member of his retinue (*dám*); for the word *céle*,
> like the feudal Latin *comes*, means 'companion'.[32]

[28] O'Dwyer, *Célí Dé*, 17, italics mine (B. L.).
[29] Hughes acknowledges the point in *Church in Early Irish society*, 173 and repeats it in *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction*, 91. Byrne observes that the reformers styled themselves *Céli Dé* 'perhaps as an implied rebuke' to the secular lawyers who equated the relationship between a *manach* (monk) and his abbot with that between a *céle* or client and his lord, *Irish Kings*, 157. However, Byrne was not concerned there to follow through the implications of his observation. Ó Fiannachta came close to noticing that the *céle* 'belonged in a special way to the Lord and to the Saviour who has come to his rescue, his *Fortachtóir*', his '*Slánaitheoir*'. The '*céile* is dedicated to God', P. Ó Fiannachta, 'The Spirituality of the Céli Dé', in M. Maher (ed.), *Irish Spirituality* (Dublin 1981) 213. In discussing the earliest occurrence of the term *céle dé* (W. Stokes and J. Strachan (ed.), *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus* i, (Cambridge [1901-03] repr. Dublin 1975), 62.29) he says: 'the word servant in this official translation may be too precise'. However, the alternatives which he offers (vassal, subject, client) are too vague. They are presented as synonyms and as such are misleading. The *céle* was not a 'subject' in the sense of the Roman Law *subditus*, or 'vassal' in the sense of the feudal *vassus* (cf. M. Bloch, *Feudal Society* (London 1962) 158, 181.
[30] This may be qualified by the observation that a man could choose a member of his *fine* as his *flaith*; he did not necessarily have to go beyond the confines of his *fine*. See D. Ó Corráin, *Ireland Before the Normans* (Dublin 1972) 42–3.
[31] 'Unfree' is a misleading translation of *dóer* since the *dóer-chéle* had to be a 'free' man. 'Base' is to be preferred. Although Byrne translates *dóer-chéle* by 'unfree client', *Irish kings*, 28, see also 175.
[32] Byrne, *Irish kings*, 28.

It will be seen that *célsine*, which is usually translated 'clientship', was a basic institution in the Irish polity. Since *céle* (client or companion) implies *flaith* (lord), *célsine* may be regarded as a native Irish term for the institution of 'lordship'. It will also be seen that fundamental to the concept of *célsine* is the idea of 'mutual obligation', not, *pace* O'Dwyer, 'total dependence'. When an Irish monk translated the Latin *servus Dei* by *céle Dé* he had in mind a figure more analagous to the free (i.e. 'noble') *céle* with whom he was familiar in his own secular society, rather than to a pre-cursor of Francis of Assisi.

That this was so is evident from the sort of persons referred to as *servus Dei* in the Latin texts that were being rendered into Irish. *Servus Dei* is common to both the Old and New Testaments and is found frequently in the Latin Fathers. For example, it is applied to St Gregory the Great, who, as O'Dwyer points out,[33] was very popular in Ireland, judging from the references to him in the literature and also from the fact that he was granted Irish nationality with a pedigree. The construction of a pedigree for St Gregory was a way of honouring him by analogy with secular aristocratic practice.

The concept of the *céle Dé* was a profoundly aristocratic one. There are no 'servile' or 'menial' or 'totally dependent' connotations to the term. Rather, it connotes 'inter-dependence'. In the tradition of Christian spirituality in western Europe the concept is audacious, signifying membersip of the 'retinue' (*dám*) of God as his 'companion'.[34] That the *céle Dé* was a spiritual aristocrat is indicated by the existence of the complementary term *mog Dé* (literally, slave of God), which may be taken as a reflection of the social and economic divisions within secular society between the *sóer-chéle* (noble client) and the *dóer-chéle* (base client) and the *mog* (slave). Not every man could be a *céle Dé*. The *Céli Dé* were a select group from among all the men on earth who were 'followers' of God and who could in suitably humble fashion call themeselves collectively *mogae Dé* (slaves of God).[35] In other words, the *Céli Dé* were 'saints', men of high status within the 'following' of God marked out from the other *mogae Dé* by virtue of their spiritual wealth or holiness of life.[36] Interpreted in this way, most of the difficulties admitted to by O'Dwyer about the meaning of *Céle Dé* can be resolved. For example, whenever reference is made in the literature to 'the *céle Dé*',[37] the term is most likely to mean

[33] O'Dwyer, *Céli Dé*, 17

[34] See Byrne, *Irish kings*, 158 where Byrne identifies a Carolingian influence on the ideals of the *Céli Dé*. Cf. also Hughes's comment on the 'aristocratic' nature of the poem *Ísucán* in *Church in Early Irish society*, 229.

[35] The nature of their relationship with God was intimate; for example, St Íte suckling the baby Jesus and Blathmac contemplating a personal visit from Mary, the mother of Jesus (lines 1–2; 591–596). By secular analogy, this indicates that they had the status of the *sóer-chéle* rather than the *dóer-chéle*. That is to say, they enjoyed personal association, or *Tischgesellschaft*, with the *flaith*. For the distinction between *sóer-chéle* and *dóer-chéle* see R. Thurneysen, 'Aus dem irischen Recht I: das Unfrei-Lehen', *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 14 (1923), 238–276. See also Binchy, *Críth Gablach*, 80, 96–8, 107.

[36] As might be expected if this distinction were correct, use of the term *mog Dé* compared with *céle Dé* is rare. The glossators do seem to have been sensitive to a distinction in the Latin *servus Dei*. For example, where *servus Dei* is referring in 2 Tim 2: 24 to Christians in general, it is glossed by *mug dáe* (Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus* i, 694.21), but where *servus Dei* refers to Bronus, who was obviously an important person who was bishop and a *socius* of Patrick, it is glossed *céle Dé* (Stokes and Strachan, *Thesauarus* ii, 265.5).

[37] O'Dwyer, *Céli Dé*, 19–25.

simply 'the Saint'. Its use may be explained in contexts where either the name of the saint was unknown or where it was so familiar as to not require stating.

Keening (*coíniud*) and clientship (*célsine*) are both central to the *Blathmac Poems* and were pre-eminently legal concepts. The following legal, or quasi–legal terms have been identified in Blathmac and discussed by Carney and Byrne: *fingal* (kin-slaying, Carney, *Early Irish Poetry*, 53); *deoch séto* (drink for the road, *Early Irish Poetry*, 54); *cobfolaid* (mutual obligations, cf. *frithfolaid*, Byrne, *Irish Kings*, 44–5); *essáin* (repulse, *Irish Kings*, 29) These are only the tip of an iceberg. At the time Blathmac wrote, the Christian Church in Ireland had appropriated, or was still in the process of appropriating to itself, the native, secular concept of 'lordship' (*flaith, célsine*). *Céle* was such a fundamental term within the secular legal framework that the very coining of *céle Dé* implied the development of a parallel, sacred, theological framework. The coinage of the term may originally have been unthinking, a straightforward translation of the Latin *servus Dei*.[38] At some stage, however, some men must have begun, prompted perhaps as Byrne suggests by the way in which monks had been classified by the secular lawyers (or by themelves), to work out the theological implications of the terms within the context of the secular legal system. This development must be seen as part of the wider process of interaction between the secular lawyers on the one hand and the ecclesiastical lawyers on the other.[39] No treatise on political thought survives from the Old Irish period. It is highly unlikely that one ever was produced.[40] However, assumptions about the nature of power, defined in terms of sacred and secular 'lordship' (*célsine*) underpin the *Poems of Blathmac*. So coherent are they that they may be considered as forming a system of ideas, a theory of power. The basic principle of the theory is that there is only one true lord (*flaith*), God, who claims legitimately the following of all men. The one *flaith* has created the Universe and now sustains it by the power of his 'truth' (*fír*). His power of *fír* is mediated on earth by certain men who rule or govern others. The efficacy of their rule depends

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[38] The earliest occurrence of *servus Dei* is about AD 800 in the Milan glosses (see Ó Fiannachta, 'Spirituality of the Céle Dé', 22–23, but see also N. K. Chadwick, *The age of the saints* (London 1961) 87. The gloss in question (Ml 30c3) is in the Latin context '*sicut etiam nobis moris est dicere: iste illius est, iste ad illum pertinet, id est, domini est potentis*'. It seems to explain '*iste illius est*' as 'this person belongs to that other: *is báes linni epert intí charas nech ocus fortét forcetar side iarum hiselbad ind fir sin foridtet amal asmberar is cele dae in fer hisin*'. (It is customary with us to say that he whom anyone loves and helps is thrown afterwards into the possession of that man who helps him, as it is said that man is a servant [sic] of God – Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus* i, 65.27–9). The phrase 'as it is said' in this first attestation of *céle Dé* indicates that the term had been current for some time. It may also be noticed that the lord is the one who helps or protects (cf. *fortét* (protects), God called *Fortachtóir*). The lord 'loves' (*charas*) the *céle*. Love was an appropriate emotion between the lord and his *carait* (friends), that is his closest *céli* who are members of his retinue (*dám*), cf. *Blathmac* l. 569. See also Ó Corráin's comment: 'throughout the history of Gaelic Ireland the nobility looked upon the peasantry and upon their servants with the greatest disdain', *Ireland before the Normans*, 48. This suggests that *céle Dé* was already understood in the developed sense of 'saint', in the sense discussed above, by the time it is first attested in the Milan glosses.

[39] See Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland*, 94–5 and M. P. Sheehy, 'The Collectio Canonum Hibernensis: a Celtic phenomenon,' in H. Lowe (ed.), *Die Iren und Europa im frühen Mittelalter* i, (Stuttgart 1982) 525–535.

[40] Cf. W. Ullmann, 'The Bible and Principle of Government in the Middle Ages', *Settimane Spoleto* 10 (1963), 181–227.

on the extent to which they have access to the power of *fír*. The principle of the *fír* of God as *flaith* in this way expresses a central doctrine of Christianity, the Lordhip of Christ.[41]

The Christian idea of a supreme authority must have challenged pre-Christian law, a fundamental feature of which was the absence of a central enforcing authority in matters of private law.[42] The truth of the lord (*fír flathemon*) was a native Irish concept and in practice it was highly localised. Every 'noble' was a *flaith*. The king (*rí*) was a lord (*flaith*) differentiated from others mainly by the extent of his authority. The basis of his authority was the same.[43] The Christianised concept of *fír flathemon* did not, however, require a centralisation of authority in practice. It would be sufficient if the title *flaith* came to be reserved to the use of the Deity only.[44] As Carney pointed out, *flaith* is not used by Blathmac for the secular lord. His usual non-royal term for lord is *tigerna*. The same distinction can be observed in the *Annals of Ulster*.[45] Although God as *flaith* called all men to be his *céli*, it would not be practicable for all men to become his immediate and intimate *céli* (*sóer-chéli*) while on earth.[46] This honour could only be attained by a few, a spiritual elite – the *Céli Dé*. Other men continued to need intermediate lords, either lay or ecclesiastical. Former *flaithi* could continue to function much as before, provided that they recognised the ultimate authority of God as *flaith*. In this way the Christianised theory of *fír flathemon* was one of synthesis; integrating rather than differentiating the sacred and secular aspects of power.[47] In practical politics the structure of authority continued to be highly localised, but with the difference that it was now centred on a Christian supreme authority. For the reason that the supreme authority was supernatural, allegiance could be given to it without any surrender of secular power being necessary in practice. The power of truth (*fír*) could continue to be manifested in a multiplicity of local lords.

Blathmac seems to have taken this basic synthesis for granted. What it provided was the conceptual framework for communication between the poet and his audience. Blathmac worked within it, exploring the implications of the Christianised principle of *fír flathemon* with regard to one of the duties of the secular *céle*

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[41] Blathmac describes Jesus as *firiánu cech breithemain* (more just than any judge, 32), *rí ba Dia, ba firduine* (a King who was God, who was true man, 68), *don bithflaith is fírdorus* (he is the true door to the eternal *flaith*, 840), *is findflatha fírflaithem* (he is the true lord of a fair *flaith*, 908).

[42] See Sheehy, 'Collectio Canonum Hibernensis', 529.

[43] See F. J. Byrne, 'Tribes and tribalism in early Ireland', *Ériu* 22 (1971), 133.

[44] The process of the christianization of the title *flaith* requires a separate study.

[45] S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill, *The Annals of Ulster (to AD 1131)* i (Dublin 1983) 252, s.a. 796 (*recte* 797) §1. *Flaith* is not used of a secular lord in the eighth century or later. There the usual non-royal term for lord is *tigerna* (Latin *dux*) until the second quarter of the ninth century when *toísech* begins to replace *tigerna*. Note also the following comment: 'The Christian faith offered a key to well-being, one of the prime functions of kings if we are to believe the import of the vernacular tracts', W. Davies, 'Clerics as Rulers: some implications of the terminology of ecclesiastical authority in early medieval Ireland', in N. Brooks (ed.), *Latin and the vernacular languages in early medieval Britain* (Leicester 1982), 91.

[46] By secular analogy, the *dám* (retinue) of a *rí rurech* (king of great nobles) was supposed to consist of thirty *sóer-chéli*. See Binchy, *Críth Gablach*, 82.

[47] Christianization of the principle of *fír flathemon* would have been a more pervasive influence than the 'hallowing' or 'consecration' of a *rí* since it would penetrate not only the public functions of the *rí* but also the public and private functions of every grade of noble.

towards his *flaith*: the keen (*coíniud*). This in itself may be taken as an indication of a concern to harmonise secular practice with sacred belief. The Christian theory of power which may be extrapolated from Blathmac's poems was sufficiently sophisticated to be capable of explaining to Irishmen, lay or cleric, the history of the world from the Creation to the present, the nature of man's condition in the present and his possible ultimate destiny.

Given this interpretation, certain commonly held notions are called into question, not least a basic view of the *Poems of Blathmac*. Carney said: 'I will not define Blathmac as a good or bad poet: it is sufficient to say that his conception of poetry is, in a good sense, primitive. . .'[48] While this remark may be true of the poet's 'perception of the mystery, the awesomeness and the power of the chanted word', there seems little else about the poems which could fairly be described as 'primitive'. Once the importance of the secular keen (*coíniud*) is realised, the poems can be seen to have an extremely complex structure and well crafted development. Blathmac gives the impression of a man well able to justify in the learned terms of his own society the ways of God to man. We may no longer be justified in judging the 'Irishness' of his poems to consist in 'a certain naivete'[49] or 'a quaint simplicity'.[50] Given the shared milieu of the *Poems of Blathmac* and the *Martyrology of Óengus*, a further question is raised about Blathmac's poetic intention. Of Óengus, Greene said:

> The intention could not be clearer: it is to substitute a set of Christian heroes for the pagan ones, to form an Irish literature which will be exclusively Christian in subject.[51]

There is little evidence of the same intention in Blathmac's work or any suggestion that he felt hostility towards the pagan past. On the contrary, the tenor of the poems suggests a man who is confident that the Christian present and the pagan past have been harmonised, a man who would have been happy to accept the belief that the first three Irishmen in Heaven were Conchobar, Cormac mac Airt and Morand:[52]

> Conchobar's soul was taken to Hell (*iffern*) until Christ encountered her [= soul] as he brought the captive host (*brod*) so that Christ took the soul of Conchobor with him to Heaven.[53]

[48] Carney, *Early Irish poetry*, 49.
[49] Carney, *Early Irish poetry*, 53.
[50] Carney, *Early Irish poetry*, 56.
[51] Carney, *Early Irish poetry*, 78.
[52] According to the tale *Aided Conchobuir*, Conchobar was 'one of the two men that had believed in God in Ireland before the coming of the faith', K. Meyer, *Death tales of the Ulster heroes*, [Royal Irish Academy Todd Lecture Series 14] (Dublin 1906) 8.12.) At the end of his account of the reign of Cormac mac Airt, in Geoffrey Keating's *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn : the history of Ireland* (ed., D. Comyn vols 1–2; P. S. Dineen, vols 2–4, [London 1902–14]) ii, 344), following sources which are still extant makes the following statement: 'On account of Cormac's deeds, and judgments, and laws, God gave him the light of the Faith seven years before his death. And accordingly, he refused to adore gods made with hands; and he set himself to reverence and honour the true God; so that he was the third man in Ireland who believed before the coming of Patrick'. For further discussion of these traditions see R. M. Smith, 'The Speculum Principum in early Irish literature', *Speculum* 2 (1927), 444–5.
[53] Meyer, *Death tales of the Ulster heroes*, 17.

Blathmac does not specifically mention Conchobar, but there seems little reason to believe that he would have wanted to exclude him from the *mórbrat* taken by Jesus from Hell (line 700). Given his concern that all men should keen Jesus and that his death should be avenged, it seems likely that Blathmac would have approved of the account of Conchobar's reaction on receiving news of the Crucifixion:

> And thereupon Conchobar said:
>   The men of the world would know what I can do, in fighting against the Jews for the sake of the crucifixion of Christ, if I were near Him! Then he rose and made the onslaught, until Mesgegra's brains jumped out of his head, so that Conchobar died forthwith. Hence the Gaels say that Conchobar was the first pagan who went to Heaven in Ireland, for the blood that sprang out of his head was a Baptism to him.[54]

The description of the baptism of Conchobar is so strikingly parallel to Blathmac's description of the Baptism of Adam (225–8) that it would seem unlikely that Blathmac would have rejected it. It is even possible the Balthmac may have had the *Death of Conchobar* in mind when he said:

Ce ro-cloither tróg nó tríst	Though one hears of any pitiful or
huilliu crochad Ísu Críst;	lamentable thing, more terrible was
(521–2)	the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Blathmac's poems seem to belong in a literary milieu where pagan past and Christian present are harmonised, where Conchobar is described as the foster-brother (*comalta*) of Jesus.[55] If Conchobar and Jesus were believed to have been fostered by the same father, this raises a question about Byrne's contention that 'euhemerisation [of the Celtic gods] was a half-hearted device for salving the consciences of Christians interested in the pagan past'.[56] Once Jesus was accepted as foster-brother of the greatest pagan *flaith*, Conchobar, and his superiority to Conchobar conceded, there would seem to have been no compelling reason for Irish Christians to cease being interested in their pagan past. Once Jesus was acknowledged as the most powerful *flaith*, attention was naturally then focused on him and his *céli*, but it would seem more likely that Conchobar and his *céli* (the other pagan heroes) were regarded as still worthy of interest as a lesser branch of the family of Jesus, rather than that Christianity required their rejection and the salving of the conscience of anyone who continued to take an interest in them.

In Greene's view, the *Félire of Óengus* does not belong to such a milieu, but an alternative interpretation is possible. In support of his view, Greene cites[57] the passage in the Prologue which describes the fate of pagan kings:

Mórríg inna gente	The great kings of the pagans wail
bithgolait il-loscud	ever in burning.
(61–2)	

Greene goes on to say:

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[54] Meyer, *Death tales of the Ulster heroes*, 17.
[55] Meyer, *Death tales of the Ulster heroes*, 16.
[56] Byrne, *Irish kings*, 10.
[57] Carney, *Early Irish poetry*, 77.

now comes an equally eloquent comparison between Nero and other pagan and the heroes of the Irish tradition:

Ro múchad, mór tirbaid,	The honour of valiant Loeguire has
míad Lóeguiri roglaig.	been quenched – a great fall; the
ainm Pátraic án aurdairc	splendid noble name of Patrick is
atá-som for forbairt. (169–72)	increasing.

. . . and so it goes on; with one hammerblow after another the great names of the past are recalled only to be rejected and their successors Patrick, Brigit, Keiran, are extolled.

'Rejected' seems too strong. Greene neglects to point out that Óengus makes an important distinction between the heroes of Irish tradition and other pagan kings like Nero: none of the former he describes as being in Hell for eternity. He is quite clear, however, that Herod (85), Pilate (85) and Nero (117–8) are in Hell for eternity and he explains why: they are there as punishment for having put to death Jesus and his *céli*, the martyrs. While Óengus condemns Loeguire for opposing Patrick, (169–70), he does not hold pre-Christian heroes such as Ailill (178), responsible for the deaths of Jesus or the martyrs. He has no need to 'reject' them by regarding them as condemned to Hell for eternity. He simply points out that they have fallen victim to the transitoriness of the world:[58]

In bith trúag hi táam	The wretched world wherein we are,
is duthain a ríge	transitory is its kingdom.
(157–8)	

Óengus seems to be saying that however great the heroes of the past may have been, none of them ever succeeded in conquering the greatest enemy, death:

Cit úallaig ríg talman	Though haughty are earthly kings
i tlachtaib at glainiu,	(*ríg*) in robes that are brightest, they
atbélat iar tuilliu,	will perish after abundance, each
téit cách ría n-arailiu.	goes before another.
(245–8)	

Óengus stresses that the only *flaith* to have conquered death is Jesus, that only his fame will last for ever and that therefore he deserves the following of all men:

in rí conic aingliu	the King (*rí*) that ruleth angels is lord
is coimmdiu cech thíre	(*coimdiu*) of every land.
(159–60)	

Óengus does not deny efficacy to secular lords or kings (*ríg*): that is implied by the phrase 'after abundance' (*iar tuilliu*, 247). His point is that no secular lord or king deserves the utmost devotion and loyalty of a *céle* because none can offer the *céle* eternal well-being (*slán*). Óengus himself is prepared to make a temporary sacrifice of his status in the eyes of his fellow men on earth in the knowledge that

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[58] A similar tolerant, almost nostalgic attitude is found in the eighth century *Fiacc's Hymn*: *is cell mór Dún Lethglasse : nímdil cid díthrub Temair* (Downpatrick is a great church; it is not dear to me that Tara should be desolate). This is emphasised by the attempt of the eleventh century glossators to reverse the sense: *ni hinmain lem Temair cid fas* (not dear to me is Tara though it be desolate), Stokes and Strachan, *Thesaurus* ii, 317.7, 16, 40–41.

their temporal power will inevitably fail. As an intimate 'companion' of the one
true lord *(céle Dé)*, he stands a better chance of eternal reward than they do. He
recognises the legitimacy of secular kings *(ríg)*, but as a *céle* of God without human
intermediary he may regard himself as superior to them:

cit móir ríg in domain	Though great are the world's kings,
a ndúine adchíssiu,	whose strongholds thou seest, a hun-
fo chét cét it uaisliu	dred times nobler are Jesus lowly
amsáin ísil Íssu.	soldiers.
(149–52)	

Not only does Óengus recognise the legitimacy of secular lords and kings, he also
seems prepared to tolerate their 'fame' which may live on after their deaths:

Donnchad dric rúad rogdae,	Donnchad the wrathful, ruddy, cho-
nó Bran búadach Berbae,	sen, or victorious Bran of the Barrow,
ní beir dím sním lobrae	visiting their tombs takes not from
athigid a m-memrae.	me the weariness of weakness.
(221–4)	

Here Óengus refers to a contemporary practice of visiting the tombs *(memrae)*[59]
of kings and says that he himself has done this but from it he has derived no
ultimate benefit (salvation from death). While he himself prefers to visit the grave
of Mael Ruain (225–8), a higher ranking *céle* of the true *flaith*, he does not condemn
the practice of others in continuing to visit the graves of secular lords or kings.

In short, this evidence does not support Greene's view that Óengus was
engaged in the formation of an Irish literature which was to be exclusively
Christian in subject.[60]   Óengus seems rather to belong with Blathmac in a
Christian milieu which could tolerate the pagan past precisely because the
dominance of Christianity was not threatened by it. The heroes of the pagan
Irish past seem to have been regarded in much the same light as the kings
and prophets of the Old Testament to whom Blathmac refers (383–4). These
are figures of whom Jesus is regarded as the most perfect example. Although
Blathmac and Óengus both devoted their works to the person of Jesus and his
céli, Mary and the martyrs, it would seem difficult to imagine either of them
being intolerant of monastic colleagues studying stories of the fame of secular *ríg*
and pre-Christian heroes.

It would seem unlikely also that men like Blathmac and Óengus would have
been intolerant of the author of the ninth century poem 'Hail Brigit', whom

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[59] *Mem(m)ra* signifies 'a monument over the dead, a tomb; often a shrine (containing a saint's relics),
E. G. Quin, *et al.* (ed.), *(Contributions to a) Dictionary of the Irish Language based mainly on Old and
Middle Irish materials* (Dublin 1913–76) *(DIL)* s.v. *mem(m)*ra. Although Stokes indexes Donnchad as
'a heathen king' *(Félire* 416), he may well be the Donnchad, son of Domnall, referred to in the *Lebor
Brecc* Preface *(Félire* 2–4, 11): *Is hí immoro aimser i ndernai Óengus in Félire .i. aimser Aeda Ordnige
maic Neill Ḟrassaig, ar is e ro gab rige nErenn i ndiaid Dondchuda maic Domnaill, uair ticc Óengus isin
broluch thoisiuch in Ḟeliri le bás Dondchada* [Now this is the time at which Óengus composed the
Martyrology, to wit, the time of Aed the Dignified, son of Niall the Showery – for 'tis he that got the
kingship of Ireland after Donnchad, son of Domnall] – since Óengus enters on the first prologue of
the Martyrology at Donnchad's death (Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster* s.a. 796 [*recte* 797]
§1). Donnchad's family may also be referred to in the Prologue: '*In gormríg ro múchtha / in Domnaill
ro plágtha* (233–4) [The famous kings have been stifled: / the Domnalls have been plagued.']
[60] Carney, *Early Irish poetry*, 78.

Greene thought to have been a 'lover of the old tradition. . .' making his poem conform outwardly to the prevailing religious fashion. It might be argued that Blathmac and Óengus in their own ways were 'lovers of the old tradition' rather than members of the 'puritan movement' which Greene held to have been responsible for 'the decline of Irish literature in the ninth century'.[61]

Greene's description of the *Céle Dé* movement as 'puritan' must be called into question. Blathmac and Óengus, at least, do not seem to have been condemning secular values as evil in the puritan manner and trying to abolish them in order to replace them with alternative values. Their poems depend on the 'secular' (pre-Christian) values of keening the dead and commemorating the deeds of famous men. They accepted secular values and saw in the person of Jesus their most perfect manifestation. For them, Jesus was the supreme lord (*flaith*), not because he was different, but because he was better than any other human *flaith*. It would be more accurate to say that Blathmac and Óengus were engaged in the formation of an Irish literature with the intention of making it predominantly, rather than exclusively, Christian in subject.

The works of Óengus and Blathmac both share the same basic theme of the universal keen for their common *flaith*, Jesus, although Óengus only refers to it incidentally:

Cíat ísliu fiad dáinib	Though they [the lowly soldiers of
co ndelmain a ngretha	Jesus] are lowlier before men with
bit áird úas dind flatha	the noise of their crying, they will
tria bithu na mbetha.	be high above the height of the
(153–156)	Kingdom (*flaith*) through ages and
	ages.

The men who became direct *céli* of God (*Céli Dé*) committed themselves to a life characterised by the 'noise of crying' (*delman ngretha*, 154). In a sense they are 'lordless men', separated by death from their *flaith* who has gone before them. The 'noise of their crying' is the keen (*coíniud*) due to their *flaith* which keeps alive his 'fame'. This raises a question about Byrne's contention that in Irish literature we hear less of the theme of loyalty to one's lord, or the plight of the lordless man, than we do in Anglo-Saxon.[62] Certainly, these are important themes in Blathmac. They are the driving forces which lead Blathmac to petition Mary for a safe welcome into the home of his *flaith* after death (563–8). As Blathmac describes him, Jesus, the perfect *flaith*, is a composite, well-integrated figure:

ferr fáith, fisidiu cech druí,	better he than any prophet, more
rí ba hepscop, ba lánsuí.	knoweldgeable than any druid, a
	king (*rí*) who was bishop and full
	sage.
sainemlu cech doen a chruth brestu	more excellent his form than that of
cech soer a balcbruth	any human being, more vigorous his
	stout vigour than that of any wright;

[61] Carney, *Early Irish poetry*, 78.
[62] Byrne, *Irish kings*, 29.

gaíthiu cech bruinniu fo nim,	wiser than any breast under Heaven,
fíriánu cech breithemain.	more just than any judge.
(27–32)	

Ó Cathasaigh has elucidated a distinction between the heroic biographies of 'king-heroes' like Cormac mac Airt and 'martial heroes' like Cú Chulainn.[63] What emerges from Blathmac's heroic biography of Jesus is a combination of the king-hero and the martial hero. It is this combination which accounts for the comparatively wide range of terms for 'lord' (*flaith, fiada, coimdiu, tigerna, toísech*) which Blathmac uses to describe Jesus.[64] It is probably more than coincidental that Blathmac presents such a figure of Jesus as the ideal model for both the secular and ecclesiastical lord at a time when the offices of king (*rí*) and abbot (*ab*) were being increasingly combined in Ireland.[65]

This in turn raises a question about the nature of what is commonly called the *Céli Dé* movement. According to O'Dwyer, 'this reform movement was introduced to counterbalance a tendency towards laicization of the monasteries'.[66] If this were the case, it needs to be explained why Blathmac should have presented such a composite ideal of kingship and lordship in the person of Jesus. This composite ideal is implied by the emphatic statement that Satan will be 'neither king nor abbot' (*níba rí, níba ab*, 975). It also needs to be explained why a king-abbot (*rí-ab*) like Feidlimid mac Crimthainn should be listed among the thirteen members of the *oentu Mael Ruain*[67] and be called a 'scribe' and 'anchorite'.[68]

As well as the 'laicization' of monasteries, account needs to be taken of the development in the concept of ecclesiastical inauguration of secular kings which becomes visible in the historical evidence in the late eighth century.[69] Blathmac suggests a context in which a deliberate integration of secular and ecclesiastical lordship in the person of the king-bishop was in progress, rather than a context of two antagonistic processes of laicization and clericalization. If so, this brings into question Byrne's view that 'all attempts to christianise Irish kingship were to amount to little more than enamelling'.[70] It would seem that Blathmac for one, at least, was able to contemplate the concept of the king-bishop with whole-hearted approval, precisely because there had been a profound change in the source – but not the character – of Irish kingship and lordship, brought about by the christianization of the principle of *fír flathemon*.

The prevailing misunderstanding of the meaning of *Céli Dé* has a major misleading consequence: it places undue emphasis on the humility and self-abasement of the *Céli Dé* which obscures the fundamentally aristocratic nature of their motivation. A man became a *céle Dé* in order to improve his status. There was no higher status to which a man could aspire in this world. In order to prepare for

[63] T. Ó Cathasaigh, *The heroic biography of Cormac Mac Airt* (Dublin 1977), 65–66.

[64] Carney pointed this out: 'Christ in his humanity comprises the perfection of the heroic and ecclesiastical virtues', *Early Irish poetry*, 53.

[65] See Hughes, *Church in Early Irish society*, 157ff and 211ff.

[66] O'Dwyer, *Céli Dé*, xi and cf. also 15, 16.

[67] O'Dwyer, *Céli Dé*, 40–43.

[68] Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster* 306, s.a. 846 (*recte* 847) §1.

[69] See Byrne, *Irish kings*, 159.

[70] Byrne, *Irish kings*, 255.

this higher status and to earn it, the *céle Dé* set himself apart from his fellow men. He underwent a severe ascetic regime which was designed, like the training of a soldier, to prepare him for a spiritual battle with the forces of evil (*gó*) on behalf of his *flaith* in Heaven and his fellow men on earth. The *céle Dé* was apart, but at the same time was an integral part of the society which had produced him. He acted as an intermediary for his fellow men. This, at least, is the picture which emerges from the internal evidence of Blathmac. The poems seem to be the product of a slow, more or less continuous development in Irish spirituality in which the sacred and secular spheres were becoming increasingly inter-connected, rather than the product of a 'reform' or 'religious revival'[71] when the fire of asceticism 'once more burst into flame'[72] and when 'no compromise with the world was possible'.[73]

As long ago as 1961, Chadwick pointed out that in ascribing a 'reform movement' to the second half of the eighth century and the whole of the ninth century, Robin Flower may have laid 'too much weight on the fact that much of our evidence is conditioned by the growth of the habit of keeping annals and recording obits in the later period'.[74] Hughes did not accept this as an argument against evidence for 'reform',[75] but did not explain why. O'Dwyer endorsed Flower's view, again with argument based on annal evidence: 'it is obvious that a movement tending towards the expansion of the anchorite ideal grew up in the first half of the eighth century'.[76]

One may doubt this. The increasing number of obits of anchorites and scribes in the Annals of Ulster in the eighth and ninth centuries may be explained simply as a funtion of the increasing attention to detail and widening of the range of information given by the annalists. An examination of the terms for 'lord', both regal and non-regal, in the Annals of Ulster over the same period reveals a parallel increase,[77] yet it does not become necessary to argue for an increase in the ideal of lordship or kingship. In the absence of more substantial evidence in favour of a 'reform movement' or 'religious revival', Chadwick's view of continuity in the Irish ascetic tradition may be preferred:

> In the eighth century, when the development had become more systematised, and also when our documents give us much fuller information, the Anchorites have developed into an organised body, and this no doubt gives rise to the idea that they originated in a reform movement at this period. . . .The literary movement with which they are associated is not the expression of a new development, but the formulation in writing of their traditional beliefs and discipline.[78]

It seems too much of a coincidence that laxity and corruption in the Church should have become an acute problem at exactly the time when the historical

[71] Hughes, *Church in Early Irish society*, 174.

[72] Hughes, *Church in Early Irish society*, 173.

[73] Hughes,*Church in Early Irish society*, 176.

[74] N. K. Chadwick, *The age of the saints in the Early Celtic Church* (London 1961) 86.

[75] Hughes, *Church in Early Irish society*, 174 n. 1.

[76] O'Dwyer, *Célí Dé*, 15.

[77] See D. N. Dumville and B. K. Lambkin, 'The Status of Irish Kings: a reappraisal', forthcoming.

[78] Chadwick, *Age of the saints*, 88, 73.

record becomes much fuller. It would seem more likely that there was a continuous tension in the Church between the *Céli Dé* (the ascetics or holy men who were revered as saints (*noeb*) and called *fír-cleirech, fír-manach*) and those whom the ninth century *Monastery of Tallaght* calls the 'lax folk' (*lax aes*).[79] Further, it is likely that this tension increased as the synthesis of the sacred and the secular developed. Since this synthesis drew the laity more and more into the life of the Church, it may be supposed that an increase in ecclesiastical laxity and corruption was an inescapable consequence. However, this negative influence seems to have been off-set by a complementary intensification of asceticism by some within the Church which managed to achieve a balance of forces. It would seem to have been this balance which sustained the development of the synthesis between the sacred and secular aspects of society.

Binchy argued that it was unlikely that ascetic leaders in the eighth or ninth centuries would have introduced 'a system of commutations designed to shorten (and in some cases. . . to lighten) the traditional forms of penance'.[80] The *Céli Dé* could have introduced such a system as a logical extension of the work which Blathmac saw himself as engaged in, of involving all men as far as possible in the universal keen for Jesus Christ.[81]

Hughes was puzzled by contradictions which she observed while describing the 'religious revival'. Referring to the contrast betwen the author of the poem *M'oenurán im aireclán* (All alone in my cell)[82] and Fedlimid, king of Cashel, she said: 'while one achorite dwelt alone in his hermit's cell, renouncing this wretched world, another, who held a kingdom, assumed abbacies, burned churches beyond his own borders and slew their inhabitants'.[83] Viewed in the context of a theory of power which synthesised the structures of sacred and secular lordship, such apparent contradictions become more readily comprehensible. It would seem unlikely that Blathmac was troubled by this type of contrast. Carney has said that his poems 'show that we are in touch with exactly the type of man and mind that brought into being the copious eighth and ninth-century glosses'.[84] From the internal evidence of the poems it is possible to go further in describing Blathmac's background.

Binchy set the following problem in his introduction to the *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*:

> Were those who originally committed the canonical tracts to vellum clerics, like those who drafted and wrote down the Anglo-Saxon dooms? Or were they rather professional lay jurists who, though their predecessors had opposed the new dispensation as a threat to the powers and privileges of their ancient order, were now compelled by the steadily increasing growth of Christianity throughout the fifth and sixth centuries to accept the Church and its teachings,

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[79] E. J. Gwynn and W. J. Purton, 'The monastery of Tallaght', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 29 C (1911) 148.18 §51.

[80] D. A. Binchy, 'The Old Irish table of penitential commutations', *Ériu* 19 (1962), 54.

[81] Cf. Carney, *Blathmac*, 581–588.

[82] G. Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics* (Oxford [1956], repr. Dublin 1996) 18.

[83] Hughes, *Church in Early Irish society*, 193. See also K. Hughes, 'Sanctity and Secularity in the early Irish Church', *Studies in Church History* 10 (1973), 31–32.

[84] Carney, *Blathmac*, xiv.

while seeking to preserve as much as possible of the traditional pre-Christian *mos maiorum*?[85]

Binchy himself suggested that the most plausible solution to the problem is that 'already in the seventh century the boundary between clerics and laymen was as difficult to draw as it was for Giraldus Cambrensis in the twelfth'. Charles-Edwards has developed Binchy's hypothesis by arguing for a multiplicity of links between the different intellectual traditions in Ireland, including formal education for clerics outside monasteries.[86] Considering both his skilful reference to secular legal procedures and the context of the prevailing theory of sacred and secular power in which he wrote, it may be supposed that Blathmac would have been at ease in the company of professional secular lawyers (cf. *breithem*, 32).

Similarly, the extent to which Blathmac depends upon allusion to secular literature in his poems may lead us to suppose that he would have been equally at ease in the company of men such as those who were involved in producing the earliest compilation of secular literature, the early eighth-century *Cín Domma Snechta*.[87] Indeed, it is striking that Blathmac was born into the royal family of the *Fir Roiss* whose territory lay within thirty or forty miles of the monastery of *Druimm Snechta* (Drumsnat, Co. Monaghan).[88] The *Poems of Blathmac* seem to bear out Hughes's observation that 'while Irish clerics would accept the subject matter of their studies from the Continental Church, the form of their learning might be influenced by the native schools'.[89] Blathmac, like Óengus, wrote a poetic prayer in which he explored the problem of how Divine power was to be related to the structure of secular power as he found it in his own society. In his precise use of lord (*flaith, fiada, coimdiu, tigerna, toísech*) and *céle* may be seen something of the Irish 'passion for analysing, distinguishing and sub-dividing'[90] applied to harmonising the principle of Christian Scripture with native Irish political concepts.

Finally, Blathmac's particular concentration on the native secular institution of *célsine* may shed some light on the little understood origin of Irish nature poetry. Murphy has explained that 'it depended for its origin on acceptance of a philosophical truth concerning creation, and secondly on the existence of a class of men educated to appreciate poetry and diligent in improving the methods of their art'.[91] Regarding the first pre-condition, Murphy meant that 'during that period in which nature poetry flourished, God was a Creator, a Ruler, and a Craftsman and the world was beautiful with a beauty borrowed from, but distinct from, His'. To this may be added on the evidence of Blathmac's poems the observation that the 'borrowing of beauty' was, to put it the other way round, the 'giving of truth' (*fír*) by the sacred lord (*flaith*) to his *céli*. The 'elements' which make up 'nature'

[85] D. A. Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin 1978), I, ix.

[86] T. Charles-Edwards, 'The Corpus Iuris Hibernici', *Studia Celtica* 20 (1982), 160–61.

[87] On the authorship of this compilation see P. Mac Cana, 'Mongan mac Fiachna and Immram Brain', *Ériu* 23 (1972) 103ff.

[88] Carney, *Blathmac*, xiv.

[89] K. Hughes, 'Some aspects of Irish influence on early English private prayer', *Studia Celtica* 5 (1970) 49.

[90] Hughes, 'Some aspects of Irish influence', 49.

[91] G. Murphy, 'The origin of Irish nature poetry', *Studies* 20 (1931), 101.

were regarded anthropomorphically as *céli* of their Creator. The *céle Dé*, therefore, regarded himself as a 'companion' of these other *céli* (the elements) as well as of God. Because the surface of the earth was the boundary zone between Heaven and Earth, the elements were, in a sense, the outermost inhabitants of Heaven. As such the *céle Dé* would prefer their company to that of his fellow men.[92] The concept of the *célsine* of nature may account for the contentment of the hermit with his hut in the wood. It is the gift of the supreme *flaith* to a *céle Dé*:

> Though you delight in your own enjoyments, greater than all wealth, for my part I am grateful for what is given me from my dear Christ.

The hermit regards the companionship which he has in his hut as superior to that of the most powerful secular lord or king:

> Tame swine lie down around it, goats, young pigs, wild swine, tall deer, does, a badger's brood.
>   Peaceful, in crowds a grave host (*sluag*) of the countryside, an assembly (*dál*) at my house; foxes come to the wood before it – it is delightful. . .[93]

The nature poetry which emerges in Ireland in the ninth century (or possibly earlier) may be seen, in part at least, as the fruit of exploration by men like Blathmac of the tension between the claims of native secular lords and God, the supreme Christian lord and king. In other words, a key to understanding both the spirituality of early Irish nature poetry and that of Blathmac's poems may be found in the underlying synthesis of the sacred and the secular. The nature and process of this synthesis is increasingly better understood. McCone has given a magisterial overview of the emergence of 'a coherent ideological framework thoroughly in tune with the various spiritual and secular interests of a monastically oriented learned class whose socio-political concerns and connections extended well beyond the confines of the cloister'.[94] Blathmac's poems were 'public' in the sense used by Ó Corráin of the later so-called 'hermit poetry'.[95] He was one of the 'cultivated and scholarly men writing to meet the needs and taste of a cultural elite'.[96] As Tristram has pointed out, he was most likely in touch with Anglo-Saxon vernacular religious epic which had come to a great flowering in the early eighth century.[97] Blathmac may now be seen to have played a significant part, like Óengus, in this process of 'the sewing together of Church with State' (*comúaim n-eclasa fri túaith*)[98] and he may yet come to be recognised as an even greater poet than his re-discoverer and editor would allow.

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[92] Murphy observed (in the 'Origin of Irish nature poetry', 91) that: 'the making of nature poetry is bound up in a special way with various monks and hermits of the 6th and 7th centuries'. This agrees with Chadwick's view of continuity in the Irish ascetic tradition.

[93] K. H. Jackson, *A Celtic miscellany* (London 1951) 68–70, cf. Murphy, *Early Irish lyrics*, no. 8.

[94] K. McCone *Pagan past and Christian present* (Maynooth 1990), 82.

[95] D. Ó Corráin, 'Early Irish hermit poetry?', in Breatnach, McCone and Ó Corráin, *Sages, saints and storytellers*, 264.

[96] Ó Corráin, 'Early Irish hermit poetry?', 264.

[97] Ó Corráin, 'Early Irish hermit poetry?', 442.

[98] McCone, *Pagan Past*, 83.