

JAMES PATRICK CARNEY

By the time I first met Jim Carney in 1955, his work had already begun to change direction somewhat, and was beginning to diverge from the views held by many (if not most) of his contemporaries. This had happened in large measure as a result of his reading one particular book – E. R. Curtius's *European literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, the English translation of which had appeared two years earlier in 1953. Curtius, and the other scholars towards whose work he was drawn during those years, undoubtedly prompted Jim Carney to undertake a re-contextualising of early Irish literature which, in turn, led to a new interpretation of much of it. This task occupied a good deal of the rest of his life, with results which affect the whole discipline still.

Of course, Jim had learned from his teacher and friend Gerard Murphy to read the texts of Old and Middle Irish as literature, rather than regard them merely as a mine from which to extract rare verbal forms or philological nuggets. (Interestingly enough, he does not appear ever to have been attracted by O'Rahilly's mythological approach to the saga and other literature, under the influence of contemporary anthropology and, indirectly, the history-of-religion school.) Long before 1955, in a series of articles contributed to *Éigse*, he had indicated to readers his view that the literary study of early literature could be every bit as *wissenschaftlich* as philological study or the establishment of a text. In fact, he was already demonstrating in his work the extent to which the establishment of the text depends on literary awareness, as well as on a thorough knowledge of the language such as he had already acquired and was to go on perfecting till the end of his life. His reading of Curtius encouraged him to read the literature as one peculiar form of a more general phenomenon – vernacular literature of the period of the Latin Middle Ages. In a way that the majority of his predecessors – and indeed of his contemporaries – were not disposed to do, Jim Carney read the literature of Old and Middle Irish, less in terms of continuity with a pre-literate past than in terms on contiguity with a cross-fertilisation back and forth from the Latin literature of the western world.

The insights he was gaining were given their first extended expression in *Studies in Irish literature and history*, which came out in 1956. Nobody involved at any level at that time can easily forget the sensation which this book caused among Irish and Celtic scholars. Its direct challenge to scholars whom he labeled 'nativist' – including old teachers of his own – delighted a number of readers but irritated and even infuriated many more. Some of the critics and reviewers, as well as others who did not commit themselves to the written medium, accused him of over-stating his case or of being insufficiently guarded in his formulations. He had to defend himself. The loneliness of his position at that time may be said to have driven him sometimes to maintain his 'anti-nativist' position more dogmatically than he was inclined to do later in life. By that time his general position had come to command widespread acceptance and respect and, towards the end, he was to smile a little to see it achieve the status of orthodoxy among those he had influenced and taught.

In an oblique reference to the work of Erwin Schroedinger in the School of Theoretical Physics and of T. F. O’Rahilly in the School of Celtic, a Dublin journalist had said that during the first ten years of its existence, the Institute for Advanced Studies had had the distinction of ‘proving’ that while there was no God there were two Saint Patricks. This wise-crack was not well received in all quarters: and, when Jim Carney in 1956 and subsequently in 1961 in his book *The problem of St. Patrick*, took up the question of Patrick’s identity and chronology which had been raised by T. F. O’Rahilly in *The two Patricks*, he must surely have anticipated trouble. Enemies and cynical friends took the view that he deliberately provoked controversy, and even relished it. But this was not entirely fair. For, while at one level he knew perfectly well what subjects were likely to raise hackles and which were not, at another level he could be almost naively surprised to discover that conclusions he had reached by what he took to be straightforward academic method, should provoke virulent *ad hominem* responses.

It is not easy today to understand how one who was by this time developing a distinguished reputation in Ireland and abroad, could also draw down upon himself robust and on occasion dismissive criticism. He was himself attracted by the suggestion once made to him that the critique of the ‘nativist’ reading of Irish literature he had developed stirred people because it touched upon something deeper. It is arguable that it represented a challenge to certain of the unexamined presuppositions of romantic cultural nationalism, insofar as it appeared to dilute the purely native character of what had hitherto been understood to be an immemorially old tradition.

His ‘tampering’ with the national apostle was seen in some quarters as insufficiently deferential to other authorities – not all of them ecclesiastical. Certainly he and Dr Ludwig Bieler, with whom he became increasingly closely associated in the research into Patrick and his time, were surprised to find themselves officially ignored by some of those who could not agree with their conclusions, but who could find no answers to the propositions they were putting.

Despite the remarkable body of work done by people who had been attracted to work on Irish and Celtic in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the discipline as a whole remained poorly funded and consequently at a primitive state of development when Jim Carney and his contemporaries began their careers. The only satisfactory grammar of Old Irish was in German, as was the best work available on comparative Celtic grammar; there was no dictionary; and the number of texts available in up-to-date editions was very small indeed.

In comparison with well-worked fields like Classics, the difficulties were enormous and the tools were scarce or unsatisfactory. But there were challenges and stimuli inherent in Celtic Studies which kept Jim Carney and his contemporaries busy and fresh throughout their scholarly lives – supplying the deficiencies we have listed. There was always something to be done which had not been attempted before, and that was an exhilarating challenge – a dictionary to produce, a dialect to describe, manuscripts to produce a diplomatic text of, to catalogue or to edit. Jim Carney was not involved in dialectology or lexicography, but he was engaged in everything else. He had studied at U.C.D. with many of the people who were to be the stars of their generation from Ireland and abroad – Nessa Ní Shéaghda,

Maura Morrissey (whom he was to marry), Angus Matheson, Kenneth Jackson and others. Later, he was to go to Bonn to study with Thurneysen. On return he did his journeyman's work under Gerard Murphy, participating in the scheme for producing texts known as *Leabhair ó láimhsgríbhíbh*. On being appointed to the Institute he found himself working on the editing of *dán díreach* under a scheme supervised by the Celtic School's director, T. F. O'Rahilly. During the same period he was appointed to work on the transcription of texts under the great palaeographer, R. I. Best. From all these he acknowledged himself to have learned skills and judgement he was later to deploy, and he respected them deeply. But that sense of the ridiculous which often came to his aid, enabled him to see their foibles too, and happily he took advantage of a period of convalescence from 'flu in later years to commit to writing (and to the security of the Institute's archives) his frank memories of the scholars he had worked under in those years. It remains unopened as yet, but I understand it is to be revealed at a date he himself set.

With all the self-confidence of one who had a good well-trained mind, Jim (like a number of his contemporaries) never felt inhibited from entering new areas of the discipline. They knew there was virgin territory almost everywhere. He always encouraged younger people not to be content to wait for someone else to find the answer; he encouraged them to seek it for themselves, as he was inclined to do.

Perhaps because of the smallness of the field and the peculiar state of the art, Jim Carney had a very comradely attitude towards others involved in Irish and Celtic studies, especially towards beginners and the young. It is wholly characteristic of him that, even as a young man himself, who had painstakingly mastered the system of contractions used by the later scribes, he was not content to store these in a private notebook. He rather made them available to others in what became a greatly extended introduction to one of the volumes in the series *Leabhair ó láimhsgríbhíbh*. I myself remember how he drew my attention to a National Library of Ireland manuscript in the hand of Muiris Ó Gormáin, pointing out that it would 'give you a publication quite quickly, which would be no harm.' Or I remember how (even more generously) he handed over to me the transcript he had made himself of the Rawlinson B502 recension of the *Sex Aetates Mundi*, suggesting that I might think of trying an edition of it.

Though he had relatively little opportunity to exercise his great gifts as a teacher, he did give courses in places as far apart as Queen's University, Belfast (one day a week for two winters in the sixties), in Uppsala, California and elsewhere. At the Institute itself, of course, he held various series of seminars, beginning with his reading of Bláthmac in 1956–7, and continuing at irregular intervals up to the time of his series on archaic Old Irish verse immediately prior to his retirement. Perhaps because he had been spared the chore of service-teaching, he was able always to make his classes into a kind of invitation to students to enter into his current research project with him. And always he invited the students to criticise, to put forward suggestions and to deploy any expertise or bring to bear any experience they might have which was relevant to the subject under discussion.

He used to say that he always assumed that in any class he taught there was a person or persons who were more able than he was himself. I doubt if that was often so in his case: but his advice to young teachers was sound – to consider that the only advantage they had over the students was greater knowledge and the capacity to put certain tools in their hands. ‘Of course,’ he added, ‘they may even throw those tools away in the end, but you will have done your bit.’ In Jim’s own case, teaching activity could not be contained within the walls of the Institute or the seminar room. In the Pearl Bar or O’Neill’s he would write down quatrains of the *Caillech Bérrí* or *Máel Ísu Ó Broilchán* or illustrate a point about hiatus from Bláthmac’s verse on the back of the cigarette packet he took out of his pocket. In his case this was neither a scholarly affectation nor the result of academic obsession; it was the overflow of unaffected enthusiasm. The conversation would not get stuck in the eighth or ninth century; soon it would equally enthusiastically be in the twentieth and then equally easily slide back to the sixteenth. Because he recognized with such clarity what the differences are between the world of the eighth century and ours, he was not afraid to state what he believed we have in common and could do so without over-simplification or anachronism.

Jim’s work was largely, though of course not exclusively, concentrated on the literature of the Old and Middle Irish period – though one should not for a moment forget his substantial work on *dán díreach*, Eochaidh Ó hEodhusa, the poems of the Butlers and the O’Reillys. He did much less academic work on material in the modern language, but it should not be forgotten that for years he spent almost every Saturday night in Kenilworth Square where Professor Delargy and his wife kept open house each week and where the oral tradition was both received and passed on. But for all his love and respect for that, it remains true that he had no great concern for the revival of the language or interest in work for its continued life. The reasons for this are probably quite too complex to enter into here.

Possibly Jim Carney did not ever recognize the extent to which the availability of resources for the study of the older language depends on the enthusiasm of others for the modern one, the demise of which he regretfully took to be inevitable. However about that, it can confidently be stated that he concurred with the view expressed by that one of his own teachers whom he revered above all others, i.e. Osborn Bergin – that Irish is a seamless robe, and the one who would speak of one part of the tradition must be prepared to be at home in every part. It is arguable that unwittingly he may have encouraged the view that work in one part is more valuable or more scholarly than work in another. He did not hold that view himself. He continued to work in an extraordinary variety of areas himself until weakness overcame him. Those who visited him in his flat during his last days when his own hands had grown stiff and tired, will testify to the encouragement he offered to those whose hands were still active. Into their heads may have come those lines of an eleventh-century scholar writing in the persona of Colum Cille which apply so well to the man this volume honours:

*Is scíth mo chrob ón scríobainn;
ní dígainn mo glés géroll;
sceithid mo phenn gulban cáelda
díg ndaélda do dub glégorm.*

*Bruinnid srúaim n-ecna ndedairn
as mo láim degduinn desmais;
doirtid a díg for duilinn
do dub in chuilinn chnesglais.*

*Sínim mo phenn mbec mbráenach
tar áenach lebar lígoll
gan scor, fri selba ségann,
dían scíth mo chrob ón scríobonn.*

(G. Murphy (ed.), *Early Irish Lyrics* (Oxford 1956) 70)

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