Coire Sois
Contents

Foreword by Declan Kiberd ix
Preface by Matthieu Boyd xv
Acknowledgments xxi
Abbreviations xxv
Maps xxviii

1 Introduction: Irish Myths and Legends (2005) 1

PART 1. THEMES

2 The Semantics of síd (1977–79) 19
4 The Concept of the Hero in Irish Mythology (1985) 51
5 The Sister’s Son in Early Irish Literature (1986) 65
6 Curse and Satire (1986) 95
7 The Threefold Death in Early Irish Sources (1994) 101
8 Early Irish Literature and Law (2006–7) 121

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## PART 2. TEXTS

### The Cycles of the Gods and Goddesses

9 *Cath Maige Tuired* as Exemplary Myth (1983) 135
10 The Eponym of Cnogba (1989) 155
11 Knowledge and Power in *Aislinge Óenguso* (1997) 165

### The Ulster Cycle

13 *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (2002) 187
14 Mythology in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (1993) 201
15 *Táin Bó Cúailnge* and Early Irish Law (2005) 219
16 *Sírrabad Súaltaim* and the Order of Speaking among the Ulaid (2005) 238
17 Ailill and Medb: A Marriage of Equals (2009) 249
18 Cú Chulainn, the Poets, and Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe (2005) 259
19 Reflections on *Compert Conchobuir* and *Serglige Con Culainn* (1994) 271

### The Cycles of the Kings

20 “The Expulsion of the Déisi” (2005) 283
21 On the LU Version of “The Expulsion of the Déisi” (1976) 293
22 The Déisi and Dyfed (1984) 301
23 The Theme of *lommarad* in *Cath Maige Mucrama* (1980–81) 330
24 The Theme of *ainnme* in *Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin* (1983) 342

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>The Rhetoric of <em>Fingal Rónáin</em> (1985)</td>
<td>376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>On the <em>Cín Dromma Snechta</em> Version of <em>Togail Brudne Úi Dergae</em> (1990)</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td><em>Gat</em> and <em>díberg</em> in <em>Togail Bruidne Da Derga</em> (1996)</td>
<td>412</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>The Oldest Story of the Laigin: Observations on <em>Orgain Denna Ríg</em> (2002)</td>
<td>422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td><em>Tóraíocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne</em> (1995)</td>
<td>449</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne</em> (translated by the author, 2011)</td>
<td>466</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Further Reading (compiled by Matthieu Boyd) 484
Notes 501
Bibliography of Tomás Ó Cathasaigh 551
Works Cited 555
Index 589
Tomás Ó Cathasaigh is one of a generation of scholars whose intellectual formation owes as much to French poststructuralism as to native interpretative traditions. His early essays appeared not only in Éigse but also in The Crane Bag, a journal of ideas whose very title encapsulated that moment when old Irish legend was invoked under the sign of continental literary theory. Repeatedly in the following pages, he cites the work of Georges Dumézil on the three functions of warrior and hero mythology in Indo-European narrative: sacred sovereignty; physical force; fertility and food production. Yet, unlike many scholars who found a guru and a method when Paris dictated fashions in cultural analysis, Ó Cathasaigh cheerfully admits at an early stage of his application that Dumézil’s approach may well be superseded; for the present, he concludes, it is the theory that accounts most fully for the workings of the texts under scrutiny.

There is an equally delicious moment in another essay when Ó Cathasaigh offers two quotations from that maître à penser, Claude Lévi-Strauss, on the structure of ancient myth: the sentences quoted are rather at odds with one another, but Ó Cathasaigh is content to note the discrepancy as an element in the range of possible interpretations, leaving resolution for some other time.

This is typical of his method with his own predecessors in the study of early Irish texts. In often-packed paragraphs, he offers reviews of the various
mythological, historical, and linguistic approaches to Cú Chulainn or Fionn. These reviews sometimes hint at the conflicts between famous scholars without ever accusing them of fanaticism and without remarking that such monomania was of just that warlike kind warned against by many monkish redactors of the old tales.

As a gifted teacher, Ó Cathasaigh has the gift of explanation rather than simplification. He feels the need to acquaint his students with the range of past approaches, even as he develops his own method. There is a mellow, amused, sometimes vaguely regretful note in his surveys of the scholarly battlefield, but also an insistence on saying his piece, even though in saying it he will usually concede that there will be many more analyses to trump his own. That note of tentative, enquiring reverence for the text under discussion and of respect for all scholars past and future is still unusual enough in the field to be worthy of celebration.

Why did early Irish literature become, rather like Shakespeare’s texts in the nineteenth century, a happy hunting ground for zealotry and fanaticism among commentators? Some of this could be put down to the vanity of gifted pioneers in a developing discipline; more again might be attributed to the strident patriotism of certain nationalist interpreters of “the matter of Ireland”; but the main reason for such repressive analyses may have been a puritanical fear of art, the sort of panic that often overwhelms a mind confronted by the uncontrollable nature of literary texts. Many scholars were rather like patients in the early years of psychoanalysis who aborted the analysis not long after it had begun. Fearing the potent force of stories rich in emotional and symbolic power, they retreated into a merely linguistic or historical analysis, treating those texts as a means of establishing the rules of grammar or syntax or of understanding the surrounding world picture. The idea that each text might be the passionate utterance of a literary artist was the last thing most wanted to think about.

Ó Cathasaigh is quite trenchant and steadfast about this: “In general we can say that an appreciation of the conceptual framework which underlies early Irish narrative is an essential element in the criticism of individual works. But whereas, in this respect as in others, the historian can cast light on the early texts by virtue of his knowledge and interpretation of other (non-literary) sources, there are strict limits to the amount of historical information which may be extracted from what are, after all, literary texts.” That is a modest and timely warning to Celtic scholars of the autonomy of the creative imagination. Even the criticism of modern Irish texts, restricted
to a largely linguistic analysis in the first half of the twentieth century, ran in the second half of that century the equal risks of reducing literature to fodder for historians. While it was certainly a good thing that some historians were now competent enough in Irish to use its materials, some of them, in taking the figurative promises of lovers over-literally, may have inferred a degree of material comfort in Gaelic society of the eighteenth century that did not widely exist. With much the same reservation in mind, it has to be said that a great lament like *Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire* (“The Lament for Art O’Leary”) was something more than an exercise in rural sociology or indeed an example of composition by a group. As one reads and admires Ó Cathasaigh’s attempts to restore and respect the artistic nature of the foundational texts under his scrutiny, one is struck by a singular irony: the period in which he wrote many of these essays was one in which scholars of modern Irish-language texts often performed a reverse maneuver on, say, *Caoineadh Airt*, seeking to highlight it as an example of communal tradition rather than individual talent.

Ó Cathasaigh remarks that writers of English have turned to the legends and sagas for inspiration far more often than writers of modern Irish. That is undeniable—the achievements of a Yeats, Synge, or George Russell in recasting the story of Deirdre and the Sons of Uisneach are proof enough of that. Yet the persistence of this story as the most popular of *Trí Truaighe na Scéalaíochta* (“The Three Sorrows of Storytelling”), while a sign of its artistic brilliance, must also have answered a felt need in more modern societies, wracked not only by emigration but also by guilt at the treatment of those migrants intrepid enough to return. It might even be said that the *gae bolga*, which explodes on entering the skin, was taken by more modern tellers as a prefiguration of the dum-dum bullet; or that accounts of the periodic bouts of depression overtaking heroes prefigure the jaded state of a society deprived of hope or innovation. Indeed, the obsession in so many tales and poems with the loss of sovereignty by flawed leaders must strike any young student now reading them in Dublin as a prophecy of an Ireland that they will, in all likelihood, have to leave. Although all the classic texts must be allowed to breathe in their own time and setting, there is every reason for current writers to want to make them live again as exempla of continuing crises in Irish culture.

And there is evidence that contemporary writers of Irish, such as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, are turning for inspiration and guidance to texts that were once of great interest to the revival generation. Ó Cathasaigh,
with characteristic modesty, suggests that many students may prioritize the study of modern Irish over early Irish literature; but, if anything, the reverse is true—the early texts provide one of the great literatures of Europe, beside which the writings in the modern Irish language, however brilliant, read like something of a coda.

The essays in this volume will be gratefully read by scholars of Irish literature in English for the light that they cast on such topics as the relation between god and man as mediated through a hero-figure, or for the ways in which they illuminate the difference between the story of Cú Chulainn (about his integration into Ulster society) and Fionn (expressing his extra-social status as a mercenary warrior for hire). If religion mediates man’s relation with destiny, morality deals with the attempts by mortals to regulate their dealings with one another—and it is on the cusp between these zones that the hero-figure comes into his own. Ó Cathasaigh has his own way of suggesting that the religious and moral impulse may clash with and destroy one another in the end: he finds in Tochmarc Étaíne (“The Wooing of Étain”) a narrative commentary on “the relationship between god and man, between the denizens of the síde and the men and women living on the surface of Ireland.”

There is much to learn from these pages, whose insights might assist even readers of Finnegans Wake. Ó Cathasaigh laments at one point that Giambattista Vico’s comment (that the first science to be learned should be the interpretation of fables) has left little impression upon the intellectual life of Ireland—but it certainly fascinated James Joyce, whose last work is an attempt to locate all knowledge from the Christian Gospels to the Annals of the Four Masters within a narrative that spans Vico’s ages of gods, heroes, and peoples. That said and admitted, it would of course be wrong if Irish legend were to be seen simply as (in Ó Cathasaigh’s phrase) “a quarry for modern creative writers.” The whole burden of these essays is that it constitutes a great literature in its own right and not a mere backdrop to the study of any other.

Ó Cathasaigh’s emphasis on the text serves as a corrective in his mind to a possible over-emphasis on the life of a writer, the accompanying world picture, or even the implied readers and audiences. (Borrowing from M. H. Abrams, he uses the terms “the work,” “the artist,” “the universe,” and “the audience.”) In this he may reflect something of the protocols of close reading, which came to prominence in the middle decades of the twentieth
century, especially in English literary studies, under the influence of major thinkers like Abrams, W. K. Wimsatt, or, indeed, Denis Donoghue (who had a huge following in the lecture-halls of University College Dublin when Ó Cathasaigh was a young scholar). To those nativists who might object that such protocols are of little relevance to a literature produced out of very different conditions, the answer must surely be: why not? The work, as Ó Cathasaigh says, “is our point of departure, and to it we must always return.” But there are pressing reasons, other than the mid-twentieth-century fashion of treating texts as autonomous artifacts, for taking a severely literary approach: “There are, of course, literary critics who would in any case argue the primacy of work-based criticism on theoretical grounds, but in regard to early Irish literature we need only appeal to the purely practical consideration that the work is virtually all that we have at our disposal in the way of evidence.” Writing brilliantly of the Táin, Ó Cathasaigh marvels that, despite the limited but interesting range of interpretations, commentators have chosen to ignore rather than contest what literary criticism exists. Most of the essays here are a plea to fellow scholars to look up from their grammatical dictionaries and to engage in the wider debate. Nor should scholars of modern Irish feel excluded from the discussion, which might lead some of them to question some of Ó Cathasaigh’s own analyses. For instance, he disputes the suggestion that Cú Chulainn is a Christ-like personage, but a figure who combines pagan ferocity with a death while strapped to a pillar will continue to strike many of us as a pre-figuration of muscular Christians, a sort of English public-schoolboy in the drag of Celtic hero.

Ó Cathasaigh’s invitation to scholars is pressing in its pragmatism but also in its confidence in the artistic value of the works to be studied. Earlier scholars who mined texts for their philological or historical learning were in all likelihood often lacking in such confidence: without ever quite realizing it, they may have feared that early Irish literature was often inferior as literature. It is a noteworthy and welcome development that in recent decades some of the leading commentators on modern Irish-language literature, such as Seán Ó Coileáin and Philip O’Leary, have themselves written on the early Irish tales in a manner that vindicates Ó Cathasaigh’s methods. For his own part, Ó Cathasaigh (again following Abrams) is supremely interested in the rhetorical devices of voice and authorial address that seem to conjure in turn an implied reader of a certain kind, trained in
such literary devices. Yet he also remains grateful for the continuing work of historians and grammarians: “It has to be said that an immense amount of work remains to be done on early Irish literature: most of the texts stand in need of competent edition and translation, not to speak of interpretation and evaluation.”

Despite that need, the discipline of early Irish studies stands currently, in Irish universities at any rate, in real danger of collapse. The main source of that danger is a Higher Education Authority (and its agents in campus administrations) determined to introduce “business methods” to the study of the humanities and, in so doing, to count the number of students in every classroom. There is reason to believe that the rather cranky methods adopted by some scholars of Old Irish may have turned bright young people away from it to work in other areas. If that is true, then Ó Cathasaigh’s exciting, open-minded approach to narrative as art provides a perfect antidote along with the promise of revival. There may never be huge numbers studying Old Irish in Dublin or other cities, but it is no exaggeration to say that the health of their discipline provides a reliable indication of the true state of both academia and the nation. If ancient kings were enjoined to protect the sovereignty of the polity, placing duty to that order above short-term considerations, there ought to be a similar constraint on today’s education authorities and university presidents. Otherwise, the work of all academics is in vain; and the ces noínden (period of debility) that immobilized the men of the Táin may last even longer in our time than it did in theirs. A people without a clear sense of the past will cease to form a conception of the future. Ó Cathasaigh quotes a famous bardic poem that suggests that if the old texts are allowed to die, then people will know nothing more than the name of their own fathers. The warning may be even more apposite now than when Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe issued it.
For over thirty years, Tomás Ó Cathasaigh has been one of the foremost interpreters of early Irish narrative literature qua literature. His method combines a rare philological acuity with painstaking literary analysis.

Ó Cathasaigh broke new ground with his insistence that the extraordinarily rich and varied corpus of early Irish literature “cannot be properly understood except as literature, with due allowance being made for its historical dimension.” In “Pagan Survivals: The Evidence of Early Irish Narrative” (1984), the item in this volume that gives the fullest attention to scholarly trends, he remarked: “the tendency has been to conduct the discussion of Irish texts principally in terms either of the artists who have produced them or of the universe which is reflected in them, so that there is a pressing need to analyze the extant texts as literary works in their own right.” Later, in his study of “The Rhetoric of Fingal Rónáin,” he added frankly that “Irish studies has not had enough of the cultivation of literary scholarship as an intellectual discipline.”

If he was correct in this, the phenomenon can partly be explained by the initial difficulty posed by the language of the texts and by the time and effort needed to develop the linguistic tools that literary critics would require. The Royal Irish Academy Dictionary of the Irish Language, begun in 1913, was only completed in 1976, and the Lexique étymologique de l’irlandais ancien, begun in 1959, remains unfinished. Even now, despite considerable progress
in the last three decades, the field continues to feel the lack of modern editions and translations of important works.

However, there was also a question of attitudes. Previously, the literary texts had been treated as repositories of linguistic forms, historical data, and mythological debris to be exploited by philologists, historians, and mythologists, often for predetermined purposes. They were invariably seen as the products of mere scribes or redactors rather than self-conscious literary artists. Some scholars, like T. F. O’Rahilly, went so far as to consider the texts to be in error vis-à-vis their theories. Ó Cathasaigh’s point was that, regardless of the origins of a particular text, it could be profitably studied in the form in which it has come down to us, with respect to the rhetorical strategies employed, or the sustained development of key themes either within a single text (as in “The Theme of lommrad in Cath Maige Mucrama” [1980–81]), or in a number of texts (as in “The Semantics of síd” [1977–79]). His studies revealed a hitherto unsuspected degree of narratorial art and thematic consistency within and among the sagas to which he gave his attention. He sometimes achieved this through the judicious application of theoretical frameworks such as Dumézil’s trifunctional approach to Indo-European myth, which he was among the first to bring to bear. He was not shackled to literary criticism, however, and was also able to produce outstanding historical research (e.g., in “The Déisi and Dyfed” [1984]) and technical studies of manuscript redactions and early Irish grammar.

After nearly two decades of such work, it was natural that Ó Cathasaigh should have been asked to survey “Early Irish Narrative Literature” in the volume on Progress in Medieval Irish Studies edited by Kim McConé and Katharine Simms (see Ó Cathasaigh 1996b, a valuable snapshot of the field); but with characteristic modesty he said hardly anything there about his own contributions. Patrick Sims-Williams, in his 2009 John V. Kelleher Lecture at Harvard University, “How Our Understanding of Early Irish Literature Has Progressed,” was not so reticent. He identified two major advances of the past few decades: (1) the realization that early Irish literary texts are attuned to the political conditions in which they were redacted, and can be analyzed as propaganda; and (2) the realization that early Irish literary texts can be analyzed as works of literature, on their own terms. The first approach is exemplified by the work of Donnchadh Ó Corráin and Máire Herbert; the second by that of Ó Cathasaigh.
It is no longer necessary to justify a literary-critical approach to early Irish texts. Ó Cathasaigh was swiftly joined in this by Kim McConne, Joseph Nagy, Philip O’Leary, Joan Radner, William Sayers, and others. They in turn have been followed by a new generation of scholars. One thing that consistently distinguishes Ó Cathasaigh’s work is the respect in which it is held by scholars on both sides of ideological divides, such as the well-known nativist/antinativist tension that became acute upon the publication in 1990 of Kim McConne’s *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature*. Often, Ó Cathasaigh’s reading of an early Irish saga is the basis for all subsequent work.

Medievalists in other areas, treading (perhaps unconsciously) in the tracks of nineteenth-century Celtic enthusiasts like Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold, too often have an unfortunate tendency to treat early Irish literature as exotic, mystical, and mystifying, calling it (for instance) “extremely rich in color, fresh and sensuous description and imagery, a delight in nature, and a delight in the play of language” but at the same time “weak in consistent or logical narrative force, devoid of character development, and lacking in subtlety” (Colish 1997, 85). Ó Cathasaigh’s body of work is a definitive rebuttal of such perceptions. The way he makes us see both the subtlety and the logic in this literature lays a strong foundation for comparative study and opens early Irish saga to the appreciation of the wider world.

With the exception of his book, *The Heroic Biography of Cormac mac Airt* (1977)—which Patrick K. Ford, his future Harvard colleague, described as “the best and most solid piece of comparative analysis of early Irish literature to appear in some time” (1979, 836)—Ó Cathasaigh has chosen to express himself through articles in scholarly journals and edited collections. It may be said that the lasting fame of journals such as *Celtica*, *Éigse*, and *Ériu* is due in no small part to his contributions.

This volume brings together Ó Cathasaigh’s most important articles published over a period of some thirty years. For most of this time, he was employed at University College Dublin, where he attained the rank of Statutory Lecturer. In 1995, he became Henry L. Shattuck Professor of Irish Studies at Harvard University, where he remains in 2013.

The book is by no means a definitive collection of Ó Cathasaigh’s oeuvre. He has important contributions currently in press and many others still to be written. Nevertheless, the articles appearing here are proven classics, or “instant classics” of unmistakable value, and having them at last
between two covers will not only make them more accessible to those who are already used to citing them, but also help a new audience to discover them and the fascinating literature that they discuss.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

The contents of this book are subdivided into “Themes” (studies on overarching or recurrent issues in the field) and “Texts” (studies on individual literary works). An article like “The Theme of lombrad in Cath Maige Mucrama,” which is an elucidation of a single saga, appears under “Texts.” “Texts” has been further subdivided into the conventional Cycles: the Cycles of the Gods and Goddesses (to use Ó Cathasaigh’s preferred designation, as against “the Mythological Cycle”); the Ulster Cycle; the Cycles of the Kings; and the Fenian Cycle.

Articles are in chronological order within each group, except that “Texts” articles on the same subject (Táin Bó Cúailnge, “The Expulsion of the Déisi,” Scéla Cano meic Gartnáin, and Togail Bruidne Da Derga) appear together for ease of reference, and have sometimes been reordered to begin with the most general or accessible treatment, followed by more focused or specialized discussions.

The volume opens with “Irish Myths and Legends,” Ó Cathasaigh’s 2005 Anders Ahlqvist Lecture, which introduces the Cycles and many of the major topics that the articles explore in more detail. It is the work of a mature scholar presenting his subject through the lens of his own expertise.

At the end of the volume are a few suggestions for “Further Reading” relating to each article, which are intended to show the current state of scholarship with respect to the text or theme that Ó Cathasaigh discusses. These suggestions are not meant to be exhaustive, nor do they include sources that Ó Cathasaigh himself has cited; rather, they emphasize new work and conflicting interpretations. The scantiness of the Further Reading in some cases indicates that very little has been done on Ó Cathasaigh’s subject since he wrote about it—these may be especially productive topics for future research.

New editions and translations of early Irish texts are normally not mentioned in the Further Reading section. Rather, this information can be found in the list of Works Cited; for every edition that Ó Cathasaigh cites,
the entry also identifies any more recent editions that have appeared, which then have their own entries in the Works Cited.

EDITORIAL INTERVENTION

Obvious misprints in the original publications (on the order of “Rawlinson 5 B02” for “Rawlinson B 502” or “kinship” for “kingship”) have been silently corrected. Further corrections have been made only with the author’s knowledge and approval. When a statement in the original article is no longer true, a correction appears in square brackets.

British English spellings have been changed to American English, except in quotations. The occasional Irishism has been amended for the benefit of North American readers.

The spelling of proper nouns such as names and titles of Irish texts has been standardized across the volume, except in quotations from the secondary literature. The spellings are those that Ó Cathasaigh currently prefers: Cúailnge instead of Cúailgne is one example. The spelling of names does occasionally vary according to the date of the text under discussion; thus the spellings Finn and Óengus are used for the characters in Old and Middle Irish texts, as opposed to Fionn and Aonghus for the characters in Early Modern Irish texts such as The Pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne.

Bibliographic references originally appeared in a variety of formats. All are now expressed in parenthetical notation. However, in order to preserve the original numbering, it was not thought advisable to eliminate any notes. In one case (“Gat and díberg in Togail Bruidne Da Derga”) the notes had to be renumbered, as the numbering restarted on every page in the original.

Ó Cathasaigh’s works are listed in a separate bibliography in advance of the Works Cited.

A NOTE ON THE TITLE

As explained in the text known as “The Caldron of Poesy” (L. Bretnach 1981; compare Kelly 2010), the Cauldron of Knowledge, Coire Sois (pronounced approximately “Corra Sosh”), is generated upside-down within
a person, and knowledge is distributed out of it. At earlier stages—the Cauldrons of Goiriath and Êrmae, which represent basic and intermediate study—the cauldron has to be set upright so that it can fill with knowledge; it is converted into Coire Sois, the highest stage, by the action of either sorrow or joy. Included in this joy (fâilte) is fâilte dóendae 'human joy,' of which there are four kinds, the third of which is “joy at the prerogatives of poetry after studying it well.” This description, of both the knowledge-distributing cauldron and what is needed to create it, seems appropriate for Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, a consummate teacher whose official rank of professor would be expressed in Modern Irish as ollamh, the old word for the highest grade of fili or poet. The fili’s remit was not simply poetry but also the knowledge of history, law, philology, place-name lore, and narrative literature—diverse competencies exemplified by the essays assembled in this book.

The subtitle, “A Companion to Early Irish Saga,” should not be construed as a claim of exhaustiveness. Not every early Irish saga extant is even mentioned in these pages, let alone comprehensively discussed. However, the book is a wise and dependable guide to the corpus: it covers the Cycle groupings, key terms, important characters, recurring themes, rhetorical strategies, and the narrative logic that this literature employs, and thus constitutes exemplary preparation to read almost anything in the field.
Acknowledgments

The contents of this book have been reproduced from other sources, which are gratefully acknowledged here.


“The Threefold Death in Early Irish Sources” was first published in *Studia Celtica Japonica* n.s. 6 (1994): 53–75.


“Knowledge and Power in *Aislinge Óenguso*,” first published in A. Ahlqvist and V. Čapková (eds.), *Dán do oide: Essays in Memory of Conn R. Ó Cléirigh*, 431–38 (Dublin: Linguistics Institute of Ireland, 1997), appears with the kind permission of Prof. Anders Ahlqvist on behalf of the volume editors.


“*Táin Bó Cúailnge* and Early Irish Law: The Osborn Bergin Memorial Lecture V (Endowed by Vernam Hull); Lecture Delivered 31st October 2003” was first published by the Faculty of Celtic Studies, University College Dublin (2005).

“*Sírrabad Súaltaim* and the Order of Speaking among the Ulaid,” first published in B. Smelik et al. (eds.), *A Companion in Linguistics: A Festschrift for Anders Ahlqvist on His Sixtieth Birthday*, 80–91 (Nijmegen: Stichting
Uitgeverij de Keltische Draak, 2005), appears with the kind permission of Dr. Rijcklof Hofman on behalf of the volume editors and the publisher, Stichting Uitgeverij de Keltische Draak.


We are immensely grateful to Prof. Declan Kiberd for the foreword, and to Prof. Thomas Charles-Edwards and Dr. Fiona Edwards for creating the maps.
Abbreviations

Abbreviations used in only one article are defined within that article.


BBCS Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies

BUD Orgain Brudne Ui Dergae (Nettlau 1893, 151–52; Thurneysen 1912–13, 1:27; V. Hull 1954a; S. Mac Mathúna 1985, 449 f.)

CA Cath Almaine (Ó Riain 1978)

CCC Compert Con Culainn (van Hamel 1933)

CCSH Comparative Studies in Society and History

CConch Compert Conchobuir (V. Hull 1934)

CDS Cin Dromma Snechta(i) (lost ms.)

CMCS Cambridge/Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies

CMM Cath Maige Mucrama (O Daly 1975)

CMT Cath Maige Tuired (Stokes 1891b; Gray 1982)

DIAS Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies


ÉC Études Celtiques
xxvi Abbreviations

ED “The Expulsion of the Déisi”
Eg. Egerton (classification of mss. held by the British Library)
gen. genitive case
ITS Irish Texts Society
JCHAS Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society
JIES Journal of Indo-European Studies
K Kinsella (1970)
KZ Kuhns Zeitschrift (Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung)
LU Lebor na hUidre (Royal Irish Academy MS 23 E 25)
NUI National University of Ireland
PBA Proceedings of the British Academy
PHCC Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium
PMLA Proceedings of the Modern Language Association
PRIA Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy
RC Revue Celtique
SC Studia Celtica
SH Studia Hibernica
SLH Scriptores Latini Hiberniae
SPAW Sitzungsberichte der Königlich Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften

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Abbreviations


TBDD  Togail Bruidne Da Derga (Knott 1935)

TE1  Tochmarc Étaíne, part 1 (Bergin and Best 1934–38)


W  Welsh

YBL  The Yellow Book of Lecan (Trinity College Dublin MS 1318 [=H 2.16]).

ZCP  Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie