



**Harmon, Maurice. *The Dialogue of the Ancients of Ireland*. (Translated with introduction and notes). Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2009. 188 pp.**

Maurice Harmon, the leading Irish scholar of his generation, has for many years been internationally recognised as a pioneering figure in the field of Irish Studies. He organised international conferences and developed and directed the M. Phil programme in Irish Studies at University College Dublin. This inter-disciplinary programme with its varied disciplines –archaeology, folklore, history, and early Irish– reflected the range of Harmon’s intellectual and cultural interests and expertise, as well as his own studies of writers. Realising that there was no guide to Irish Studies, he prepared *Modern Irish Literature: A Reader’s Guide, 1800-1967*; a subsequent publication was the *Select Bibliography for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature and its Backgrounds*, 1977. Recognising the need for a reliable history of the literature, he wrote with Roger McHugh *A History of Anglo-Irish Literature from Its Origins to the Present Day*, 1984. Noting that there was no journal specifically for articles on Anglo-Irish Literature, he founded and edited the *Irish University Review* for sixteen years, 1970-86, establishing it as the preminent journal for Irish Studies. Aware that most attention went to major figures, he advocated that Irish writers be seen in contexts and that lesser figures should not be overlooked. It was significant of his approach that from the mid-1960s he included the work of contemporary writers in his lectures and conducted seminars in contemporary fiction, drama, and poetry. It was he who edited with introduction and notes the hugely influential anthology *Irish Poetry after Yeats: Seven Poets*, which showed the developments in poetry. Throughout his distinguished career he has written studies of Irish writers, including Seán O’ Faoláin, Patrick Kavanagh, Austin Clarke, Mary Lavin, Francis Stuart, Benedict Kiely, John Montague, Richard Murphy, Thomas Kinsella, and Seamus Heaney, among others. His *Selected Essays* was published in 2006 and the definitive study, *Thomas Kinsella: Designing for the Exact Needs* in 2008. Harmon is also a poet. *The Mischievous Boy and other poems*, his third major collection, also was published in 2008.

Now he has turned his attention to medieval Irish literature with this translation, *The Dialogue of the Ancients of Ireland*, of the *Acallam na Senórach*, medieval Ireland’s greatest compendium of heroic tales and poems. The *Acallam na Senórach* [literally the Colloquy of the Old Men], dated around A.D. 1200 and probably early thirteenth century, is the most important text of the Fenian Cycle and is, after the *Táin Bó Cuilgne* (The Cattle Raid of Cooley), the longest surviving work of original medieval Irish literature. The original text, about 8,000 lines, employs the conceit of Caílte and Oisín, survivors

of Finn Mac Cumhaill's third-century warriors called the Fianna Éireann, meeting and journeying with a fifth-century Christianising Saint Patrick. Patrick's mission is to convert the provincial kings, their nobles and followers; Caílte wants to revisit places associated with former comrades. How third-century Caílte and fifth-century Saint Patrick meet and travel together through Ireland's four provinces is never queried nor explained. Within this peripatetic frame-story are more than 200 other tales told mainly by Caílte about people, places, and events in Ireland's legendary past.

The *Acallam* was edited and translated by Standish Hayes O'Grady in *Silva Gadelica* (1892), vols. 1-11, 1892, and by Whitley Stokes in *Irische Texte*, 1900; the O'Grady translation left out some of the material, gave prose versions of the poems, and left a number of these untranslated. Harmon's new version, based on the Stokes edition and published in April 2009, is a free rendering and not a work of textual scholarship. It transfers the medieval text into a contemporary idiom; and this is not only a matter of bringing it alive in contemporary language but of creating an easy relationship between its various parts, its multiple voices, and its different rhythms of speech. In the case of the prose he has changed the original text from long paragraphs incorporating both narrative and dialogue to the conventions of modern fiction which many times separates dialogue from description and narration. In the case of some of the poetry that is written in an older form of the language than the prose, he often provides a literal translation. An experienced scholar, a poet of deep literary taste, Harmon is able to respond to the many poetic forms of the text with sensitivity and skill.

The scale of the *Dialogue's* imaginative narrative whole is remarkable: depictions of the gigantic and diminutive, the ugly and beautiful, people of different shapes and sizes (dwarfs and giants), the strange and the ordinary, the Otherworld where the ancient gods and goddesses reside. It is told with large comedic elements: a dog who vomits treasure, another who blows destructive fire from his arse; the woman from The Land of Women so big she must lie down on the side of a hill in order for the Fian to hear what she has to say; another, who won't drink from a vessel unless the rim is gold or silver; and a beautiful queen, who comes to Finn to offer him her entire wealth and kingdom if he will grant her his sole sexual activity for one year and his quick response: 'I do not give that to any woman in the world.'

Equally remarkable is the huge diversity of stories, over 200, reflecting many genres – romances, mythological tales, enticements, elopements, intrigues, transmogrifications, sea tales, tales of revenge, of fierce battles and single combats, wonder tales – and equally varied kinds of poems – elegies, prophecies, eulogies, genealogical poems, poems of praise, laments, commemorations, nature poems, formulaic listings, love poems.

As a literary invention, nothing quite like it had appeared before in Irish literary tradition. Behind its evocation of an imaginary landscape lies not only the world of the Fianna and of early Christianity but figures and events in Irish sagas, such as the heroic world of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* and the legend of Suibne Geilt (Mad Sweeney). There

are associations with people, places, and events in the *Fianaigecht* (*Adventures of the Fian*), with Patrician hagiography, and with European romances.

Although its shape follows the traditional alternating of prose and poetry, the *Acallam* is an overwhelmingly new creation. The story-cycle form itself ensures creative interaction among the various narrative levels and between the pagan, oral world of the Fianna and the literate, Christian world of Patrick. The contrast between Christian values and pagan permeates the entire work, Patrick's miraculous deeds and blessings on the one hand and Caílte's accounts of heroic adventures and romance on the other. Heroic and Christian values are finely balanced. The potential conflict arising between the two cultures is never an issue, as it often appears to be in other works of this period. Over and over the *Dialogue* stresses the supremacy of Christianity. For the author, storytelling itself is an important value; the poet-minstrel-storyteller, proficient in both music and poetry, is praised and liberally rewarded. In addition to Caílte, one of the most attractive and mysterious figures in the entire work is the poet-minstrel Cas Corach, whom the King of Ireland appoints Poet of Ireland at the *Feis Temrach* [Festival of Tara].

One of the oldest and most deeply persistent strands in all Irish literature is the *Dinn-shenchus* (place-lore writings). As the old men travel about the countryside, the interest always is on the naming of places, a hill, a fort, a stone, a ford, a dwelling. Stories are introduced with formulaic patterns of questions and answers which also connect the frame story to place-lore. Saint Patrick asks 'Tell me, Caílte, why is this cairn called the Cairn of Fratricide?' or 'Why is this place called Rough Washing?' Caílte replies with a story that gives the answer required. Obviously, the question and answer style would be congenial to the author. He chooses the method which he would have known from ecclesiastical texts, whose intent was instructive or didactic. One of the significant effects of these informative narratives is a narrowing of the gap between past and present.

In a listing of Fianna leaders for Patrick, for example, Caílte associates each with a specific quality such as bravery, loyalty, wisdom, generosity, which is always praised, but Finn remains the ideal. When Patrick asks Caílte, 'Was Finn Mac Cumail, whom you served, a good lord?' Caílte responds with a little praise poem:

Were but the brown leaf gold  
that the wood sheds,  
were but the white wave silver  
Finn had given all away.

This response prompts Patrick to ask, 'What values did you live by?' Caílte makes the famous reply: 'Truth in our hearts, strength in our hands, and fulfilment in our tongues.'

Often Caílte, in response to a query, recites a poem celebrating a memorable place. One of the loveliest lyrics in the book, beautifully rendered in Harmon's translation, is 'Arran of many stags':

Arran of many stags  
The sea beats against her cliffs  
Island feeder of hunting bands  
Ridges red with steely spears.

Restless stags on the summits  
Ripe bilberries in thickets  
Cool water in her streams  
Mast in her red oaks.

. . .  
Pleasant in fine weather  
Trout below the river banks  
Gulls circling the white cliff  
Arran always beautiful.

One of the most attractive aspects of the *Dialogue* is the connection between the visible and the invisible worlds, between the landscape in which Patrick and Caílte travel and the places under fairy mounds where the Tuatha Dé Danann live. Créde may be a creature of the Otherworld but lines from her lament for her drowned husband, Cael, at the Battle of Finntrága are as moving as any human elegy:

Sad is the cry the thrush makes in Druim Caín,  
no less sad the blackbird's voice in Leitir Laíg.

Sad the sound the stag makes in Druim dá Léis,  
for the dead doe of Druim Sílenn the stag roars.

Sad the sound the wave makes to the north,  
hammering the hard rocks, lamenting Cael's death.

Sad the sound the wave makes to the south,  
my time is done as my appearance reveals.

Sad the sound made by Tulcha's dragging wave.  
I have no future, since its tidings reached me.

The rich diversity of poetic forms and types of stories, its literary, social and political implications, and the civilising values it espouses make the *Dialogue* in Maurice Harmon's superb translation an entertaining and compelling work for readers of all ages.

*Barbara Brown*