

The Colloquy of the Old Men: *An Introduction*

Maurice Harmon

The Colloquy of the Old Men, a translation of *Acallam na Senorach*, is an early thirteenth-century text of about 80,000 words mainly of prose but with many poems interspersed in the prose. A medieval Irish romance, the *Colloquy* tells of the meeting between Oisín and Cailte, two surviving members of the third century Fian, a band of roving warriors who used to guard Ireland, and saint Patrick, who brought Christianity to Ireland in the fifth century. Cailte and Patrick travel round Ireland together. Patrick is concerned with converting the provincial kings, their nobles and followers, but Cailte wants to revisit places associated with his former comrades. The frame story deals with Patrick's journeys but within that are over two hundred stories told mainly by Cailte about people, places, and events in the legendary past.

The stories reflect many genres: wonder tales, romances, mythological tales, tales of monsters and magic, sea journeys, stories of revenge, transmutations and attacks by forces from the Otherworld. Flocks of birds lay waste areas of Munster; a woman from the Island of Women seeks protection from the Fian, but is killed before their eyes by a man from the Island of Men. Three strange men from Norway, each with a particular gift, and their dog protect the Fian but insist on sleeping in their own camp with a wall of fire about them: they do not want anyone to see them at night because every third night one of them is dead and their dog shrinks; that same dog vomits treasure on demand, wine comes from his mouth, his breath turns men's bodies to ashes and he protects Finn mac Cumhail, the leader of the Fian, by walking about him three times each day. The Tuatha De Danann in one fairy mound are attacked by Tuatha De Danann from another and are saved only by the help of the Fian. There are also many kinds of poems: poems of praise, nature poems, elegies, genealogical poems, commemorations, eulogies, prophecies. The *Colloquy* is a rich compendium of imaginative literature, a collection of contrasting tales and poems whose diversity and interaction make for a lively imaginative experience. It has been shaped with such intelligence and care and with such a profound understanding of tradition that it is easy to agree with Gerard Murphy that it had a single author. 'Some unknown Irishman of genius,' he said, 'steeped in the ancient lore of Ireland, but inspired also by the innovating tendencies of his time, got the idea of combining all the modes and spirits of various branches of Irish tradition in one vast literary compilation...'¹

Despite its great variety of stories, poems, incidents and people, the *Colloquy* is coherent and ordered. Formulaic patterns that help to bind the tales together include the manner by which stories are introduced, the formal style of personal address, and the words Patrick and others use to thank Cailte for his stories. Stories are formally introduced by questions about the origin of place-names, as for example 'Why is this rath called the Rath of the Dog's Head and this mound the Mound of Women?' In response Cailte tells a story

that gives the explanation required. Dinnschenchas, or the lore of place-names, is strong in Irish tradition. At the end of the telling Patrick compliments him courteously with the words, 'Victory and blessing be yours, Cailte, this is entertainment of mind and spirit for us.' At its conclusion all the main participants, Patrick, Cailte, Oisín, the High King of Ireland, the provincial kings, and significant minor figures assemble for the Feast of Tara where narrative strands are brought to conclusion.

The aesthetic interaction of prose narratives with poetic comment or illustration is also effective, providing a contrast with the prose and often highlighting particular events, figures, or places. When, for example, Cailte finds a well for Patrick, he recites a sensuous lyric about it:

Well of Tra Da Ban,
lovely your pure-topped cress,
since your verdure has been neglected
your brooklime cannot grow.

Trout out from your banks
wild pigs in your wilderness
deer on your crags good to hunt,
dappled red-breasted fawns.

Mast on the tree-tops,
fish in the river mouths,
Lovely in colour your arum lily shoots,
Green brook in the woody hollow.

Cailte's idealised description of Arran is outstanding:

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.

Hunting dogs and beagles there
Blackberries and blackthorn sloes
Its shore close to the woods
Deer straying among the oaks.

A purple crop on the rocks
Unblemished grass in the glades
Pleasant cover on the crags
The skipping sound of dappled fawns.

Smooth plains and fat swine
Happy fields, a tale to believe,
Nuts hang on her tree-tops
Long ships sail by.

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

The contrast between Christianity and paganism permeates the entire work. If there are examples of heroic deeds by the Fian, there are also examples of Patrick's miraculous powers: raising the dead, striking water from a rock, healing the sick, promising salvation and cursing evil-doers so effectively that the ground swallows them. As he zealously pursues his spiritual mission, Patrick is a powerful exponent of Christianity and an impressive advocate for its values. Kings and nobles in each of the provinces readily submit to his spiritual authority. He drives legions of demons from Cailte and Oisín when he first meets them, does the same at Cashel when he ascends the Rock and in the end will reduce the glorious Tuatha De Danann, the gods and goddesses of the Otherworld, to dwellers on hills and mountains. While Patrick's God is not judgmental the unmerited mass destruction of princes at Tara was sufficient proof of His existence to have made Finn mac Cumáil believe in Him. Cailte willingly accepts baptism but laments the disappearance of former comrades and all that they stood for. His stories bear witness to and often celebrate the extraordinary prowess of the pagan Fian in battle, their skill in the use of weapons, their attractiveness to women and their unusual adventures. One of the recurrent themes is the greatness of Finn mac Cumáil and his people, the Clann Baiscne, and their disruptive rivalry with the other great family, the Clann Morna.

Those seductive themes are countered by Patrick who maintains that Cailte is lucky to have survived long enough to have become a Christian. 'You should not feel sad,' Patrick tells him. 'Your condition and your hope are better than all the others, since I have come to you and because the reward of the true God, faith, holiness and prayer with the arms crossed have come to you and not to any others of the Fian.'

Early on in the work Patrick asks Cailte, 'What values did you live by?' and Cailte makes the famous reply: 'Truth in our hearts, strength in our hands, and fulfilment in our tongues'. In a listing of Fian leaders Cailte associates each with specific qualities such as nobility, knowledge, wisdom. They were brave, loyal, wise. But Finn is the ideal: 'gift-giver to noble hosts, our many-talented wise man./Our chief, leader, seer, judge, magician and druid.' Fian values include skill in battle, fame, personal honour. The tribute most frequently ascribed to people is that they were hospitable. Generosity is always praised as in this poem about Finn:

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

Storytelling itself, however, is an even more important value, transcending all others.

Many of the stories compiled and shaped by the nameless author belong to oral tradition and the *Colloquy's* success depends on the author's effectiveness as a teller of tales. When Patrick questions the propriety of listening to secular stories, his two guardian angels not only approve but urge him to record what Cailte and Oisín say 'for gatherings of people and noblemen in times to come will be delighted to listen to those stories.' Indeed, they say, since the old men only remember a third of what they know, it is imperative to write down what they still recall. Cailte may be proud of the military skills he once had but he is valued by those who listen to him because of what he knows and because he is a good storyteller. 'Victory and blessing, Cailte,' says Diarmaid mac Cerbaill, High-King of Ireland, 'where are the poets and storytellers? Let these matters be written in the tablets of the poets, in the records of the learned, in the words of the judges, so that all the knowledge of land and territory may be retained together with all of Cailte's and Oisín's great deeds of valour and prowess, and the place-lore of Ireland.' The *Colloquy* records and affirms the antiquity, strength, endurance and richness of Irish tradition and the poet-minstrel-storyteller is recurrently praised and generously rewarded. In addition to Cailte, the chief storyteller, two of the most attractive figures in the entire work are Cnu Dereoil, the much-loved dwarf minstrel, and Cas Corach who is surrounded by mystery and is appointed Poet of Ireland in the final pages.

Heroic and christian virtues are finely balanced. Confirming prophecies retrieved from the past validate the coming of saints to sites once associated with the Fian. It is clear, however, that the author favours Connaught where the last portion of the work is set. While Finn prophecies the coming of particular saints to the monasteries of Ferns, Rosbroc and Glendalough, his highest praise is for saint Ciarán who will come to Clonmacnoise.

'A birth will occur there by the will of the Lord of the great host,
the worthy Son of Heaven's King whom angels serve.
He will be holy Ciarán, will be born in the royal rath,
will seize half of Ireland, the mason's son from Muirthemne.

To those who would wreck his church sudden red-speared death,
hanging, pitiless racking and the lowest pit of Hell.'

Significantly, Croagh Patrick, also in Connaught, is identified as the place of pilgrimage guaranteed by Patrick himself. 'I have,' he declares, 'ensured that the place be a place of holiness and truth. Whoever commits evil or wrong there will experience withering of children, kindred and people. My blessing on him who will honour and defend it.' In the next breath he promises that three Connaught kings will rule Ireland and that the country will prosper under them.

The potential conflict between the two cultures is not an issue, the force of paganism never allowed to burst through the author's restraining hand. Cailte laments what has gone but never challenges what has ensued. What he values and represents is subordinated to what he has come to accept. If he regrets the destruction of places where the Fian used to hunt or assemble, their transformation into centres of christian gathering is celebrated within the one poem. That process is part of the christian author's revisionist agenda by which what the Fian represent is replaced by what Patrick embodies and which Finn is shown to have foreseen and welcomed. The story-cycle form ensures creative interaction between the various narrative levels and between the pagan, oral world of the Fian and the literate, Christian world of Patrick.

Over and over the Colloquy stresses the supremacy of Christianity. No one experiences a crisis of conscience, no one rebels against the teachings of the church. When Ailenn Fialchorcra falls in love with the king of Connaught who already has a wife, Patrick says that such a relationship is forbidden by God and by himself. Both the woman and the king accept this ruling. Only when the first wife dies are they able to marry and that union is one of the threads tied in the conclusion. Significantly this story is told not by Cailte but by the Christian narrator.

The point is also made in the story of Tuathal Techtmar's two daughters, Fithir and Dairine. Eochaid mac Echach, king of Leinster, wants to marry Fithir but her father will not give her in marriage before her older sister, Dairine. Eochaid accepts Dairine, but it is the younger sister he loves. After a year he builds a house in the forest and hides Dairine there and then goes back to her father. He tells Tuathal that Dairine has died and that he wants to marry Fithir. Reluctantly the High King agrees. Eochaid takes her back to Leinster but when they arrive they find Dairine before them. At sight of her sister Fithir dies and then Dairine also dies. As the poem says: 'Fithir died from shame, Dairine died from grief.'

The Colloquy is a highly allusive text. Behind its evocation of an imaginary landscape lies not only the world of the Fian and of early Christianity but figures and events in Irish sagas, such as the heroic world of the Tain Bo Cuailnge (The Cattle-Raid of Cooley) and the legend of Suibne Geilt (Mad Sweeney). There are associations with people, places and events in the wider tradition of the Fianaigeacht, with Patrician hagiography, and with European romances. Within the romanticised world of the Colloquy, known elements of Irish society exist and help to explain what goes on. Plunderers, for example, are those who do not have ties of kinship with a king or lord; agreements are guaranteed by people of stature; blood-fines are paid for murders; formal gifts are exchanged in accordance with Irish customs. All create a layered landscape and a layered consciousness. The Colloquy appears to be grounded in actually but is free-standing, its imagined reality superimposed on a sketchily outlined real world.

The *Colloquy* gives the impression of being set in a realistic social world through the identification of places and directions to them, through the naming of provincial kings and High King, through the provision of genealogies, through the naming of royal sites and places in which the Tuatha De Danann live. But this impression is largely illusory. The names of the kings are almost all fictitious and the place names that seem real are often imaginary. It would be a mistake, however, to think that the Colloquy takes place in a political or social vacuum. Ultimately it offers a civilizing ideal at a time of political disruption in the first quarter of the thirteenth century. Some stories have a moral force: they show how one should behave; they show what kinds of behaviour are deeply, even fatally, shameful. Many deal with relationships between men and women and with marriage, elopements, angry fathers, jealous rivals, sexual arrangements. In early Irish society a man could have more than one wife and so the sharing of his sexual activity could be an issue in marriage arrangements. Some focus on the proper behaviour of retainers. Others illustrate how princes ought to behave. The poem of advice to Mac Lugach is a case in point. Finn mac Cumail urges him to respect the elderly, to be gentle to women and children, to reward artists, to shun sexual looseness, to be loyal, and prudent.

Do not speak in big words,
nor avoid saying what is right.
It is shameful to speak too fiercely,
if you cannot match deeds with words.

Do not abandon your lord
while you live in this yellow world,
nor for any wealth or gold
go back on your support.

One of the most attractive aspects of the Colloquy is the connection between the visible and the invisible worlds, between the landscape in which Patrick and Cailte travel and the places under fairy mounds where the Tuatha De Danann live. To some degree there is little difference between the people of this world and the people of the Otherworld. They too have elopements and battles, make alliances for purposes of marriage or combat, and have a range of feeling. But they are forever young and beautiful, live in crystal palaces and enjoy an abundance of food and drink. The Colloquy has several descriptions of their houses, such as this sophisticated account of Crede's home under the Paps mountains in north County Kerry.

'A hundred feet in Crede's house
from one end to the other
twenty measured feet the width
of its splendid doorway.

'Its wattling and thatch
of bird feathers yellow and blue
its wall-railing to the east
of glass and carbuncle.

'Four pillars for each bed
patterned with silver and gold
the glass gem on each
a pleasant crowning.

Crede may be a creature of the Otherworld but her lament for her drowned husband, Cael, at the Battle of Ventry is as moving as any human elegy:

'The harbour resounds with the red race of Reenverc,
the ebb laments the death of the man from Loch Da Chonn.

'The crane cries in the marshes of Druim Da Thren,
but cannot guard her young when the fox comes close.

'Sad is the cry the thrush makes in Drumkeen,
no less sad the blackbird's voice in Leitir Laig.

'Sad the sound the stag makes in Drumlesh.
For the dead doe of Druim Silenn the stag roars.

'It grieves me the death of the hero who used to lie with me,
the son of the woman of Doire Da Doss with a cross above his head.

'It grieves me, Cael, to have you dead by my side,
the wave-drench over your bright side maddens me.

'Sad the sound the wave makes against the shore,
it drowned a handsome man, my grief Cael went near.

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

'Sad the sound the wave makes to the south
my time is done, my shape utterly gone.

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

'Since Crimthan's son drowned, I will love no one.
His hand felled many, on a hard day his shield never spoke.'

The *Colloquy* has a splendid imaginative power. We are persuaded that vast numbers of people, kings, nobles and followers, Christians and pagans travel from place to place and that they enjoy lavish banquets, but no mention is made of the practical difficulties involved. The Tuatha De Danann add to this sense of a romantic cavalcade and Cailte's stories of place-identifications with their array of characters and events deepen the atmosphere of romance. The medieval imagination enjoys the crowded canvas, splendid figures, kings, queens, romances, wonders, magic, daring deeds, banquets and feasts.

More generally the atmosphere of medieval romance casts an attractive ambience over the entire work so that accounts of battle, beheadings, fights against monsters, or against the Tuatha De Danann all fit into a pleasing style. In telling the story of the journeys made by Patrick, Cailte, and Oisín and providing a geographical context for them, the author at the same time usually achieves a smooth transition to the many different kinds of stories within that frame story. He can sustain a narrative across several stories, introducing characters, leaving them aside, introducing other stories, and then return to the original story and its characters.

The *Colloquy* connects the present with the past and revivifies what once was. Past splendour is confirmed by Cailte's stories and by the evidence he produces in the form of goblet, sword or treasure. These, he says, belonged to Finn, Oisín, or one of the other heroes; here is where that woman was buried; that hill, that ford, that plain is where these events took place. In the end it is the narrative richness and values of the work that are most important. Second in length only to the *Tain Bo Cualinge*, the scale, variety and artistic power of the *Colloquy* make it one of the greatest and most entertaining works in Irish literature.

Note

1. 'Acallam na Senorach' in *Irish Sagas*, edited Myles Dillon, Dublin, 1959, 125