

EARLY LITERARY CONTACTS BETWEEN WALES AND IRELAND

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For a long time the feeling has been growing upon me that we exaggerate the separateness of the Welsh and Irish literary spheres and the distance between the two countries. The true unit to consider is not 'Wales' or 'Ireland', but the Irish Sea—'the Celtic Pond'—and its shores. For in early days the sea formed no great barrier. The barriers were the land masses—the mountain chains, the rivers, the great areas to be covered by foot, or on horseback, with no roads, no bridges, no shops, no ready food or fresh water supplies. We recall the medieval description of the Pass of Drumochtar in the Highlands—*passagium pessimum, sine cibo*. But the sea has no such boundaries, no formidable obstacles. Provided one knows the weather all is well. This is, of course, a big premise; but it is the only one.

THE LITERATURE OF THE PAGAN TRADITION

Other contributors to this volume give numerous examples of traffic to and fro across the Irish Sea and of interaction between the peoples of either side. In the literary sphere, too, it is often possible to show influences spreading from one shore to another. But it is first necessary to acknowledge certain common literary traditions which belonged to the several Celtic peoples and which were present around the Irish Sea area from an early date. The word 'literary', it should be explained, is here used to include a great deal of material which originated in spoken form and was only later recorded in writing.

There are, for example, not only individual themes which are common to Welsh and Irish literature, but styles, conventions and motifs which are shared by both traditions. For example, both have preserved the literary saga in which the narrative is free, but which is combined with speeches of fixed form. This appears to be very old in Irish, and Sir Ifor Williams showed that the same ancient literary form underlay the speech poems of Llywarch Hen in Welsh. Again, both Irish and Welsh, unlike other traditions of early Europe, paid great attention to wild nature in poetry. In Ireland this produced superb results, but in Wales such poetry was more jejune and seems to have embodied mere convention rather than original inspiration. Both countries made use of conventions such as catalogues, triads and place-name speculation (*dindsenchas*). In these wide categories it is impossible to tell who is the originator and who the borrower. Extant Welsh prose is later in date than Irish, and examples are fewer; thus comparison is made more difficult.

Certain of the Irish gods are peculiar to Ireland, and these were apparently never borrowed by Wales, for example the gods who dwelt beneath the earth. There was the Dagda, and his son the Mac Óc of Bruig na Bóinne, the god Midir of Brí Leith, and others, like Ethal Anbual, dwelling in the *Uamh* (Cave) of Cruachain in the *Adventures of Nera*. These are presumably the older gods of Ireland who have their dwellings in the *síd* mounds; they

have no counterparts in Wales. They are known collectively as the *Tuatha Dé Danann*—‘the tribes of the goddess Danann’.¹ But although they did not exist as gods in Wales, there was a supernatural family of Don, which is believed to correspond to them. This family comprised Math, the son of Mathonwy, Gilvaethwy and Gwydion his brother, Math’s nephews, the sons of his sister Don, and Aranrod (Aranrawd), their sister, Math’s niece. And at least one of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* is known by name in Welsh literature, namely *Nuadu*, who appears under the title Gwynn ap *Nudd*, whose name is believed to appear in that of the god *Nodens* on the River Severn. According to Irish tradition *Nuadu Argetlamh* (‘*Nuadu of the Silver Hand*’) obtained his title from the hand of silver with which he was furnished after losing his own arm in the first Battle of Moytura; but this explanation is probably secondary, and his name was quite probably due to the great wealth of his sanctuary at Lydney on the Severn. *Nuadu* himself is believed to be probably identical with the Welsh *Lludd Llaw Ereint*, ‘*Lludd of the Silver Hand*’ of Welsh medieval legend. He is believed to be the original of King Lear, whose daughter *Creiddylad* (*Cordelia*) was carried off after her betrothal to Gwythir ap Greiddawl, by Gwynn vab *Nudd*.² Probably *Lludd* and *Nudd* are ultimately the same name.³ In Welsh we hear of Gwynn and his fight with Gwythir ap Greiddawl for the hand of *Creiddylad* every May morning till Doomsday, when the final conqueror shall win her. The story is thus fully integrated in Welsh supernatural tradition, and the family is extensively represented—more so than in Irish literature.

Heroes of the Irish Heroic Age are also known in Welsh literature, but relatively sparsely. We have no certain evidence of the heroes of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, though we have an elegy on *Cúroí mac Dáiri* (*Marwnat Corroi mac Dayry*), an Irish chieftain of Munster who was slain by *Cú Chulinn*. The forms of the Irish names, *Coroi* and *Cú Chulinn* bear, as Miss O’Rahilly has pointed out,⁴ all the appearance of oral transmission.

In addition to the unmistakable literary borrowings already mentioned, we find similarities of theme in Welsh and Irish. This is especially true in *Branwen ferch Lŷr*, where the well-known story of the Iron House is introduced in Welsh in a subordinate manner only, and with open acknowledgement of its Irish origin, while it forms the main feature of the Irish saga. The *Intoxication of the Ultonians* and the *Destruction of Dinn Righ*⁵ are others of obvious Irish origin. The Magic Cauldron is widespread in Irish literature. It was brought by the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, and was one of the chief insignia of the *Dagda*. No one ever went from it unsatisfied. This is an exclusively Irish theme. The rapid cure of those wounded in battle by being dipped into the well of magic herbs prepared by *Diancecht*, the physician of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, is exemplified in the *Second Battle of Moytura*, chs. 99, 123, 176. Numerous other parallels of Irish origin in *Branwen* are noted.⁶ When we reflect on the small body of early Welsh prose which we possess, it is surprising how much Irish influence we can detect, even though its direct origin is sometimes hidden from us. Why, for example, did *Pryderi* marry a wife with the Irish name of *Kicva*, the daughter of Gwynn *Gloyw*? Here we seem to have a hint of a lost story.

Miss O’Rahilly and others have frequently attributed much of the common stock of Irish and Welsh to the fact that both these people are of a common stock of Indo-Germanic peoples, and this must certainly account for something, as we have seen. But there remains a wide difference, especially in the treatment of the supernatural, which we should expect to be the oldest element. We have, for example, nothing in Irish like the bargain between

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Pwyll and Arawn (though we have an exact parallel in Old Norse), and nothing corresponding to the magic of the Wasteland in Manawydan, though in Ireland the heroes are carried off temporarily to the magic realms by a god. Pwyll might be such a theme, a *baile*—told after an interval of many years—in fact, a Welsh variation of the *baile* motif. There was plenty of head-hunting in Irish, but no magic was attached to the heads save in the *Battle of Allen*, which was late. There was nothing in Irish like the magic of Bendigeid Vran (which may easily go back to Gaulish magic). The difference in the treatment of magic, however, might well be due to transmission across the Irish Sea and the passage of a long interval of time rather than to common racial origins.

So far we have considered only Welsh themes which appear to be shared with, or borrowed from Irish. These are late in their extant form, dating from the eleventh or twelfth centuries. Let us now examine some of the Irish themes which appear to be borrowed from Britain. In Welsh times we can go back to times as early as the eighth century, perhaps the seventh. In Scottish our texts are very late, but the themes are early.

First there are Irish and Welsh themes derived from Scotland which must have travelled across the Irish Sea, for Scottish literature to affect Wales by a landward route is a laborious business. The county of Lancashire must be negotiated; there the many rivers all flow from east to west and are not fordable at their lower reaches. Much of the intermediate land is swampy, and one has to cross Martin's Mere—a lake, three miles long by two wide even today; and then Chat Moss, a great swamp even yet not wholly drained; and there are Rainford and Knowsley Mosses, Hallsall Moss, Pilling, Rawcliffe and Stalmine Mosses, the latter ones together covering nearly 20,000 acres. The saying is: 'Pilling's Moss, like God's grace, is boundless'. Then there are the great forests—Delamere Forest, and Macclesfield. The desolation of early Lancashire is hardly realised today.

'Lancashire was never densely settled by early man. . . It was isolated by leagues of dense forest that covered the heavy soils of the midland plain; . . . Behind the barren sand-dunes or the squat cliffs of boulder clay stretched the moss-lands, studded with meres . . . Inland again the mosses were succeeded by the heavy clay soils . . . covered with thick and tangled woods. On the slopes of the Pennines . . . the great forests gave way to more open woods that reached well above the 1,000 foot contour, possibly covering most of the plateaux which are now occupied by empty, treeless moors, and a dark-brown skin of blanket-bog . . . Even the Romans left no deep mark on the Lancashire countryside. They made a few roads, mostly centred on Manchester, in the extreme south. The sum total of Roman and Celtic influence is very small.'

'In Cheshire in 1086 the population averaged fewer than two to the square mile over the whole county, which meant that in the east it was far below this figure. Primeval woodland clothed the slopes of the Pennines and much of the plain at the foot, and almost uninhabitable moorland occupied the higher ground. Even the centre of the county was sparsely settled, for there too Delamere Forest and the Forest of Mondrum covered the land, as did the Forest of Macclesfield in the east.'

It is therefore in no way surprising that people coming from Scotland to Wales seem to have preferred the short cut across Morecambe Bay to the long and difficult route through Cumberland, Westmorland, Lancashire and Cheshire. There were no obstacles to encounter, whether they came from Dumbarton or Wigtonshire, and an ideal landfall and fresh water

supply was available on the Isle of Man, and so on to Anglesey. If Cunedag (or Cunedda) really did come to north Wales from Manau Guotodin on the Firth of Forth we may be sure that this is how he came—only thirty-seven miles by horse along the Antonine Wall, then by ship to another Manau (this time the Isle of Man), and then on to Aberffraw in Anglesey. It was still easier to reach Ireland. The Mull of Kintyre was easily visible from the Antrim Coast, and the crossing of the Narrow Sea presented no obstacle.

Scotland has no early native texts—nothing earlier in writing than the seventeenth century. We have many earlier Scottish stories, but the texts exist only in late Irish manuscripts. The famous Irish story of *Suibhne Geilt* was probably Scottish originally, though this cannot be actually proved. The hero is of quite uncertain origin but the story is widespread, and only the Irish Sea link can account for it. Suibhne was a wild man of the woods who had gone mad in battle; he became a prophet and was befriended by St. Moling. In the Irish *Buile Suibhne*, his chief saga, and also in the Irish *Life of St. Moling*, and elsewhere, he is an *Irishman*, king of Dál nAraidhe in Ulster, and son of one Colman Cuar, who according to the story of the *Battle of Magh Rath* was son of Cobhthach; but no such people appear on the genealogies. The dialogue with Loingseachan (*Buile Suibhne*, ch. 36) speaks of him as the grandson of Eochu Sálbuidhe, an Irish prehistoric king. The poems contained in the *Anecdota* call him 'the Scot', and 'the son of Eochu'. In the Irish *Battle of Magh Rath* Suibhne was an ally of Domhnall Brecc, the king of Dálriada in Scotland, the son of Eochaidh Buidhe; in this tradition Suibhne was a Scot of the royal line of Dálriada. This was probably the original tradition, though in his long saga he is not from Scottish Dálriada but from Irish Dal nAraidhe.

The particular type of wood-dwelling 'wild man' like Suibhne is represented in Welsh by Myrddin, the 'Merlin' of the *Vita Merlini* of Geoffrey of Monmouth, and by Lailoken of the St. Kentigern story. There is another tale of a *geilt* who lived in a wood in *Buile Suibhne*, chs. 46-50. Here then we have four identical tales from the twelfth century, all localised in Strathclyde, all about the same person, and all occurring in the late sixth or early seventh centuries.⁹ The theme must have been common. We cannot say certainly whether the original story was Irish or Scottish, but the link seems to have been Dálriada, the new bridge between Scotland and Ireland—an Irish kingdom in Scotland in fact. The earliest traceable source of the Lailoken story seems to be a lost *Life of St. Kentigern*, written perhaps by a Dálriadic Scot. In one version of the Irish story, perhaps the original one, Suibhne was a prince of Dálriada. These facts suggest that the whole story arose perhaps in the first instance in Dálriada, and was afterwards adopted into Strathclyde and into Ireland being attached to St. Kentigern in Britain and St. Moling in Ireland. The story of the three-fold death (inset in the Irish story) was told about a prophecy of St. Columba, as we learn from the seventh-century *Life*. It was therefore widespread at an early date, and attached itself to two famous battles—in Ireland to Mag Rath, for the king of Dálriada was one of the protagonists of this battle.¹⁰ It looks very much as if the story had originated in North Britain and had travelled by way of the Irish Sea to Ireland and Wales.

Another figure who plays a large part in early Irish saga and poetry of the seventh century and is connected with Scotland is the god Manannán mac Lir. In Cormac's *Glossary* of the ninth century he is called 'a son of the sea', and *Ler* in Old Norse poetry is a god of the sea (*Hlér*). In the Irish saga of the *Voyage of Bran* (attributed by its editor, Kuno Meyer, to the seventh century), Manannán meets Bran in mid-ocean, and tells him in a long poem of the

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joys of the Celtic Other World, Mag Mell. At the time he is on his way to visit the wife of Fiachna the Fair, king of the Irish Dálriada, and he tells Bran that Mongan will be born of him as a result of this visit. We have another full Irish saga in which Fiachna Lurgan is in imminent danger of losing his life in Scottish Dálriada, where he has gone to fight the Saxons. They are the foes of his friend Aedán mac Gabrain who sent across the sea to Fiachna Lurgan for help. While Aedán was fighting in Scotland, Manannán came to his wife in the fortress of Rathmore in Moylinny and begat Mongan. To reach her he is distinctly said to have come across Lough Neagh, the biggest fresh-water lake in Europe; and he meets Bran in mid-ocean, passing with ease backwards and forwards between Scottish and Irish Dálriada. He is, in fact, Mac Lir, 'the son of the sea'. In Cormac's *Glossary* he is said to be 'a renowned trader who dwelt in the Isle of Man'. He was the best pilot in the west of Europe. Through acquaintance with the sky he knew the quarter in which would be fair weather and foul weather, and when each of these two seasons would change. Hence the Scots and Britons call him a 'god of the sea', and hence they said he was a son of the sea, i.e. mac Lir, 'son of the sea'. To this day the native name for the Isle of Man is *Ellan Vannin*, 'Manannán's Isle'.

But this is not all. On the Antrim coast a late story places the Children of Lir (unnamed) and the story is known to have earlier beginnings. In the medieval Welsh story of *Manawydan fab Llŷr* we have surely the same family removed by several centuries from the early Irish tales. The names are not identical—Manawydan is not identical with Manannán, but it is near enough. Philology must allow for changes in the intervening centuries and across the Irish Sea. He is the brother of Bran the Blessed who had been killed in Ireland and whose head brought magic experiences and the birds of Rhiannon—from the other world—to them before burial, recalling the Irish Bran. His seat was at Harlech and in Dyfed; his chief experiences take place at Harlech and at Gwales in Penfro, 'high above the waves'. These are all sea-coast places. Bran and Manawydan have a sister, Branwen, though she is less prominent than the Irish sister, the story turns on her here too. There can be little doubt that Manannán (Manawydan) is the god of the Irish Sea and of its shores and principal islands. In the Irish saga of the *Second Battle of Moytura* it is Manannán's fosterling Lug mac Ethlenn who comes across the Irish Sea to take charge of the battle. We know Lug also from Continental sources. He must, in fact, cross the Irish Sea—the only continental god who does. He does not appear to be an indigenous Irish god.

In this respect, their non-Irish origins, Manannán and Lug differ from the other Irish gods, the gods of the *sid*-mounds. Neither the Dagda nor the mac Oc nor Midir are known in Britain, nor are the Irish goddesses known in Britain by name. They appear to be purely Irish, and Irish tradition would seem to support the supposition that they are older.

When we turn to the Irish *heroic stories* we find a mixture of native and non-native. The Ulster heroes seem native enough, as do the Connacht heroes, Ailill and Medb; and the Munster hero Cúroí mac Dáiri. But what of Cú Chulainn? His home is at Dun Deilgan on Dundrum Bay in the east of Ireland. Unlike the Ulster heroes, who are pictured as tall and fair, he is said to be small and dark. He is known to the earliest tradition as 'little Setanta',¹¹ a name which is connected with that of the earliest Welsh King Seithennin.¹² He is not subject to the *noinden*, or 'cess', the temporary disability or sickness which affects the other Irish heroes. *He* defends them, in fact, while *they* are affected by it. His pedigree is not certainly known. He is sometimes said to be a son of Lug and he is variously said to be a

son of Sualtair and a fosterling of Lug. He is one of the few Ulster heroes who crosses the sea to Britain. He crosses to Scathach and Aoife and learns from them the art of warfare, magic arts and gnomic (worldly) wisdom, and from Scathach he obtains his famous weapon, the *gai-bolga*. By Aoife he has a son. It is only after these adventures, and others in Britain, that he returns to Ireland to marry Emer, the daughter of Forgall Manach. He is a free-lance adventurer. He does not appear in the oldest stories—of Conn Cétchathech, or Cormac, or the Sons of Uisnech. He is a relatively late-comer, and he passes to and fro at will across the Irish Sea.

Before continuing our study of Cú Chulainn's education by Scathach and Aoife in Britain, let us look for a moment at a process or charm referred to in the *Táin Bó Cualnge*. It is described in the ninth-century *Glossary* of Cormac. It is a very difficult passage to translate, but it runs somewhat as follows according to the translations of Meyer and Stokes:¹³

'*Imbas forosnai*, "Knowledge that enlightens", (it) discovers everything that the poet wishes, and which he desires to manifest. Thus then is this done, namely the poet chews a bit of the red flesh of a pig or a hound or a cat, and puts it then on a flagstone behind the (door) valve, and sings an incantation upon it, and offers it to idol-gods and calls them to him, and leaves them not on the morrow; and chants, then, over his two palms, and calls idol-gods to him that they should not disturb his sleep; and puts his two palms round his two cheeks and falls asleep. And men are watching him so that no one may overturn him or disturb him. And so that on which he was (engaged) is shown unto him to the end of a *nomad* or two or three, for the long time or the short time that he was judged (to be) at the offering. And therefore is it called *Imbas*, i.e. a palm (*bas*) from this side and a palm from that, round his face or round his head. Patrick abolished that, and the *teinmláida* (illumination of song?); and he bare witness that whosoever should perform them should neither be of heaven nor of earth, for it is denial of baptism. *Dichetal dochennaib*, "extempore recital", in the law of art, this was left, for it is science (*Sous*) that causes it, and offering to devils is not needed at it, but a declaration from the ends of his bones (? fingers) at once.'

According to the second of the *Metrical Tractates* published by Thurneysen from the *Book of Ballymote*, the *Book of Leinster*, etc. the *filid* had to learn in his eighth year of training three songs, *Imbas forosnai*, *Tenm laida*, and *Dichetal da chennaib na tuaithe*. There can be no doubt that these are three technical terms which are closely related to the art of the *filid*—'illumination of song', 'knowledge which illuminates', and 'extempore incantation', so Meyer translates, and all are associated in the saga of the *Macgnimmartha Find* ('The Boyhood Exploits of Finn'). In Cormac's *Glossary*, *imbas forosnai* is described, not as a charm, but as a process of revelation induced by a mantic sleep, and this would seem to be indicated by other phrases in the prose sagas in which the term occurs. One of the most interesting and important examples of the *imbas forosnai* occurs in the *Táin Bó Cualnge* in connection with Fedelm the *banfaid* (woman prophetess) of Connacht. Medb asks her where she has come from. Fedelm replies: 'From Alba (Britain), where I have been learning poetry (*filidecht*) and magic (*imbas forosnai*)'. (The two arts are closely connected.) Thereupon Medb asks her to 'look' (*deca*) how her own (Medb's) undertaking will prosper. Fedelm 'looks' and then proceeds to chant in strophic form the result of her 'vision'.¹⁴ In the tradition of the *Táin* therefore *imbas forosnai* has its origin in *Britain*.

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Imbas forosnai is taught by Scathach and Aoife to Cú Chulainn in Britain.¹⁵ In the account found in LU, folio 125 b9, which almost certainly comes from the *Cin Dromma Snechta*,¹⁶ and was written down as early as the eighth century, we read that Scathach told him what should lie before him, and 'she spoke to him, through *Imbas forosnai*'.¹⁷

According to the earliest texts of the *Wooring of Emer Scathach* dwelt among the Alps (*Alpi*) which appears in the latest version as *Albion* (Scotland or perhaps Britain).¹⁸

From this story, therefore, and from the passage in the *Táin Bó Cualnge* quoted above, according to Irish tradition the *imbas forosnai* was introduced into Ireland from outside, from Britain; and it would appear that it was the special metier of women.

To return to Cú Chulainn, the *Táin* is concerned only with Cú Chulainn's military career, but it is clear that according to the oldest Irish tradition the homes of Scathach and Aoife formed general cultural establishments, and Cú Chulainn received there the normal education of a Celtic gentleman. There are other traditions of such establishments on this side of the Irish Sea. Sir John Rhys showed long ago that in the Welsh medieval romance of *Peredur* there was a tradition of nine witches of Gloucester who trained the hero in mantic arts, and who were also acquainted with prophecies. The picture is an elaborate one. The 'Witches' are nine in number, and they occupied a stronghold (a *liss*) with their parents. It was therefore presumably hereditary. Our source in Welsh is, of course, a late one. But why Gloucester? This had been a great Roman stronghold, and its prestige had obviously lasted. The story is an old one. We know of no such establishments in Ireland, and Cú Chulainn had to come to Britain for his training.

In Britain as late as the twelfth century Giraldus Cambrensis mentions in his *Description of Wales* a class of people whom he calls *awenithion* (*awenyddion*), who appear to practise an art closely resembling the *imbas forosnai*.¹⁹ Their name is derived from the word *awen*, or poetical (mantic) inspiration, and is generally conferred on a person during a mantic sleep. These people become rapt in an ecstasy in which they deliver themselves of speech which is not easily intelligible because the utterances are veiled (*cf.* Irish rhetorics), and apparently contradictory and highly figurative. Often such people have to be violently shaken before they can recover a normal condition. This may be a contemporary practice as described by Giraldus Cambrensis, or it may be derived from literary tradition, as I suspect the reference in Cormac's *Glossary* to be; but there can be little doubt that a practice like *imbas forosnai* in Wales was known to Giraldus Cambrensis, whether as a living practice or as a native literary motif. And moreover, let us not forget that the *verba Scathaige* (gnomic utterances in catalogue form) are the oldest evidence we have for Britain as the source of this type of literary framework.

We may perhaps compare the Cave of the Afanc and the Addanc, also in the Welsh medieval romance of *Peredur*. There are indications that these stories are possibly based on some Celtic institution which had a real existence, as Sir John Rhys suggested. We think of the household of Aranrod in the *Mabinogi of Math fab Mathonwy*. Again there is a supernatural woman referred to in the Breton *Life of St. Samson of Dol* (written in Latin) who was a witch, a *theomacha*, and chased Samson's deacon with a trident. She confesses to being one of nine sisters, all possessing supernatural powers. She can hardly be unrelated to the 'nine witches' of Gloucester.²⁰ Her story may perhaps belong to the Welsh part of St. Samson's life.

It will readily be admitted that the great body of Irish prose literature is wholly native and even heroic in theme and content. The majority of the Welsh is magical. The early Welsh is largely contained in the *Mabinogion*, and this, though admittedly late and disintegrated, is not heroic. It is therefore not derived in essence from Irish, however much it is indebted to Irish in individual themes. The story of *Pwyll* is essentially a story of magic transformation. *Branwen*, the most Irish of the stories, is in essence the story of the head of Bendigeid Vran, which is a magical explanation of the Gaulish love of head preserving. *Manawydan* is a story of a land transformed by magic into a wilderness, and *Math* above all is a story of a dynasty of magicians. All these themes are purely native Welsh. They may owe something to Gaulish—we do not really know; but they are quite independent of Irish. On the whole the evidence suggests that while Irish heroic literature originated and developed in Ireland, Irish magic had its background in Britain, and reached Ireland across the Irish Sea. Only a few fragments of Irish heroic tradition seems to have reached Wales; Britain was conservative in her traditions.

THE LITERATURE OF EARLY CHRISTIAN TIMES

When we turn to the literature of Christianity we find the Irish Sea a busy thoroughfare of criss-cross routes. In the fifth century we know from his own pen that St. Patrick was carried off to Ireland in a raid, probably from Strathclyde, and that later he managed to escape in a ship to Gaul. This can only have been via the Irish Sea, wherever he landed. From the sixth century onwards, the western Hebrides, including Iona, were in constant relations with northern Ireland. From Adamnán's *Life of St. Columba* we gather that these relations were very active in the seventh century, and from Bede we know that in the early eighth century at the latest, English scholars were flocking to Ireland for learning and hospitality, for both of which the Irish had gained a great reputation: 'The Irish welcomed them', said Bede, 'dispensing free hospitality and supplying them with books free of charge.'²¹ Bede was in friendly relations with Aldhelm of Malmesbury, itself an Irish foundation, and also with Pecthelm of Whithorn, a disciple of Aldhelm. Whithorn is a place which can only have been founded in such a site for easy communication with Ireland. This fact is amply substantiated by later tradition. Moreover when St. Colman retired defeated after the Council of Whitby in 663 or 664, it was to Ireland that he and his band of followers retired to settle in Inish Bofin (though naturally by way of Iona, not through Whithorn).

It began to look as if the Irish Sea was becoming the highway of the Roman Church; but North Wales was conservative, and clung to her Celtic institutions. It is not until 768 that we read in the *Annales Cambriae* that 'Easter is changed among the Britons, Elbodugus, the man of God, amending it', but the *Chronicle of the Princes* gives the date 715, and states that South Wales followed the example of North Wales in 777.²² To us it does not seem to have been till late in the eighth century that Wales conformed, nearly a century later than the North of Ireland (697) and the North of Ireland was nearly a century later than the South. Meanwhile in c. 632 we have the letter sent from Bishop Cummian, probably of Durrow, to Segene, fourth successor of Columba and abbot of Iona, urging the latter to come over to the Roman Easter. This is said by Kenney to be the only important controversial document written in Ireland regarding the Pascal question that we possess.²³ It was important, though unsuccessful, and we know it crossed the Irish Sea, conveyed from Durrow to Iona, probably in 632/633.

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In 686 and the two following years Adamnán, now abbot of Iona, and head of the Columban monasteries, was staying with Aldfrith of Northumbria, and was converted to the Roman Order; but on his return to Iona he found that the monks would not consent.²⁴ He went to the North of Ireland and there worked with the English monk, Ecgberht, who had come as the representative of the Anglo-Roman party, and in the synod of 697 they together brought the north of Ireland into conformity with Rome. Adamnán returned to Iona in 703 and died in 704. But in 716 Ecgberht came to Iona also, and in this year he persuaded the abbot Dunchad and most of the monks to celebrate Easter according to Roman usage. In the seventh century, indeed, intercourse between Northumbria, Iona, and Ireland was exceedingly active, and we have much evidence for the crossing of the Irish Sea.

By the middle of the ninth century we have some definite evidence of a through route between Ireland and Wales. There was a change of dynasty in Gwynedd (north-west Wales, including Anglesey). Merfyn Frych was not in the direct male line, and seems to have come from the North. His line had probably been displaced earlier from Galloway by Aethelfrith and his successors in Northumbria, moving westwards through Strathclyde.²⁶ Merfyn's dynasty had probably moved southwards across Morcambe Bay, for we can trace it *en route* for the Isle of Man, and he established himself from there in Anglesey, his mother's home. From here he wrote a letter to his brother-in-law, King Concenn, the last king of the native dynasty of Powys, who died in Rome in 854. It is probably the first Welsh letter in existence, but we possess only the opening—

“Mermin rex Concenn salutem,”

“King Merfyn greets Concenn.”

The line is enclosed in a letter to an Irish teacher Colgu, and is preserved in a manuscript at Bamberg in Germany. The relevant passage of the letter to Colgu runs as follows:

‘This is the inscription which was offered as an ordeal by Dubthach to the learned Irishmen at the citadel (*arx*) of Merfyn, king of the Britons. For he (*i.e.* Dubthach) so far thought himself the best of all the Irish and the Britons as to believe that no Irish scholar, much less British, would be able to interpret the writing before King Mermin. But to us (Caunchobrach, Fergus, Dominach and Suadbar) by the help of God it did not remain insoluble.’

Then follows the interpretation of the cryptogram—Mermin rex Conchen salutem—and the explanation of the method by which it was composed, that of substituting *Greek letters for Latin*, and the passage continues:

‘Please understand, wise and estimable Colgu, our very learned teacher, that we are not transmitting this exposition to you as to one needing such enlightenment, but we humbly ask that in your kindness you would give this information to such of our simple and unsophisticated Irish brethren as may think of sailing across the British Sea, lest perchance otherwise they might be made to blush in the presence of Mermin, the glorious king of the Britons, not being able to understand that inscription.’²⁷

This passage is very important, for it shows that in the ninth century

- (1) There was a regular ‘packet service’ across the Irish Sea to the court of Merfyn;
- (2) This was a recognised pilgrim route to Rome;

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- (3) Others, as well as recognised pilgrims, used it if they could, but Merfyn's hospitality was only extended to the educated Irish pilgrims, and an intelligence test—a kind of neck-verse—was imposed on all comers;
- (4) The test involved elementary Greek;
- (5) There was an official at Merfyn's court named Dubthach responsible for submitting this test;
- (6) We may guess that those who succeeded in passing this test would be passed on to Concenn's court in Powys, and perhaps go under his further escort to Rome, as we know he went himself.

Who the teacher Colgu was we do not know. He was possibly the learned Colgu of Clonmacnois, which was like a university at that time, but the name is common. Anyhow, this is a delightful bit of cheating. Ireland had been able to transmit just this amount of elementary Greek at least to Gwynedd. Another manuscript from Brussels contains both the cryptogram and the letter, and the letter is also referred to in the Bamberg text. The Brussels MS is believed to be in a St. Gall hand of the period, and St. Gall was the famous halting place of pilgrims going to Rome; it is just where we should expect to find such a cryptogram. Both MSS are derived from a ninth century original. At some period the *Codex* belonged to the chapter library of the abbey of St. Lawrence at Liège. Contacts between St. Gall and Liège are known to have been numerous in the ninth century. Manuscripts are also known to have reached Bamberg from Liège. At this period Liège was a cultivated intellectual centre of the circle of King Charles the Bald, and news of Merfyn's son Rhodri also seems to have reached them.

The close communication between Wales and Ireland continued in the next generation. Rhodri Mawr is mentioned three times in *Annals of Ulster*, which also record the death of Horm (O.N. Gormr), the leader of the Danes, in 855, at the hands of Ruadhri, son of Mermin, 'king of Britain'. It is not impossible that the fame of this victory may have reached the continent where Charles the Bald was anxiously watching the raids on his own coasts. The panegyric of Sedulius Scottus (Sedulius the Irishman), a member of Charles's court, was composed about this time, on a certain Roricus (Ruadhri). In 876 (*recte* 877), *Annals of Ulster* record how Ruadhri, son of Mermin, king of the Britons, came to Ireland fleeing before the Black Foreigners (*i.e.* the Danes).

The Age of the Saints, as the sixth and seventh centuries have come to be called, was chiefly known intellectually by the *vitae*, or 'The Lives of the Saints'. These came to be written in ever-increasing numbers, from Muirchu's *Life of St. Patrick*, written in Ireland before 699, and Adamnán's *Life of St. Columba*, written in Scotland in the same century, in a style already superseded. The longer narrative style had already made its way in. The Breton *Life of St. Samson* (in Latin), which contains much Irish and Welsh matter, is thought by many to have been already written in the seventh century. This is much earlier than any other *vita* of a Welsh saint, though we have a number of the ninth century in Northern Brittany which must have derived their subject matter from Wales.

The earliest Welsh life, however, is Rhygyfarch's *Life of St. David*, written at St. David's in Dyfed in the eleventh century. This is full of Irish material, for Dyfed had become practically an Irish country long before this time. Rhygyfarch's father, Bishop Sulien of St. David's,²⁸

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was a native of Llanbadarn Fawr, Aberystwyth, and had gone to Ireland for his education, stimulated by the example of his forbears (*exemplo patrum commotus*). From this it is clear that he was not the first learned man of his family to receive his education in Ireland. He seems to have remained there for perhaps thirteen years. He then returned to his native Cardiganshire (*ad patriam remeans*) where he became a famous teacher. Late in life he became bishop of St. David's. He made himself responsible for the education of his four sons. Rhygyfarch was the most famous of these, with his *Life of St. David*, and his *Psalter and Martyrology*, written in 1079. The Psalter was illuminated by his brother Ieuan. Both works show marked Irish characteristics: the beautiful minuscule handwriting and the later style of illumination. Their contents, too, are full of Irish themes. But with Bishop Sulien and his family we are entering upon Middle Ages, and this is beyond the scope of the present paper. Enough has been said to prove that the literary evidence indicates a close and long-standing unity of culture among the Celtic peoples around the shores of the Irish Sea.

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- ¹ Probably a genitive, also used as a nominative, the true nominative being lost. Cf. T. F. O'Rahilly (1946), 308, 315.
- ² Cf. Tolkien, in *Report on Lydney*, App. I.
- ³ *Mabinogion*: Kilhwch and Olwen, in *Red Book of Hergest*, Oxford, 1887, vol. I, 131, 134. Professor Tolkien suggests with probability that the fixing of the father's name as Lludd may have owed something to the alliteration of his surname. See App. I to Wheeler's report on Lydney.
- ⁴ C. O'Rahilly, *Ireland and Wales*, 128.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.
- ⁷ Roy Millward, *Lancashire*, London, 1955, 26, 51 ff.
- ⁸ D. Sylvester and G. Nulty, *The Historical Atlas of Cheshire*, Chester, 1958.
- ⁹ Parry, *Celtic Tradition*; Griffiths *op. cit.*, 75.
- ¹⁰ K. Jackson, 'The Motive of the three-fold death in the story of Suibhne Geilt', *Feil-sgribinn Eoin Mac Neill*, 535 ff.
- ¹¹ Thurneyson, *Heldensage*, 90.
- ¹² Well-known from Peacock's novel, *The Misfortunes of Elphin*, as Seithennin the Drunkard, who allowed the sea to inundate Cardigan Bay through neglect of an ancient sea-wall.
- ¹³ W. Stokes, Laud 610, fol. 79A in his edition and translation of the *Tripartite Life of St. Patrick*, Vol. II, 569.
- ¹⁴ *Ériu* I, Part II, supplement, 4.
- ¹⁵ *Revue Celtique*, XI (1890), 433.
- ¹⁶ Thurneysen, *Heldensaga*, 17.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 377; cf. ZFKP, IX, 487; III, 255 ff.; IX, 487 and same in *Anecdota* from Irish MSS by K. Meyer, V, 28 f.
- ¹⁸ Thurneysen, 388, n. 1. Scathach and Aoife seem to have been in Scotland.
- ¹⁹ I, cap. XVI.
- ²⁰ A. W. Wade-Evans, *Welsh Christian Origins*, 217.
- ²¹ *History of England*, III, 27.
- ²² Zimmer, *The Early Celtic Church*, 62.
- ²³ p. 220.
- ²⁴ Bede, *History of England*, V, 15.
- ²⁵ Zimmer, 86.
- ²⁶ Cf. A. W. Wade-Evans, 'Prolegomena to a Study of the Lowlands', *TDGNHAS*, Whithorn Volume, XXVII (1949), 82, n. 123A.
- ²⁷ Gougaud, *Christianity in Celtic Lands*, 252 f. Cf. Chadwick, *Studies in Early British Christianity*, 94 f.
- ²⁸ *Studies in Early British History*, 166 ff.

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