WRITING HISTORY: EARLY IRISH HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FORM

"History has no stipulatable subject matter uniquely its own; it is always written as part of a contest between contending poetic figurations of what the past might consist of".[1]

This essay is based on certain assumptions – assumptions which are not unusual (they have been current for sometime among historiographers), but which should probably be explicit.[2] I am assuming that since the writing of history, the recording of sequential past events, is essentially a process of creating narrative form, literary criticism can offer some helpful approaches to the study of historiography.[3] Historical narratives, as Hayden White has proposed, are "manifestly. . . verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences".[4] In particular, I am assuming that like other narrative forms, the forms of historical narration are significant symbolic structures: simply as forms, they connote certain kinds of conventional meanings, which they project upon the events they report. Reading historical narratives critically can yield insight into their structural connotations; their stylistic, formal, and rhetorical conventions can begin to suggest answers to major questions about the people who generate them: What is their image of the past? How do they believe that the past is related to the present? What do they believe is the place of human kind in the world?

As a small beginning on such a reading of medieval Irish history, I propose here to discuss three common forms of historical writing in (mainly) pre-Norman Irish tradition, which I will refer to as annals, legends, and chronicles.[5] These genres are not unique to Ireland, of course – and indeed, their development in Ireland in several ways parallels their development in western Europe as a whole. But my concern here will not be with the kinship between medieval Irish historiography and that of Europe in general; instead, I will make some remarks about the

[1] H. White, "The Historical Text As Literary Artifact", in R. H. Canary and H. Kozicki (ed.), *The Writing of history: literary form and historical understanding* (Wisconsin 1978) 60.

[2] The present essay is based on a presentation delivered at the Harvard Seminar in Celtic Literature, Harvard University, in February 1987.

[3] The literary qualities of much early Irish historical prose have of course long been recognized. See, for instance, B. O Cuív, "Literary Creation and Irish Historical Tradition", Rhŷs Lecture, *Proceedings of the British Academy* 49 (1963) 233–62; F. J. Byrne, "*Senchas*: The Nature of Gaelic Historical Tradition", in J. G. Barry (ed.), *Historical Studies 9* (Belfast 1974) 137–59; K. Hughes, "The Early Celtic idea of history and the modern historian: an inaugural lecture" (Cambridge 1977); D. O Corráin, "Historical Need and Literary Narrative", in D. Ellis Evans (ed.), *Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress of Celtic Studies, Oxford, 1983* (Oxford 1986) 141–58.

[4] White, "The Historical Text As Literary Artifact," 42.

[5] F. J. Byrne, "*Senchas*," discusses Irish historical genres which he names "myth", "legend", "pseudo-history", and "fiction"; his distinctions depend in large part on content, and, as he notes, these four genres "tend to be inextricably ravelled in the texts as we have them" (p. 149). Annals, legends, and chronicles as I refer to them here, on the other hand, are descriptive designations based largely on stylistic and rhetorical qualities.

rhetorical and symbolic implications of annals, legends, and chronicles in their Irish context.

I begin with annals, since they dominated historical writing in Europe for so many centuries. Let us take as a sample the entries for the years 701 and 702 in the Annals of Ulster, the fullest of the annalistic compilations at this period:

> [701] *Kl. Ianair. Anno domini .dcc. Bouina mortalitas.*
> *Colman aue Oirc, Ceallach m. Maele Racho ep*[*iscopu*]*s*, *Dicchuill abbas Cluana Auis, mortui sunt.*
> *Ailill m. Con cen Mathair, rex Muman, moritur.*
> *Feidelmidh m. Fergusa m. Aedhain moritur.*
> *Iugulatio Aedho Odbae.*
> *Aedh m. Dluthaig, Congal m. Euganain mortui sunt.*
> *Imbairecc i Scii ubi cecidit Conaing mc. Dunchado 7 filius Cuandai.*
> *Distructio Duin Onlaigh apud Sealbach.*
> *Iugulatio generis Cathboth. Iugulatio Conaill m. Suibne regis na nDeisi.*
> *Conall m. Donennaigh, rex nepotum Finngenti, moritur.*
> *Occisio Neill m. Cernaig. Irgalach nepos* [*r. filius*] *Conaing occidit illum.*
>
> [702] *Kl. Ianair. Anno Domini d.cc.i. Muiredach Campi Ai moritur.*
> *Irgalach nepos* [*r. filius*] *Conaing a Britonibus iugulatus i nInsi m Nesan.*
> *Feldobor Clochair dormiuit.*
> *Maccnia, rex nepotum Echdach Ulath, Ailill m. Cinn Faelad rex Ciannachta, mortui sunt; 7 Garban Midhe, 7 Colggu m. Moenaigh abbas Luscan, 7 Luath Foigde, 7 Crach Erpais sapientes, mortui sunt.*
> *Tiberius Cesar annis .uii. regnauit.*[6]

Stylistically, such annals entries are easy enough to describe: bare statements of fact – mainly simple declarative sentences, though occasionally mere phrases (*Bouina mortalitas*; *Occisio Neill mic Cernaig*), and sometimes, though not in this particular sample, a single name, an implicit obituary notice. Complex sentences are rare – and not very complex (cf. under 701, above, *Imbairecc i Scii ubi cecidit . . .*) – and this is true whether the annals are composed primarily in Latin, as in the early period, or in Irish. (At this point in AU the text is somewhat macaronic, though still predominantly Latin.) Typically, adjectives and adverbs are lacking, the range of vocabulary is severely limited, and the language of the entries is mainly formulaic.

The range of events reported is almost as constrained as the language of reportage. Major natural disaster: a cattle murrain. Natural deaths of kings, lay nobility, high-ranking churchmen, scholars. Slayings and assassinations of the same sorts of personnel. Raids and battles. The overwhelming focus of attention is on events in Ireland (chiefly but not exclusively in the Northern Half) and its extended community in Scottish Dál Riata, although there is also information synchronizing these events with the passage of time in the greater world – in this

[6] S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill (ed.), *The Annals of Ulster to* AD *1131*, Part I: text and translation (Dublin 1983) 160.

case, under 702, with the reign of the Eastern Emperor Tiberius Caesar. Such, along with some sort of information demarcating one year from the next, are the typical contents of Irish annals.

What rhetorical clues do the annals present? How do they indicate the concerns, the beliefs, the audience, the identity of the annalist? We almost have to say that the annalist is deliberately absent. There are no statements of opinion, no indications of evaluation. There are not even any suggestions as to cause or effect, thus no claim of special understanding on the part of the recorder. (Why was Dunolly destroyed? Why was Aed Odbae murdered? What were the consequences of these catastrophes?) The complete disjunction of the statements within each year implies no principle of ranking: all events seem to be of the same order of importance. Although one might not go so far as Hayden White in speaking of the annalists' "refusal to narrate", they do not comment on the moral or social significance of the events they record.[7]

Yet they did record, and given the high value of vellum and the laboriousness of scribal activity, we must assume that they did so because they felt that what they were doing was important. The fact that the importance is not explained implies that it was taken for granted by both the monastic historians and their audiences; handicapped by our distance in time and place from them, we must infer the significance of annals from what was written. Risky as it may be to analyze texts so spare in contents, we may still ask certain questions. What does their form communicate? What relationship to the past, what attitude towards the past, what image of the world, do they present?

It is a past full of happenings, indeed major happenings in this Christian, aristocratic, pastoral/agricultural society. These are events of some importance for the monastic community and its secular supporters, but they are presented without mention of their past causes or potential future effects, presented simply as discrete items arranged in clusters along a time-line – thus unique events, sequential, non-recurring. The form of annals speaks of the irrevocable passage of time, of the threat of obliteration from human knowledge. Perhaps we should see the annalist, filling up the vellum, shoring up against oblivion a record of events of monumental significance to his community. In the grips of such a heroic conceit about record-keeping, however, we should not forget how very passive is the image of human action in the annals. To quote Hayden White again, annals foreground "the forces of disorder, natural and human", and "figur[e] forth a world in which things *happen to* people rather than one in which people *do* things".[8] Plagues and crop failures and storms strike; kings and scholars and abbots die; men are slain – but it is the exception rather than the rule for the slayer to be named. The picture of the past in the annals is of a past in which people do not control events, and in which human moral principles are not central. Implicitly, the disposer of all is God. It is God, not man, who understands the principles of cause and effect that govern human lives. And this situation obtains for the Irish, for Tiberius Caesar, for the world. Annals present a profoundly monastic point of view.

[7] White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical inquiry* 7 (Autumn 1980) 18.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 14.

At the opposite extreme from annals in several respects were the medieval historical legends built around some of the same kings and clerics whose exploits and deaths the annals record. These tales from what Myles Dillon christened "the cycles of the kings" vary considerably in length, in age, and in their degrees of literary elaboration, but rhetorically they have much in common with one another. As a sample, I present here a short tale (perhaps first written in the tenth century, though rewritten thereafter) that relates precisely to the years 701–702 represented from the Annals of Ulster above. The tale concerns Irgalach son of Conaing, king of Síl nAeda Sláine in northern Brega.

Isin bliadain si do rala eidir Iorghalach mc. Conaing 7 Adhamhnan, ar sárugadh Adamhnáin do Iorgalach im marbadh Neill a bhrathar dhó ar comairge Ad[a]mhnáin. As eadh do ghníodh Ad[a]mhnán: trosgadh gac[h] n-oidhche 7 gan codladh, 7 bheith i n-uisgibh uair[i]bh, do thimdhibhe saoghail Iorgalaigh. As eadh imorro do gniodh an chóraidh sain, .i. Iorgalach: a fhiarfaighid do Ad[a]m(a)nán, "Créd do géna-sa anocht, a chleirigh?" Ní ba h-áil do Ad[a]m(a)nán brég do radha fris. Ro inniseadh dhó go mbíadh a ttrosgadh gan chodladh i n-uisge úar go maidin. Do gniodh an t-Iorgalach an cédna, .i. da sháoradh ar easguine Ad[a]mhnáin. Acht cheana, ra mheall Ad[a]mnán esiomh: .i. rá bhoí Ad[a]mnán 'gá rádh ra clereach dá mhuintir, "Bí-si sunna anocht um riocht-sa 7 mh'édach-sa iomad, 7 da ttí Iorgalach da iarfaighid dhiot créd ra ghéna anocht, abair-si budh fleadhugadh 7 codladh do ghéana, ar dháigh go ndearna-somh na cédna". Uair assu ra Ad[a]mnán bréag da fhior muintire qu[a]m do fén.

Tainig iar[a]mh Iorgalach d'ionsoigidh an clerigh sin, 7 andar leis ba é Adamhnan baoi ann. Ro iarfaigh Iorgalach dhe, "Créd do geana-sa anocht, a cleirigh?"

"Fleadhughadh 7 codlad," ar an clereach.

Do roine dno Iorgalach fleadhughadh 7 codlad an aidhchi sin. Do rigne imorro Ad[a]mhnán áoine 7 friothaire 7 bheith 'san Bhóinn go maidin. An tan dno ro bhaoi Iorgalach 'na chodladh, as eadh ad connairc, Ad[a]mnán do bheith gonuige a bhraghaid isin uisge, 7 ro bidhg go mór trid sin asa chodladh, 7 ra innis da mhnaoí. An bhean imorro ba h-umhal inísil í don Choimdheadh 7 do Ad[a]mhnán, úair bá torrach í, 7 bá h-eagail lé a clann do lot tré easguine Ad[a]mhnáin. Agas ra ghuidheadh go meinic Ad[a]mnán gan a clann do lot no d'esgaine.

Rá érigh iar[a]mh Iorgalach mochtráth arnabhárach, 7 do rala Ad[a]mnán 'na aighidh. As eadh ra raidh Ad[a]mnán ris: "A mic mhallaighthe", ar se, "7 a dhuine as cródha 7 as meassa do righne Día, bíoth a fhioss agat gurob gairid gur rod sgerthar rit flaithius, 7 ragha dochum n-ifrinn".

O do chúala bean Iorgalaigh sin, tainig ar amus Ad[a]mnáin, 7 ro luigh fo chossaibh Ad[a]mnáin; ra attaigh Día riss gan a clann d'easguine, 7 gan an ghein ro bhaoí 'na broinn [do lot]. As eadh ro ráidh Ad[a]mnán: "Búdh rí go demhin", ar sé, "an ghen fail id bhroinn, 7 as briste a lea[th]shuil anossa tré easguine a athar". Agas as amhlaid sin do rala. Rugadh fo cédóir iar sain an mac, 7 as amhluidh ro bhaoí 7 sé leathcháoch.

[In this year enmity arose between Irgalach son of Conaing and Adamnán, for Irgalach had flouted Adamnán by killing his own kinsman, Niall, in spite of Adamnán's protection. This is what Adamnán did: he fasted every night without sleeping, staying in cold water, to shorten Irgalach's life. And this is what that sinner, that is, Irgalach, used to do: he would ask Adamnán, "What will you do tonight, cleric?" Adamnán did not want to tell him a lie. He would tell him that he would be fasting without sleep in cold water until morning. Irgalach would do the same, to free himself from Adamnán's curse. But all the same, Adamnán deceived him. Adamnán was talking to one of the clerics of his household, saying, "You be here tonight in my place, with my clothes on you, and when Irgalach comes to ask you what you will do tonight, say that you will be feasting and sleeping, so that he will do the same" – for it was easier for Adamnán that one of his people should lie than he himself.

Then Irgalach came to that cleric, and he thought that it was Adamnán who was there. Irgalach asked him, "What will you do tonight, cleric?"

"Feast and sleep", said the cleric.

So Irgalach feasted and slept that night. Adamnán, on the other hand, fasted and kept vigil and stayed in the Boyne till morning. While Irgalach was asleep, he saw Adamnán up to his neck in the water, and he started violently out of his sleep because of that, and he told it to his wife. Now his wife was humble and obedient to the Lord and to Adamnán, because she was pregnant and was afraid that her child might be harmed through Adamnán's curse, and she used often to beseech Adamnán not to harm or curse her child.

Irgalach rose early the next morning, and Adamnán came to see him. Adamnán said to him: "Cursed son", said he, "hardest and worst man of God's making, know that shortly you will be separated from your sovereignty, and you will go to Hell".

When Irgalach's wife heard that, she came before Adamnán and lay at his feet, and besought him for God's sake not to curse her child, the infant that was in her womb. Adamnán said, "The infant in your womb will be king indeed, but one of his eyes is now damaged as a result of the cursing of his father". And that is how it was. The boy was born immediately after that, and he was blind in one eye.][9]

It is hard to imagine a presentation of past events more different from annals than this kind of tale. There are no terse formulas; sentences of syntactic complexity present an interwoven account of motivations, causes, and effects. These actions are not disjunct; they are multiply interconnected. The narrator commands a wide vocabulary, and freely dramatizes his tale with conversational speech.

More important, a narrator is evident here, commenting and explaining – not to say sometimes equivocating ("for it was easier for Adamnán that one of his people should lie than he himself"). This narrator is not bound to handle events in rigid chronological sequence; he can deal with time flexibly, juxtaposing present events in the story, past events (Irgalach's murder of Niall), habitual actions in the past (Adamnán's ritual cursing, Irgalach's nightly questioning, Irgalach's wife's

[9] J. N. Radner (ed.), *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* [*FA*] (Dublin 1978) 46–49.

persistent fears that Adamnán will harm her unborn child), and glances ahead to the future (the birth of the maimed baby, Adamnán's prophecies). We see the narrator deliberately controlling the degree of emphasis given to various elements of his story.

Now let us ask of this legend another of the questions previously asked of the annals: what image of the world is implicit here? From the narrator's point of view, Irgalach wilfully committed a sinful deed in killing his kinsman Niall, and in response, Adamnán carefully planned and executed a powerful punishment. In this world, indeed, "people *do* things"; their actions are shown and vividly dramatized as both effects and causes of other actions. The assumption here is that free will generates human events, and that human actions must be governed by the social and moral laws understood by the community. This is not by any means a pagan vision, however, or even a secular one. The universe is still governed by God – but in the legend world, God responds to people and supports human social norms, and there are tangible signs of divine intervention. The child is born half blind.

The social norms that God is shown to be supporting here are hardly universal, nor even necessarily Biblical: they are native Irish, as are the literary motifs. Here, typically, the sacral status of the cleric is analogous to that of a poet, and is demonstrated in verbal and prophetic power; Adamnán's curse is overwhelming, and he foretells its outcome. We also have the common theme of a power struggle between king and cleric, here, as elsewhere, focused on the issue of a king's violation of clerical sanctuary – the ecclesiastical equivalent of a lay guarantor's surety.[10] Here, too, we have the kind of legalistic trickery that often characterizes sacral – what Dumézil calls "first-function" – figures in Irish tradition. And the legal action itself is of a peculiarly Irish (and archaic Indo-European) kind: fasting for redress of a wrong.

In fact, this legend's treatment of the theme of fasting for redress may stand as a paradigm of the blending of cultural worldview typical in medieval Ireland. As the story first puts it, Adamnán is performing *troscad*, a ritual fast constituting a legal maneuver, pre-Christian and possibly Indo-European in its origins.[11] *Troscad* is a method of gaining redress when one has a genuine grievance against a man whose status is too high for other legal proceedings to be effective. Adamnán is performing *troscad* against king Irgalach, and Irgalach is attempting to block the tactic by ritual counter-fasting, matching Adamnán's sundown-to-sunrise fast with his own. But Adamnán's fasting is not only *troscad*, the secular legal tactic aimed at subduing Irgalach. It is at the same time also *aíne*, Christian ascetic, penitential fasting aimed at influencing God. The night that Adamnán finally wins, he is performing *aíne 7 frithaire*, an ascetic vigil-*cum*-fast designed to compel God's aid in punishing Irgalach, and as a result, he is given the foreknowledge that Irgalach will lose his kingship and go straight to Hell. The story uses both the native

[10] For a discussion of this theme in Middle Irish narratives, see J. N. Radner, "The Significance of the Threefold Death in Celtic Tradition," in P. K. Ford (ed.), *Celtic Folklore and Christianity* (Los Angeles 1983) 180–200.

[11] Cf. D. A. Binchy, "Irish History and Irish Law: I", *Studia Hibernica* 15 (1975) 23–27; for specific references in the laws, see F. Kelly, *A guide to Early Irish law* (Dublin 1988) 182–83.

Irish legal term *troscad* and the loan-word *aíne* (from Lat. *ieiunium*) to describe Adamnán's bivalent maneuver.

This interpenetration of secular and ecclesiastical elements, typical of medieval Irish historical legends, attests to the steady process of blending secular and Christian cultures, the secular learning of the *filid* and the ecclesiastical scholarship of the monastic *literati*, that had been going on at least since the sixth century. As Kim McCone has pointed out, "the boundaries between Latin learning and jurisprudence, poetry and history are blurred, to say the least, in the relevant accounts and there is evidence for a great deal of overlap both in theory and practice".[12] Like the legends themselves, the audiences for such historical narratives as these were both lay and clerical – and the legends often have much to say about the interrelationship between Church and State.

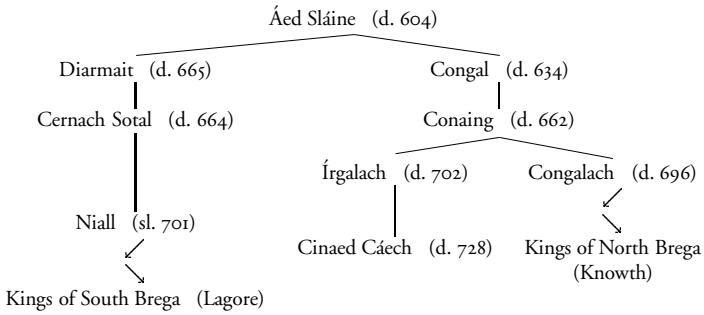
If we ask of legends another of the questions we asked of annals – what relationship between past and present do they represent? – again it is clear that both Christian and native Irish tradition have contributed to the development of the form, for its interpretation by the medieval Irish was in a style congenial to both the native tradition of *senchas* and the Christian science of typology, the study of types or figures in the Old Testament through which God covertly foreshadowed events to come. The story of the cursing of Irgalach could have been seen as true in two different senses: "historically", that is, as presenting past events that actually happened, and "prophetically", prefiguring events to come.[13]

How is the story a true record of past events? From our perspective, it would feel rash to assume that the tale is factual, given its reliance on magic, its density of traditional motifs, and its dramatic style. We can verify only three of its assertions from other sources: first, that Irgalach actually did slay his cousin Niall, in 701 A.D.; second, that Irgalach himself was slain shortly thereafter and thus lost his kingship; and third, that Irgalach's son Cinaed, though he became king, had something wrong with one eye, for all sources refer to him as Cinaed Cáech, "One-eyed Cinaed". Indeed, the legend seems to fit into the cracks between annals entries: it fills in precisely what is excluded from the annals – the personalities, the causes, the moral values, the whole cultural structure without which happenings are beyond human comprehension. And in turning bare "facts" into story, it makes those facts accessible to the human imagination. The traditional narrative shape – familiar, sensible, and thus by itself already, in a way, "true" – can best be seen to validate the "facts", and not vice-versa.

Like the apostles, for whom the history of Moses represented both far past events and also key moments in the recent life of Christ, medieval Irish historians could see a story like The Cursing of Irgalach as both a record of the events of 701 and a prefiguring of more recent happenings. The story actually "explained" the recent history of the royal line of Síl nÁeda Sláine:

[12] K. McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present in Early Irish literature* (Maynooth 1990) 24.

[13] See the discussion in D. Hay, *Annalists and historians: Western historiography from the eighth to the eighteenth centuries* (London 1977) 19.



In the later half of the seventh century, the Síl nÁeda Sláine kingship of Brega was decisively split, north against south, and this split, begun and perpetuated by a series of internecine battles and kinslayings, was the cause of the grave weakening of Síl nÁeda Sláine, in the eighth century and after, and of their exclusion from the Uí Néill kingship of Tara. This story of Irgalach, located back near the first Síl nÁeda Sláine kinslayings, provides a "psychohistorical" explanation for the decline of the tribe. Niall, the slain kinsman, was ancestor of all the kings of South Brega. Irgalach's father, Conaing, was ancestor of the kings of *North* Brega. Irgalach's son Cinaed, in this tale blemished even before his birth by God's curse against his kinslaying father, was the last Síl nÁeda Sláine King of Tara for more than two centuries, and he is not known to have had children. Not only Irgalach, but also his progeny, lost connection with kingship; the sovereignty of North Brega descended through his brother Congalach. To slay a kinsman, the tale says, is to betray one's family and its future; just punishment, therefore, is to be cut off from both family and future.

Thus the legend dramatized a societal principle, and prefigured a recent historical situation familiar to its audience; it said, implicitly, that the situations of the past *do* recur – the opposite message to that implicit in the annals – and therefore it was a powerful didactic tool for its contemporary audience. I would guess, further, that the story about Irgalach was first composed to fit a particular occasion for which its didactic function was appropriate: the mid-tenth-century accession to the kingship of Tara of Congalach mac Máele-mithig, the next Síl nÁeda Sláine King of Tara after Cinaed Cáech, and, indeed, the last Síl nÁeda Sláine King of Tara ever. (A flurry of Síl nÁeda Sláine stories can be dated to this time.) The legend would have served Congalach as injunction and warning: if you violate proper relations with your kin and with the clergy, oblivion awaits you. On these rocks your predecessors have been shipwrecked before; the principle is demonstrably true (whether or not the story is regarded as factual in detail or not).

This principle embodied in Irish historical legends, that the past provides the paradigm for the future, seems precisely opposed to the assumptions about historical truth that gave rise to the writing of annals. The annalist presented a minimally structured sequence of non-recurring past events with no narrative form or explicit didactic purpose; the composers and tellers of legends presented a highly structured, didactic and mythopoeic narrative of past events in which time sequence was subordinate in importance to the symbolic message.

In addition to annals and legends, and later than these, Ireland developed a third mode of historical rhetoric which I will refer to as "chronicle". In some cases chronicles seem to have developed within the framework of annals, and to have been regarded, therefore, as kindred to them in nature. We can see this in England in the development of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle after the time of Alfred, for instance, and in Ireland there is clearly a Mac Carthaig chronicle in the Annals of Inisfallen in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, and a chronicle centering on Cathal Crobhderg O'Connor in the Annals of Loch Cé and the Annals of Connacht.[14] Even chronicles which are not an integral part of annals texts, such as *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, tend to be built around annalistic sources at their beginnings.[15]

In chronicles, as in annals, temporal sequence is of prime importance: A happened and then B happened and then C happened, and so forth. But in annals facts A and B and C are disjunct; their interconnection, and any notion of progressive change which may be potential in their sequential arrangement, receive no comment. Not so in chronicles, which present the past as a continuum of factual events causally interrelated. Like the Irish writers of legends, chroniclers narrate, although their plots and dramatic situations are less varied than those in the legends. A higher proportion of events in chronicles than in legends is corroborated by independent annals entries – but the range of subject matter in Irish chronicles is less wide than in the annals, comprising essentially political and military history and tactics. The chronicle genre was fully evolved by the first half of the twelfth century, when *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* was written under the patronage of the O'Briens. *CGG* represents amply, and in the full-blown rhetoric of its period, the major features of chronicle. After an opening narrative of Viking activities in Ireland down to 922 A.D., probably drawn from a full annals text, *CGG* presents an emotional history of the Vikings in Munster, who arrived in an immense flood and "countless sea-vomitings of ships and boats and fleets" (*murbrucht diaisneisi long ocus laidheng ocus cobhlach*) and overran the province until they were opposed by Mathgamhain and Brian of the Dál gCais,

> two gates of battle, two poles of combat, two spreading trees of shelter, two spears of victory and readiness, of hospitality and munificence, of heart and strength, of friendship and liveliness (*da tuir croda comnerta comcalma, da laech lonna letarracha luchtmara, da comlaid catha, da cleith ugra, da dos didin, da rind aba ocus urlaimi, enig ocus egnuma brotha ocus brigi bagi*).

Specific marches and battles are described, along with the leaders' heroic speeches; Brian, for instance, responding to his brother's timorous refusal to defend Munster lest his army, vastly outnumbered by the Vikings, be killed, replies heroically

> that it was hereditary for him to die, and hereditary for all the Dál gCais, for their fathers and grandfathers had died, and death was certain to come upon

[14] S. Mac Airt (ed.), *The Annals of Innisfallen* (Dublin 1951); W. M. Hennessy (ed.), *The Annals of Loch Cé* 2 vols., (London 1871); A. M. Freeman (ed.), *Annála Connacht: The Annals of Connacht* (Dublin 1944).

[15] J. H. Todd (ed.), *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh: the war of the Gaedhil with the Gaill* [*CGG*] (London 1867).

themselves; but it was not natural or hereditary for them to submit to insult or contempt, because their fathers or their grandfathers had not submitted to it from anyone on earth.

(*. . . ba duthaig do éc, ocus ba duthaig do Dail Cais uli, uair marb a n-athri, ocus a senathri, ocus bas ar a cend doib fein dágbail; ocus nirbo dual, imorro, ocus nirbo duthaig doib tár na tarcaisin do gabail, uair nir gabsat a n-athri no shenaithri sin o neoch ar talmain*.)[16]

What is clear, in the emotional rhetoric of this chronicle as in others, is that the ingredient which converts annals into chronicles, which welds those facts of the past into narrative shape, is intense political partisanship. Interest in the significant continuity of history seems to be a byproduct of the partisanship of the historian – and also of some other important developments in worldview. The focus of Irish chronicles is upon human leaders and their strategies – military tactics, telling public rhetoric – which can be explained in practical terms. These narratives are designed to serve the ends of secular power by celebrating pragmatic leadership – quite unlike the historical legends, which teach that power is maintained by adherence to the traditional laws of God and Christian Irish society, and also unlike the annals, which by their very lack of narrative form imply that only God controls and understands human fortunes. Chronicles teach the Art of What Works, and thus they stress the immediate event, its causes and consequences, time-bound – the syntax of history rather than the paradigm. It is certainly significant that this innovation in historiography arises in Ireland (and also elsewhere in medieval Europe) in connection with particularly innovative kings. Brian Borumha's mettle will easily stand with that of Charlemagne and Alfred.[17]

In highlighting these three major forms of medieval Irish historical writing, I have suggested that each was predicated upon a different philosophy of historical causation. These separate philosophies, furthermore, are reflected in distinctive styles, forms, and contents. Annals, legends, and chronicles were generated and usually preserved independently of one another, but it is particularly significant, particularly revealing of historical thinking, that they were sometimes used conjointly by the *same* historians – that is, that a single author could, on occasion, see two or all three divergent modes of interpreting the past as contributing to the same rhetorical purpose. I will close this essay, therefore, with a few remarks about what I believe to be the earliest Irish synthesis of chronicle, legends, and annals, in the text I have edited under the title *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* (first published in 1860 by John O'Donovan as *Annals of Ireland: Three Fragments*).

A word first about the nature and origins of *FA*. It survives in one seventeenth-century MS in Brussels, and it comprises the remains, in five (not three) fragments, of a historical document first compiled in Osraige in the early eleventh century – although thereafter rewritten and linguistically modernized at least once. It is a

[16] *Ibid*., pp. 40–41, 56–57, 68–69.

[17] Cecily Clark's study of the evolution of styles in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle likewise shows an increasing range of narrative and rhetorical devices as the writer becomes more openly partisan: "The Narrative Mode of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* Before the Conquest", in P. Clemoes and K. Hughes (ed.), *England before the Conquest: studies in primary sources presented to Dorothy Whitelock* (Cambridge 1971) 215–35.

compilation of a type not unknown in Western Europe at the time: a framework of short annals entries, into which extended narratives (comprising about 80% of the text) have been inserted. Chiefly because of the gaps between fragments, *FA* includes entries for only about one third of the years from its beginning in 573 A.D. to its end in 914; clearly it once extended beyond that date.

The compilation from which *FA* survives seems to have been made to support the aspirations of Donnchad Mac Gilla Pátraic, who reigned as king of Osraige from about 1003 until his death in 1039. Donnchad was a dynamic king, and finally, in 1036, he achieved what his ancestors for at least 150 years had been striving for: the kingship of Leinster. Unfortunately, Donnchad's subjugation of Leinster was short-lived, and his son was unable to maintain it; Donnchad's campaigns so weakened the Uí Dúnlainge, the traditional Leinster royal lineage, that ironically, instead of establishing his own descendants over Leinster, he opened up the way to the sovereignty for the Uí Ceinnselaig, the major southern rivals of the Uí Dúnlainge. But like Brian Borumha, Donnchad was a political innovator; and the scholar who wrote his history book appears also to have been an innovator – at least in Ireland. He was synthesizing a new kind of history.

The sources of *Fragmentary Annals* are not explicitly identified in the text, but they can be inferred from internal evidence, and by comparison to other sources for the same period.[18] The compiler seems to have drawn on three major components: an annals text covering the entire period, a collection of historical legends relating to the period before AD *c.* 735, and a narrative chronicle for the later years. The annals which provided the matrix were an abridgement of a southeastern recension of the standard annals text that lay behind all of the surviving early Irish annals. The legends included in the first three fragments – among which we find the story of the cursing of Irgalach – concern sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-century kings of the Connachta, the Uí Néill, and the Ulaid, and deal with Iona and Adamnán; however, they also show considerable interest in and knowledge of the traditions of Osraige and Leinster, and they derive much from the *Bórama*. I am not sure that these legends were taken from a single compilation; but if they were, then their complex of characteristics suggests that their source might have been the monastery of Durrow, a Columban foundation in the southeast of Ireland.

I have referred to the third and final source, the narrative component of the last two sections of *FA*, as the "Osraige Chronicle". It deals with various subjects (ninth- and tenth-century kings of Tara, the doings of the Vikings in Ireland and abroad), but its central focus is upon Osraige, and in fragment four there is a large piece of what amounts to the heroic royal biography of Cerball mac Dúnlaing, king of Osraige until his death in 888, great-great-grandfather of that Donnchad Mac Gilla Pátraic for whom the history was compiled, and, like Donnchad, an ambitious pragmatist, consummate practitioner of the Art of What Works. It was through Cerball's efforts that Osraige became a significant power in the southeast, through his pressure on the Leinstermen, stern discipline of his Munster neighbors to the west, and clever alliances with the king of Tara. His particular skill, though, was manipulation of the Vikings – and he not only made military

[18] See the fuller discussion in Radner, *Fragmentary Annals*, ix–xxxiv.

alliances with those who pushed up along the Barrow River, but he also married four of his daughters to Norsemen, and was heavily involved in the politics of the Dublin kingdom; *Landnámabók* remembers Cerball, who appears in the genealogies of major families in Iceland, as "one of the principle sovereigns of Europe."[19] His presentation in the chronicle sections of *FA* gives a foretaste of the rhetorical hyperbole of *CGG* about Brian: Cerball is "that man who was worthy to possess all Ireland because of the excellence of his form and his countenance and his dexterity" (*duine on garbo dingbála Eire uile de bheith ar fheabhus a dhealbha 7 a enigh 7 a eangn[a]mha*); the mere light of his royal candle by night frightens away hordes of Norwegians; his speeches to his troops, reminding them of hereditary enmities, subtly inciting them to perform bravely to impress those allies who might in future turn hostile, reveal a master orator and tactician.[20] This Osraige Chronicle is patently earlier in style than *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh*, without so much adjectival smothering and literary elaboration, but it certainly belongs to the same chronicle genre, realistic, built on a framework of mainly verifiable data, celebrating effective strategy and public rhetoric: partisan propaganda to the bone.

The history book for Donnchad Mac Gilla Pátraic now represented by *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* was put together deliberately and strategically, incorporating available annals, legends, and chronicle. These three divergent ways of presenting the past must therefore have been seen as true and useful by the same historian. Donnchad's historian was obviously a professional. His method of compilation shows this. Using the source annals as his basic pattern, he took narrative material corresponding to an annals entry, and replaced the entry with the narrative; if there was no annals information corresponding to a particular story (as would have been the case with quite a bit of the legend material), he inserted the story adjacent to annals entries relating to its protagonist. The compiler's expertise shows in his remarkable accuracy at this task: there are very few errors of placement or duplications of information in *FA* – a rather rare achievement among medieval Irish historical compilations. So we have here the work of a professional, a historian who was in conscious control of his text. It is significant to notice that he chose not to construct a fluent, stylistically homogeneous history for his patron. The text he put together seems, to modern tastes, choppy: a few terse obituaries from the annals, then a legend or a chunk of chronicle, then some more annals entries, with only the most minimal effort to integrate the whole. He did nothing to modify or disguise the nature of the ingredients of his history. To bind the inserted narratives to the annals framework, he simply prefaced them with phrases such as *isin bliadhain si*, *isind aimsir sin* ("in this year", "at that time"). In fact, this minimal integration works against any privileging of one form of history over another; it implies that all the genres of history writing, no matter how divergent their implications, were for him valid, and necessary to accomplish the purposes of the whole composition.

[19] *CGG* 297.
[20] 20. *FA* pp. 102-03, 108-09, 100-01.

It seems, therefore, that the historian deliberately chose to maintain a sense of the separate natures of annals, legends, and chronicle, and that he was intentionally invoking the historiographic connotations of all three genres. There is some suggestive evidence for this intention even in the way the individual elements are presented. It seems important to notice, for instance, that while the sequence of events in the annals entries in *FA* is quite reliable, judging from other annals' records, the kalend-count is so idiosyncratic that the actual dates are not clearly indicated; the dating in *FA* is erratic, therefore, but the *form* of annals is retained. This suggests that the annals form itself – in particular, its aura of veracity and divine sanction and control – was of principal interest to the historian/compiler.

The legend genre, too, added important elements. The connotations of the historical legends in the first three sections serve in several ways the political interests of Donnchad Mac Gilla Pátraic. First, in combination with the early annals entries, they provide the "roots" of Osraige history; they place Osraige's past in the context of the traditional history of Ireland. (We can see here on a local and secular scale the same kind of mythopoeic impulse that created the *Lebor Gabála*, which puts the mythic history of all of Ireland into the context of the Biblical history of the world.) In addition, through these legends the actions of Cerball and other Osraige kings are associated with stories about kings of Tara, saints, and other distinguished personages – making the implicit claim that Cerball and his descendants are just as important as those legendary figures. Further, the fact that many of the legends have to do with Leinster dynastic history would have served Donnchad very well; after all, he was claiming the kingship of Leinster, and at some point – perhaps, as F. J. Byrne has suggested, during the reign of Cerball himself – the Osraige pedigree had been attached by the genealogists to the prehistoric Leinster genealogy. So it was appropriate for Donnchad's historian to write of Leinster history: it was part of Osraige's own.

Most important of all, however, the legends introduce into and associate with the Osraige history the expectation that narratives of past events are mythopoeic paradigms, traditional charters, revealing the origin, explanation, and pattern for present conditions. I expect that this paradigmatic idea of history was intended to carry over to the Osraige Chronicle material in the latter part of Donnchad's book, and most important, that Cerball's pragmatic, aggressive career was meant to be seen as the pattern for that of Donnchad Mac Gilla Pátraic. In fact, the delineation of Cerball's career in *FA* seems to make it specifically analogous to Donnchad's: raiding Leinster, aiding but at times putting down Munster, fighting and also controlling Norse leaders, challenging the king of Tara himself. Cerball did maintain the old traditions (for example, in 860 the annals record that he held the Oenach Raigne) – but, like his great-great-grandson Donnchad, only when it served him.

The existence of a compilation like the *Fragmentary Annals* reminds us to be aware not only of the connotations of forms of historical writing, but also of the ways these connotations could be manipulated in various contexts. If, for instance, the bare factual statements in annals, standing alone, can connote (among other things) human powerlessness, God's central control of the universe, then annals entries placed in conjunction with dynastic propaganda can invoke for wholly

different purposes that aura of fact ordained by God. Similarly, I have suggested that legends placed in conjunction with chronicle material can transfer even to the paratactic chronicle an aura of charter, of paradigm for later times.

Finally, therefore, I am suggesting that what we today might see as contradictory modes of thought and belief, contradictory models of history, contradictory views of human capacities, illustrated by these three diverse genres of historical writing, did not necessarily seem contradictory to the scholars of medieval Ireland. Instead, the connotations of these genres could in fact *complement* each other – for a purpose; the old forms could be adapted to fit changing times. Donnchad Mac Gilla Pátraic's book provides an interesting insight into an eleventh-century Irish historian's mind, comfortably blending the learned traditions of native scholarship and of the Church, and also cosmopolitan, concerned with events in England and on the Continent. (In fact, it seems quite possible that the compiler got ideas for his own book from some familiarity with foreign texts such as Asser's Life of Alfred or the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle.) What Donnchad's historian celebrated was not just Donnchad himself and his family, but also the vital, pragmatic imagination of Irish leaders in the post-Viking era – and he matched that pragmatism with his own invention of a new form of history-writing, synthesized from the traditional genres of his predecessors.

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