

SIR JOHN RHŪS MEMORIAL LECTURE

THE DATING OF MIDDLE IRISH TEXTS

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MY teacher, Kathleen Mulchrone, used to describe Middle Irish as a *portach*, a morass in which the unwary researcher, vainly expecting to find the same firm footing as in Old Irish, could disappear without a trace in one of the palaeographic, orthographic, phonological, morphological, or syntactic bogholes which awaited him at every step. Of course, there are some today who would hold that the apparently secure footing of Old Irish was itself deceptive, the lush green of the sphagnum moss concealing the treacherous pool beneath. But Old Irish was reinforced by four substantial rafts, the *Grammatica Celtica* of Johann Kasper Zeuss (1853), Holger Pedersen's *Vergleichende Grammatik der keltischen Sprachen* (1909–13), Rudolf Thurneysen's *Handbuch des Altirischen* (1909), and the English-language adaptation of the latter by O. J. Bergin and D. A. Binchy as *A Grammar of Old Irish* (1947). The codification of Old Irish grammar by these scholars lent to it an appearance of consistency and regularity which the original sources do not quite warrant. The impression of contemporaneity conveyed by these works conceals the fact that the texts on which they are based are spread out over a century and a half, at least, and are not homogeneous documents but compilations and copies of earlier material.¹ So we see already in the eighth and ninth centuries the elements of the same problems which we shall now begin to discuss in relation to Middle Irish.

It is usual today to use the term 'Middle Irish' for the language of the period *c.*900–*c.*1200. Earlier scholars often extended the lower limit to 1600,² but linguistically the date 1200 makes more sense, because by that time the most important of the innovations which distinguish Modern Irish from Old Irish had already

¹ See W. Stokes and J. Strachan, *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, vol. i, pp. xiii–xxvi (esp. nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 11, 12), vol. ii, pp. ix–xl (esp. nos. 2, 3, 4a, 5a, 5b, 5c, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 16, 21, 22, 25, 27).

² R. Thurneysen, *Grammar of Old Irish* (Dublin, 1947), p. 1.

entered the language.¹ The development of the language since the twelfth century has been much less rapid than in the preceding period and has consisted mainly of the extension of those features which first appeared in Middle Irish. The changes which were thus introduced did more to alter the appearance and structure of the language than did any other set of changes since the loss of Indo-European inflectional endings and associated changes in the fifth and sixth centuries.

Phonologically the most important change was the loss of distinction between short unstressed vowels in final position.² This led in the morphology to the falling together of those grammatical categories which were distinguished by the contrast in final unstressed vowels, such as the inflectional cases of *io-* and *iā-* stems of the noun and the singular/plural opposition in these same stems.³ These plural forms were restructured by means of borrowing from the consonantal stems,⁴ but in the singular the distinction of case remained lacking (save only for the varying effect on the following initial), thus introducing into the language for the first time a considerable body of indeclinable nouns, which must have been a factor in the total collapse of the declensional system which we witness in the modern dialects.⁵

In the adjective a steady decline in inflection can be observed from the end of the Old Irish period, beginning with the predicative adjective and extending gradually through the attributive adjective until, in the modern dialects, the inflection of the adjective, even for the marking of the plural, has been largely abandoned.⁶

In the verb the re-formation of the system has been even more thorough. The compound verbs, which were such an important feature of Old Irish, were simplified, while the simple verb gradually gave up its dual series of personal endings. New personal endings arose which have proved productive in the Modern Irish period.⁷ In the formation of tenses much levelling took place,

¹ G. Murphy, *Duanaire Finn* iii, 1953, Ir. Texts Soc. XLIII.

² R. Thurneysen, *Grammar*, §§95, 99; G. Dottin, *Manuel d'irlandais moyen* (Paris, 1913), §8; G. Murphy, *Early Irish Metrics* (Dublin, 1961), p. 31, n. 3.

³ G. Dottin, *Manuel*, §§82 ff.

⁴ D. Greene, 'Distinctive Plural Forms in Old and Middle Irish', *Ériu* xxv (1974), 190-9.

⁵ G. Dottin, *Manuel*, §83.

⁶ T. F. O'Rahilly, *Irish Dialects, Past and Present* (Dublin, 1932, repr. Dublin, 1972), 139; T. De Bhaldraithe, *Gaeilge Chois Fharraige, An Deilbhíocht* (Dublin, 1953), pp. 120-4.

⁷ G. Murphy, 'Analogy in Middle-Irish Conjugation', *Essays and Studies Presented to Professor Eoin Mac Néill* (Dublin, 1940), pp. 72-81.

chiefly by the substitution of the present stem of the verb for older tense-stems which deviated considerably from it in form owing to reduplication or other inherited formations.¹

A strong tendency, begun in Middle Irish and continuing to this day, is for nominal forms to spread within the verbal system.² In Middle Irish the use of the verbal noun or participle with the verb 'to be', a usage instanced from the early Old Irish period, to express certain aspectual or temporal meanings, becomes more and more common, replacing earlier constructions with verbal particles.³

The deponent verbal system weakened and died out during the Middle Irish period, but before its demise as a system it succeeded in establishing some of its forms within the active verbal system, where they still survive.⁴

In Old Irish pronoun subjects were contained in the verbal ending, while object pronouns were expressed by morphemes attached to the verb in unstressed position, either suffixed (to simple verbs) or infixes (in compound verbs and frequently with simple verbs).⁵ In Middle Irish a new system of independent pronouns was generated to serve as subject of the copula, of passive verbal forms, and of active verbs, and as object of transitive verbs.⁶

The inherited simple prepositions were replaced largely by forms corresponding to the old 3 sg. masc. of the preposition with suffixed pronoun or by new compound prepositions, usually consisting of a preposition followed by a noun governing the genitive, another facet of the spread of nominal forms in the Middle Irish period.⁷

¹ K. Mulchrone, 'Die Abfassungszeit und Überlieferung der Vita Tripartita', *ZCP* xvi (1926/7), 1-94, 411-52; J. Strachan, 'The Verbal System of *Saltair na Rann*', *Trans. Philol. Soc.* (1895), 1-76.

² H. Wagner, *Das Verbum in den Sprachen der britischen Inseln* (Tübingen, 1959), pp. 20, 31 ff., 136 ff., etc.

³ For the history of verbal noun constructions see J. Gagnepain, *La Syntaxe du nom verbal dans les langues celtiques*, vol. I. *Irlandais* (Paris, 1963). For participles there is nothing comparable but see D. Greene, 'Perfects and Perfectives in Modern Irish', *Ériu* xxx (1979), 122-41.

⁴ J. Strachan, 'Contributions to the History of the Deponent Verb in Irish', *Trans. Philol. Soc.* (1894), 444-568.

⁵ L. Breatnach, 'The Suffixed Pronouns in Early Irish', *Celtica* xii (1977), 75-107; J. Strachan, 'The Infixes Pronoun in Middle Irish', *Ériu* i (1904), 153-79.

⁶ D. Greene, 'Synthetic and Analytic: A Reconsideration', *Ériu* xxiv (1973), 121-33.

⁷ T. F. O'Rahilly, *Desiderius*, *Med. and Mod. Ir. Ser. XII* (1941), xxxiv-xxxvi; id., *Irish Dialects, Past and Present*, General Index, s.v. Prepositions, esp. 225-7; M. O'Brien, *Celtica* iii (1956), 175-6.

Syntactically the most outstanding change is the weakening of congruence between a verb and its plural subject, leading in Modern Irish to the regular use of singular verbs with plural subjects.¹ In subordinate clauses the mark of subordination through the so-called 'relative clause' of Old Irish gives way to a system of subordination by means of the conjunction *coⁿ-/goⁿ-*.²

In the vocabulary many of the old inherited verbs were abandoned in favour of circumlocutions consisting of a basic verbal form ('be', 'do', 'come', 'go', etc.) and a preposition or noun, adding further to the intrusion of the noun into the verbal system.³ Loanwords from Scandinavian appeared during the Middle Irish period⁴ and before 1200 we find the first borrowings from Norman French.⁵

Such then are the principal changes which took place in this period which moulded the history of the language for many centuries. As is clear from this summary, the actual changes are well known, the origin of some of them has been accounted for through the research of the last ninety years, but the precise process of change or its dating is in many cases unclear. There is only one grammar of Middle Irish, that of Dottin, published in 1913,⁶ too early to benefit from the greater part of the research of this century, and based on a single collection of ecclesiastical texts dated c. 1100. It is a synchronic description of the language of a restricted body of material with no diachronic dimension. It is not a historical grammar of Middle Irish. A number of other scholars have in the intervening years signified their intention of producing such a historical account of Middle Irish but the considerable difficulties involved have so far proved intractable. The work at present being carried out by Professor Kenneth Jackson of Edinburgh gives the best hope for the speedy appearance of the historical grammar which all workers in the field are waiting for.

¹ T. F. O'Rahilly, *Irish Dialects, Past and Present*, p. 230; id., *Desiderius*, p. 256. G. Mac Eoin, *ZCP* xxviii (1961), 190; id., *Studia Hibernica* i (1961), 46 n. 51a.

² C. O'Rahilly, 'Three Notes on Syntax', *Celtica* viii (1968), 155-66; 'Notes on Conjunctions', *Celtica* ix (1971), 113-34.

³ H. Wagner, *Das Verbum*, pp. 36-48.

⁴ C. Marstrander, *Bidrag til det norske sprogs historie i Irland*, Videnskapselskabet skrifter II, Hist.-filos. klasse, 1915, No. 5 (Kristiania, 1915).

⁵ H. Risk, 'French Loanwords in Irish', *Études celtiques* xii (1970), 585-655, xiv (1974), 67-98.

⁶ G. Dottin, *Manuel d'irlandais moyen*, vol. i, *Grammaire*, vol. ii, *Textes et glossaire* (Paris, 1913).

The difficulties which beset this task may be briefly listed as follows:

1. The fragmentary state of the evidence. In spite of the large amount of material which has come down to us from the Middle Irish period, it is not complete enough to enable us to answer all the grammatical questions which arise without considerable research effort. Of many texts we have only one or two copies. From many poets we have only one or two poems. The evidence is frequently discontinuous, as, for instance, throughout the greater part of the vital tenth century, when we are lacking in dated texts of any extent.

2. The lapse of time between the original composition of the text and the writing of the surviving copies. For most of the literature the time involved is from two to five centuries. This introduces a serious uncertainty about textual fidelity. How many scribal errors, unconscious modernizations, deliberate updatings, or more thorough revisions have taken place in the interval? If a text has survived in a sufficiently large number of copies, it may be possible to trace its development and to eliminate secondary material from it. Even in that case precision in the matter of grammatical form is hardly attainable, though the strict metrical rules of Irish verse can be of great assistance towards this end. However, though the difficulties of dealing with late copies are great, it is no guarantee of textual excellence to have a manuscript copy written within a short time of the composition of the text. This is exemplified in the Book of Leinster (*c.* 1160) copy of the *Banshenchas*, a poem of about 1500 lines on the great women of history composed by Gilla Mo Dutu ua Casaite in 1147. This is the poorest of the four surviving copies of the text, with omissions and corruptions, and is much inferior to the fifteenth-century copies of the poem.¹

3. The anonymity of much Middle Irish literature. All of Middle Irish prose is anonymous. Much of the verse too is unascribed. More of it is fictitiously attributed to the great names of remote history, Oisín, Colum Cille, or Athirne. The absence of a reliable ascription to the real author deprives us of the knowledge of the date of composition or the place of origin of these poems, so that they cannot be placed in their historical or literary contexts and their language remains unfixed in period or dialect.

4. The archaizing tendencies of many authors and scribes. The literature of previous centuries was available and apparently

¹ M. Ní Bhrolcháin, 'An Bansheanchas', in P. Ó Fiannachta (ed.), *Na Mná sa Litríocht*, Léachtaí Cholm Cille XI (1982), 7.

familiar to the writers of all periods so that they could imitate the style and even the linguistic usage of their forebears. The existence of the poetic order brought another conservative influence to bear on the linguistic practices of the poets. But the extent of such archaism should not be exaggerated. It was usually confined to individual items of vocabulary or certain well-defined grammatical forms, such as deponent verbal endings which could be attached even to active verbs for the sake of effect. The thoroughgoing linguistic pastiche, such as the seventeenth-century life of Aodh Ruadh Ó Domhnaill by Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh, which could almost pass for a twelfth-century text, is very rare indeed.¹

5. The influence of the spoken dialects on the written language is an imponderable which ignorance of the spoken language of the Middle Irish period prevents us from defining. One must assume that there existed conservative and progressive dialects and that they may have influenced the extent to which old forms were preserved or new forms introduced in the written language. This was highly standardized from the eighth century and registered change slowly and, presumably, with a time-lag in comparison to the spoken language. Gerard Murphy postulated a delay of a full century in the case of one change, while David Greene sought to show that analytic forms of the verb existed in the spoken language for a very long time before the twelfth century when they first appeared in writing.² The truth is that we know little or nothing of the difference between spoken and written Irish during the middle period. We cannot even project a modern isogloss like the double form of the negative particle, *ní* and *cha(n)*, back to the Middle Irish period, because the dual forms which then existed, *ní* and *nochan*, do not seem to have had a dialectal distribution.³

6. The manner in which many texts developed by a process of gradual growth over a period of centuries or by deliberate combination of pre-existing materials resulted in the phenomenon of language stratification. In *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, for instance, there is plentiful evidence for the compilation of the text from earlier

¹ P. Walsh: *The Life of Aodh Ruadh Ua Domhnaill*, Ir. Texts Soc. xlii, xlv.

² G. Murphy, 'Analogy', p. 80; D. Greene, 'Synthetic and Analytic'.

³ D. Greene, '1. The Status of *ní* "non", 2. "nicon" "non"', *Ériu* xxi (1969), 89-92; H. Wagner, 'Das negative altir. Präverb nicon "non"', *ZCP* xxxii (1972), 18-35. Discussion of Mod. Ir. *ní/cha*: B. Ó Buachalla, 'Nótaí ar Ghaeilge an Tuaiscirt I', *Éigse* xvi (1976), 285-316; id., '*Ní* and *Cha* in Ulster Irish', *Ériu* xxviii (1977), 92-141; C. Ó Dochartaigh, '*Cha* and *Ní* in the Irish of Ulster', *Éigse* xvi (1976), 317-36.

versions each of which had a history of at least a couple of centuries behind it.¹ In consequence at least three strata of the language have been identified in this tale, an eighth-century stratum in certain formulae and in rhetorical passages, a tenth-century stratum² in the body of the work, and an eleventh-century stratum in certain episodes which are clearly later than the main text. Chief among these is the Combat with Fer Diad, an example of the emergence within a tale of a new episode based on elements which were already present in other parts of the same tale. This episode developed during the tenth century and was fixed in form in the eleventh in Recension I of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. There it distinguished itself from the surrounding text by certain eleventh-century morphological and stylistic features in the prose and by the use of certain metres in the verse which were in vogue at that time.³ In other texts whose history is not as well documented as that of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* these same processes of compilation and interpolation may have taken place and passed unnoticed, leaving the late linguistic forms for all to see but without the textual history to account for them. These anomalies confuse the issue for the investigator. I believe that we have an instance of such linguistic stratification confusing researchers in the key text *The Tripartite Life of St. Patrick*, usually regarded as the earliest considerable text of the Middle Irish period. Here, in the midst of language generally consistent with a date about 900, one finds a number of forms which one would not have expected before 1000. The opinions of scholars as to the date of the text have varied according as they saw the earlier or the later stratum as the more significant.⁴ I shall return to the question of the dating of the *Vita Tripartita* later and wish here merely to suggest that the difference in date between the two strata is due to a revision which the text underwent at some date in the eleventh century.

It is perhaps in the nature of a traditional literature like that of Middle Irish that the old definition of *aimser*, *loc*, and *persa* should be blurred and that the conservatism of the literary tradition should effect the language. The dire result of these factors for the

¹ R. Thurneysen, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum 17ten Jahrhundert* (Halle, 1921), pp. 101-13.

² S. Falconer, 'The Verbal System of the LU Táin', *Ériu* xvii (1955), 145-6.

³ Á. Ní Bharáin, 'Comrac Fir Diad ocus Con Culaind' (unpubl. MA diss. Galway, 1980).

⁴ W. Stokes, *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, 2 vols. (London, 1897), esp. vol. i, pp. lxii-lxxxix; K. Mulchrone, *ZCP* xvi, 1-94.

literary historian and historical grammarian alike is to deprive them of the secure foundation for their research, a series of dated and located texts written in contemporary Middle Irish.

The Middle Irish texts which are firmly dated and which are of sufficient length to provide a considerable corpus of linguistic material are easily enumerated: *Saltair na Rann*, dated from internal evidence to the year 988,¹ two long poems by Gilla Modutu ua Casaite, the *Banshenchas* dated 1147² and *Éire ógh inis na naem* dated 1143,³ a handful of poems attributed with varying degrees of trustworthiness to each of the following: Flann mac Maelmaedóc (†979),⁴ Cinaed ua Artacáin (†974),⁵ Urard mac Coisse (†990),⁶ Airbertach mac Coisse (†1016),⁷ Mac Liag (†1015),⁸ Cúán ua Lothcháin (†1024),⁹ Flann Mainistrech (†1056),¹⁰ Gilla Caemán (*fl.* 1072),¹¹ Dublithir ua Uathgaile (*fl.* c. 1100),¹² and Gilla na Naem ua Duinn (†1160).¹³ Many of these poems are of the enumerative type, listing kings, battles, or famous women, and contain a meagre vocabulary apart from the proper

¹ W. Stokes, *Saltair na Rann*, *Anecdota Oxoniensia*, Med. and Mod. Ser. I, iii (Oxford, 1883).

² Ed. M. Dobbs, *Revue celtique* xlvii (1930), 282–339, xlviii (1931), 163–234, xlix (1932), 437–89. New edition of prose and verse by M. Ní Bhrolcháin (unpubl. diss. Galway, 1977 and 1980).

³ Ed. B. MacCarthy, *Codex Palatino-Vaticanus 830*, Todd Lecture Series III (1892), 408–37.

⁴ K. Meyer, *ZCP* viii (1910), 117–19; R. I. Best and M. A. O'Brien: *The Book of Leinster*, vol. i, 4886–994. Cf. *Studia Hibernica* viii (1968), 29.

⁵ Edition of collected poems by Máirtín Ó Briain (unpubl. diss. Dublin, 1977).

⁶ O. J. Bergin, *Ériu* ix (1923), 175–80. Cf. Ó Lochlainn, 'Poets on the Battle of Clontarf', *Éigse* iii (1942), 208–18, iv (1943), 33–47.

⁷ K. Meyer, *ZCP* iii (1899), 20–4; G. Mac Eoin, *Ériu* xx (1966), 112–39; P. Ó Néill, *Éigse* xvii (1977), 19–46; Best and O'Brien, *The Book of Leinster*, vol. iii, 524–32. On Mac Cosse's authorship of *Saltair na Rann* see G. Mac Eoin, 'The Date and Authorship of *Saltair na Rann*', *ZCP* xxviii (1960), 51–67; id., 'Some Observations on *Saltair na Rann*', *ibid.* xxxix (1982), 1–28.

⁸ Cf. Ó Lochlainn, 'Poets on the Battle of Clontarf'.

⁹ M. Joynt, *Ériu* iv (1908), 91–111; E. J. Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, vol. i (1903), pp. 14–27; K. Meyer, *ZCP* v (1904), 21–3.

¹⁰ J. Mac Neill, *Archivium Hibernicum* ii (1913), 58–92; id., *Proc. Roy. Ir. Acad.* xxviii C, (1910), 125.

¹¹ Best and O'Brien, *The Book of Leinster*, vol. iii, 471–503.

¹² *Ibid.* vol. iii, 563–73. R. I. Best, *Ériu* x (1928), 141–2. H. Tristram, 'Sex Aetates Mundi' (unpubl. diss. Freiburg im Breisgau, 1980), pp. 181 ff., 470 ff. I have to thank Dr Tristram for sending me a copy of her dissertation.

¹³ E. O'Reilly, *A Chronological Account of nearly Four Hundred Irish Writers* (1820, repr. 1970), pp. lxxxv f.

names. A large amount of prose literature exists from the period but none of it is precisely dated.

In the past century much has been achieved in the dating of Middle Irish texts by all possible means. Much of it has been the work of editors who rightly saw it as their function to attempt to date the text they were editing. Some efforts were made by scholars who worked outside the framework of an edition. Many dates were supplied by Thurneysen in his monumental work, *Die irische Helden- und Königsage*, based mainly, I suspect, on intuition and often not specifying accurately the evidence on which the dating was founded. Some of these dating attempts give rise to misgivings on account of the weakness of the arguments offered, though one realizes that, in spite of the poor argument, such dates had Thurneysen's authority behind them. One in particular is based on unusually flimsy grounds, the date of the second version of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*.¹ The kernel of the argument is that, in the First Recension of *TBC*, Fergus' sword is called *Caladcholg*, while in the Second Recension it is called *Caladbolg*. This name appears as a borrowing, *caletwylch*, in the Welsh twelfth-century text, *Kulhwch ac Olwen*. Now this name is the presumed source of Caliburnus, the name of Arthur's sword, which first occurs in Geoffrey of Monmouth (1132-5). Thurneysen's conclusion that Recension II of *TBC* must have been written in the first third or the first quarter of the twelfth century seems to involve a calculation of how long it might have taken the *b/v* form of the word to cross the Irish Sea after its 'first' appearance in the Second Recension of *TBC*. T. F. O'Rahilly has exposed the weakness of Thurneysen's argument but in a context in which his own argument is so partial that one almost hesitates to cite it.² But essentially it is justified. Thurneysen had a tendency to disregard the possibility of lost sources or of sub-literary origins for literary features. He accepted the first appearance of a tale, motif, or word in writing as coinciding with its composition or invention. This led him to ascribe dates with more assurance than the evidence would have justified. On account of his eminence as a scholar other investigators accepted his dates without question and used them to date other texts. In this case Alf Sommerfelt based his dating of *In Cath Catharda*, the Irish adaptation of Lucan's *Pharsalia*, on Thurneysen's date for the Second Recension of *TBC*.³ Thurneysen himself used it to date

¹ R. Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, pp. 113-15.

² T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (1947), pp. 68-72.

³ A. Sommerfelt, 'Le Système verbal dans *In Cath Catharda*', *Revue celtique* xxxviii (1922), 20-47.

Togail Troí, the translation of Dares Phrygius' *De excidio Troiae Historia*, and other texts.¹ In this way a catena of dates is generated, each depending on another or on the original date, which may have been wrong in the first place. These and other Middle Irish dates need to be re-examined globally, not because such a reassessment is likely to alter drastically the dates assigned to the texts or cause us to revise our view of the sequence or timing of the linguistic events of the period, but because some attempts at dating were haphazard, some were based on incomplete evidence, some were made without regard for the full manuscript material available, while others failed to take account of the history of the development of the text in question, and ascribed the date of one stage in that development to the text in general. Little was done to fill the hiatus of the tenth century already referred to by the more precise dating of those texts tentatively referred to that period by Thurneysen and others, or by the analysis and comparison of their language and literary form. Rarely has any attempt been made to fit dated or undated Middle Irish texts together in a chronological or typological series, and note the emerging picture of literary and linguistic development.

A particular danger which the researcher has to beware of is to place reliance on incomplete or otherwise unsatisfactory editions of texts. Many of these have not been edited since the late nineteenth century, when editors were concerned with getting as much as possible of early Irish literature into print rather than with establishing the relationship between the manuscript copies. Consequently several important texts are available only in editions which do not meet modern requirements and which are not suitable for linguistic investigation. One thinks of two important compilations of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, *Bórama Laigen*² and *Acallam na Senórach*,³ both of which appeared in that most exasperating and endearing anthology, *Silva Gadelica*. Even the editions by Whitley Stokes of both of these texts are little more than transcriptions of a single manuscript text but omitting much of the verse in the *Bórama*. A full edition and analysis of these two extensive texts which seem to have so much in common could contribute much to our understanding of literary development in the later Middle Irish period. From the earlier period two still more important narrative texts, *Togail*

¹ R. Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, pp. 113, 352, 579.

² S. H. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (1892), pp. 359-90; W. Stokes, *Revue celtique* xiii (1892), 32-124.

³ S. H. O'Grady, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-233; W. Stokes, *Irische Texte*, vol. iv, i (1900), xiv + 438.

*Bruidne Da Derga*¹ and *Fled Bricrend*,² await a definitive text despite having been printed more than once. Both are apparently eleventh-century recensions of much earlier tales with much additional material. What is the researcher to do when faced with such lacunae in his material? Should he avoid such texts altogether, thereby reducing seriously the amount of evidence available to him? Or should he turn aside from his main task and produce, if only for his own use, new editions of these texts? The shortness of human life will not permit it. But it is the way the *Wissenschaft* as distinct from the individual worker must go.

Failure on the part of researchers to define clearly their literary or linguistic objectives to their readers, and one suspects to themselves, has sometimes led to wasted effort. Editions which waver between the extremes of diplomatic transcript and normalized text are too unreliable for the linguistic investigator without being simplified enough for class use. Some of Van Hamel's editions suffer from this hesitancy; I am thinking especially of *Compert Con Culainn and Other Stories* and *Immrama*. Linguistic investigations which do not define closely the categories to be examined will have to be repeated by some succeeding scholar. This is the unfortunate result of Myles Dillon's failure to distinguish the various elements which make up the category of 'independent pronouns' which he investigated in the course of his paper 'Nominal Predicates in Irish'.³ Object pronouns and subject pronouns should have been examined separately, while among the subject pronouns it would have been necessary to distinguish subjects of the copula, of passive verbs, and of active verbs, as these appear to have emerged at different times.

Some confusion has been caused in the past by dating attempts which were based on a single copy or recension of a text but which were presented as a date for the original composition. Thurneysen's dating of *Togail Troí* to the twelfth century was based on the copy in the twelfth-century manuscript, the Book of Leinster, and on a comparison with the copy of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* in that manuscript. But he failed to take account of two later copies of an older recension which must have been produced in the eleventh century. The original of the translation from Latin must be earlier still, because the text shows considerable development in

¹ W. Stokes, *Revue celtique* xxii (1901); E. Knott, *Med. and Mod. Ir. Ser.* VIII (1936).

² E. Windisch, *Irische Texte* vol. i (1880), 235-311; G. Henderson, *Irish Texts Soc.* II (1899).

³ *ZCP* xvi (1927/8).

comparison to that of Dares and because one manuscript of the latest recension preserves traces of a recension older than that of the eleventh century.¹

Conversely certain texts are known from external evidence to have existed at an early period, perhaps about the beginning of the eighth century, but the evidence of the surviving copies points to a common archetype no earlier than the eleventh century. Some of these are texts which are known to have been contained in the lost early-eighth-century manuscript, *Cín Dromma Snechtai*—though this early date has recently been questioned once more, I think justifiably, by Professor Séamas Mac Mathúna—such as *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and *Immram Brain*.² These texts have to be treated with circumspection, for there is a danger of attributing to the eighth-century text features which are not demonstrably older than the archetype. Thus, for example, in *Immram Brain* we find the following forms among many others which are not to be expected in the language of the eighth century but which occur in all manuscripts of the text: *fil inis* §4, *i fil* §19, *nach (n)galar* §10, *in delb hé* (for *hí*) §49, and *drepa* §40, which appears to be a Norse loanword. These forms point to some considerable interference with the text between its first composition and the writing of the archetype three centuries later. How much more interference has taken place which we are unable to identify?

The same question can with still more reason be asked in relation to texts which do not have any external evidence of date but which rely for their dating on internal linguistic evidence alone. The linguistic strata in the text which derive from the 'original' on the one hand and from the 'archetype' on the other can be distinguished only when they contrast with each other in a way which can be recognized by the modern investigator. Where the later stratum reveals no symptoms of lateness known to the researcher the fact that the text has been interfered with cannot be divined, leaving the researcher under misapprehensions about the language of the original and thwarting all efforts at tracing the historical development of the text.

Many texts are compilations, either because they were such from their first beginnings or because they developed through accretion in the course of time. If the various parts of the compilation can

¹ G. Mac Eoin, 'Das Verbalssystem von *Togail Troí*', *ZCP* xxviii (1961), 201.

² Paper read at the Sixth International Congress of Celtic Studies, Galway, 1979. See also the introduction to his forthcoming edition of *Immram Brain*. I am grateful to Dr Mac Mathúna for a copy of his diplomatic transcript of the MSS and for much relevant information on the text.

be disentangled, they may show differing linguistic characteristics. In the case of *Fled Bricrend*, for example, Thurneysen has succeeded in distinguishing interpolations from the early text.¹ Linguistically these are distinguished by the absence of earlier forms and usages which occur (alongside later features) in the early text, e.g. art. nom. sg. neut. *a* LU 8046; gen. sg. fem., gen. pl. *inna* 8049, 8063; adj. superl. *aldem* 8673; suff. obj. pron. *gabsus* 8217; vb. forms *do-ruménatar* 9076, *ro-leblaing* 9077. The interpolations also show later features than any occurring in the early text: independent pron. *hé* (obj. of trans. vb.) 8878, *siat* (after *ocus*) 8419, *iat* (subj. of pass. vb.) 8832, *iat* (obj. of trans. vb.) 8872 (it is to be noted that the indep. prons. found in the early text in LU 8199, 9067, 9157, 9174 are confined to that manuscript); verbal endings 3 sg. pres. ind. conj. in *-and*, *-cengland* 8928, 1 sg. pres. subj. in *-ur*, *-esur*, *-chotlur* 8457, pass. pl. for sg., *do-bretha* passim, e.g. 8833. This pattern is broken by §57, which occurs only in LU in the original hand (M) but which Thurneysen regarded as part of the early text. It shows, however, so many late linguistic features that it must belong to the interpolations: pret. pass. pl. for sg. *do-bretha* 8761, indep. pron. *at-cessa iat* 8770, 1 pl. pres. ind. ending in *-mit*, *chathaigmit-ni* 8772, *mar* as conjunction 8767, as well as the loanword *sparr* from Old Norse or Middle English (DIL), the earliest otherwise attested example of which is in *In Cath Catharda* (12th cent.) but which is most frequently found in Modern Irish. Generally speaking, then, the compilatory nature of the text is reflected in its language, though the case is not a simple one of complete contrast in text and language. The linguistic continuum is reflected in the overlap of 'latish' forms in early text and interpolations. What is important is the 'mix' in each. The early text contains early ingredients not found in the interpolations, while these have late features absent from the early text. The question of dating both strata must await a more detailed textual and linguistic analysis. Meanwhile I feel bound to say that I do not understand why Thurneysen dated the early text to the eighth century. I see nothing in it that is necessarily older than about 900. But we must await Professor Proinsias Mac Cana's promised edition to date it with more confidence.

One type of text which frequently betrays its composite origin is that most typically Irish of all literary forms, the prose tale with verse inserts which sometimes contain the formal conversations of the characters, sometimes a lyrical or mantic monologue, and

¹ R. Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, pp. 447-50; id. *ZCP* iv (1903), 193-206; x (1915), 440-3.

often again merely retell in verse what has already been narrated in prose. The verse is in many cases older than the prose and may indeed have been taken over from a completely different literary genre, as Professor James Carney has argued for some of the poems in *Acallam na Senórach*.¹

Of course it can happen that the compilation is so old or was carried out with such care that the seams are no longer visible, even though variation in theme may indicate that the text is in fact a compilation. This is the case with *Tochmarc Becfhola*, which is a Christian *exemplum* about the observance of the sabbath grafted on to a kingship tale. The juxtaposition of heathen and Christian material shows that this tale is a compilation but there is no sign of a difference in style or language between the two strands of the tale.²

Some of the older sagas may be compilations too and disguise the fact. I think especially of *Tochmarc Emire*, which looks like a combination of a wooing-tale and a tale of the training of the hero in feats of valour. In this particular case the disguise is pretty thin and one can readily agree with the remark of Thurneysen's: 'Es gibt wohl keine andere irische Sage, in die so viel fremde Sagenbestandteile — nicht andere Fassungen derselben Sage — aufgenommen worden sind'.³ Commentators have not agreed on the composition of *Tochmarc Emire* or on the relative importance of its constituent elements. Neither has any study of the language of the text appeared.⁴ However, the identification of the older textual stratum in the main recension (Thurneysen's *Fassung III*) is facilitated by the survival in Rawl. B. 512 of an older, shorter recension. The relationship between these two recensions is highly interesting and, to my knowledge, unique in Irish literature. The older recension has been incorporated almost verbatim in the later, which has been very much expanded by the addition of extra material and new episodes. The existence within *Fassung III* of what amounts to an independent tradition of the older recension was indeed observed by Thurneysen⁵ but he appears not to have

¹ J. Carney, 'Two Poems from *Acallam na Senórach*', in J. Carney and D. Greene (edd.), *Celtic Studies: Essays in memory of Angus Matheson* (1968), pp. 22–32.

² Editions by B. O'Looney, *Proc. Roy. Ir. Acad.*, Irish MSS Ser. I, (1870) and S. H. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, pp. 85–7. New edn. and discussion by M. Bhreathnach (unpubl. diss. Galway, 1977).

³ R. Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, p. 381.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 377–82; D. Edel, *Helden auf Freiersfüßen* (Amsterdam, 1980), esp. pp. 10–13. I am grateful to Dr Edel for sending me a copy of her book.

⁵ *Heldensage*, p. 379.

attached any importance to the observation. It has recently been demonstrated in some detail by Mrs Carole Bergin.¹ The language of the older recension is considerably earlier than that of the later, but here again a linguistic comparison of the strata of the later recension is desirable.

Literary genre and style can have an effect on the language of a text. It is generally accepted that the traditional sagas show a certain degree of conservatism when compared to non-saga prose of a similar period. The sagas preserve petrified grammatical forms in formulae like *con-cloth ní . . .*, *tongu-sa do dia toingte Ulaid*, and the ritual greeting of friendly warriors found a couple of times in *TBC*.² Saga style tends to clichés of grammatical form as well as vocabulary. Here much work remains to be done on the language of the sagas. But the fondness of saga writers for deponent forms of the preterite long after the deponent system had been abandoned and its artificial extension to verbs which were not deponents may be classified as such a cliché.³ So may the use of the equative of the adjective at a period when the writers do not seem sure whether it was an equative or a comparative.⁴ To what extent other grammatical features like the use of infixed pronouns, often pleonastically, in the later Middle Irish period may have been influenced by the conventions of the genre is a matter for further investigation.

In view of the possibility of such variation of linguistic usage between one genre and another, these should, as far as possible, be investigated separately. At least the investigator should be alert for differences in usage which coincide with different genres. There are two main axes of stylistic differentiation which may be reflected in the language:

Form: verse v. prose

Material: secular v. ecclesiastical.

The items on the left in these oppositions are generally regarded as traditional and conservative, while those on the right are thought to be innovative because they are less bound by ancient forms and models. These generalizations, however, do not hold good for all cases. Some verse, like for example *Saltair na Rann*, is linguistically progressive, while saga prose tends, as we have seen,

¹ Unpubl. diss. Galway, 1980.

² Discussed by E. G. Quin, *Studia Celtica* ii (1967), 93-5.

³ Cf. G. Mac Eoin, 'Smaointe ar Stair Litríocht na Meán-Ghaeilge', *Irisleabhar Mhaighe Nuad* (1961), pp. 39 ff.

⁴ W. Meid, 'Zum Aequativ der keltischen Sprachen', *Pokorny Festschrift* (1967), pp. 223-42, esp. 231-7.

to be conservative. Neither is it always easy to distinguish clearly between secular and ecclesiastical material. As the secular literature of the Old and Middle Irish period seems to have been produced in the monasteries, there is no clear institutional distinction between the authors and redactors responsible for it and those who gave us the hymns, sermons, and saints' lives. Are the works of *senchas* produced by authors like Flann Mainistrech any the less secular for their monastic provenance? Is the author of *Aislinge Meic Con Glinne*, who made both sides the butt of his satire, to be classed as secular or ecclesiastical? Perhaps the intended audience was an important factor in deciding the style of composition. Certainly the homilies in the Lebor Brecc, most of which were aimed at a wide public, seem to be in a straight-forward style and language. As might be expected, the style of the homilies differs considerably from that of the contemporary version of *Táin Bó Cuailnge* as found in the Book of Leinster. A careful comparison of the language of the two texts would probably confirm the impression that the saga is more conservative than the sermons.

The above are some of the difficulties to be faced and some of the considerations to be borne in mind by anyone who would date Middle Irish texts with a view to using them in linguistic research. When he comes to the actual task of dating the text, the investigator would be advised to explore all other avenues before attempting to date it from the linguistic evidence. The non-linguistic evidence is usually of one of the following three types:

1. Ascription to a known author. The well-documented propensity of Irish scribes for attributing late verse to the famous poets of the past has already been mentioned. The more blatant cases of such false attribution deceive nobody. But how are we to judge the validity of attributions to poets who fall within the Middle Irish period? It is often assumed that ascriptions to Middle Irish poets in Middle Irish manuscripts like LU, LL, and Rawl. are reliable. Some would certainly seem trustworthy, but their reliability is not enhanced by ascriptions to Cormac macc Airt, Medb Lethderg, and Ailill Óluimm on the adjoining pages. And if we distrust the ascription in the oldest manuscripts, what are we to say of those in later sources? What about the poems attributed to Cormac macc Cuilennáin in various manuscripts?¹ Or the poems attributed to Flann Mainistrech in the Book of

¹ Collected and discussed by Caitlín Ní Chonghaile (unpubl. diss. Galway, 1973).

Fenagh?¹ Colm Ó Lochlainn made an over-enthusiastic attempt to exorcize what he considered to be phantom poets of the tenth and eleventh century.² In his zeal he indicted several well-attested poets on the ground that most or all of the poems attributed to them are patently later compositions. But some of these poets are mentioned in contemporary annals, such as the Annals of Ulster, and for that reason alone cannot be the fabrications of later saga manufacturers. Neither does Ó Lochlainn appear to have examined all the work attributed to them or considered the possibility that some of the late poems may be modernized versions of Middle Irish originals. For these and other poets there is need of a thorough examination of all the works attributed to them and the establishment of a canon of their works. This calls for editions of the type 'The Poems of . . .' such as has been provided for several poets of the Modern Irish period but not yet for any of the earlier poets.

Such attention to the poetic remains of the period should pay dividends. It is well known that the strictness of syllabic count and rhyme discouraged, though they did not entirely prevent, modernization and other scribal interference. Frequently, where corruptions have crept in, they can be identified and eliminated with the help of the metre. Thus one can rely on linguistic evidence corroborated by metre in a way that is never possible with prose. Furthermore, the system of rhyming allows us to make certain deductions about the phonology of the language which would not be possible if one were to rely solely on the irregular orthography. Thus the rhymes in the Calendar of Oengus (AD 800) show us a language in which the final unstressed vowels were still differentiated.³ *Saltair na Rann* (AD 988), on the other hand, no longer recognizes these subtle differences and shows by its rhymes that the final unstressed vowels had been levelled.⁴ The syllable count of the verse testifies to the existence of hiatus in certain words down to the eleventh century but also shows that the abandonment of hiatus had begun as early as the ninth century.

2. Reference to the text in other dated sources. As Irish literature is in general backward-looking, the texts refer constantly to

¹ W. M. Hennessy and D. H. Kelly, *The Book of Fenagh* (1875, repr. 1939), pp. 124 ff., 312 ff.

² C. Ó Lochlainn, 'Poets on the Battle of Clontarf'.

³ J. Strachan, 'Final Vowels in the Féilire Oenguso', *Revue celtique* xx (1899), 191-8, 295-305.

⁴ 'Zur Metrik von Saltair na Rann', *Kgl. Preuss. Akad. d. Wissensch., Sitz.-Ber.* (1918), 874-7; G. Mac Eoin, *ŽCP* xxxix (1982), 12.

past events, thus evincing knowledge of sources anterior to their own time. Often these references are of such a general nature that they do not justify the conclusion that a particular text was known to the author, who may have based his reference on some other text or on a more diffuse tradition. One much-discussed source of such references is the two saga-lists in which over 200 saga-titles are given. Thurneysen analysed these and concluded that they were based on a common original list which was compiled about the middle of the tenth century, so that any tale mentioned on both lists must have been in existence before 950.¹ More recently Proinsias Mac Cana has shown that the origin of the lists goes much further back than 950 and that it was not a fixed canonical list but one in the process of growth.² The title, *Serc Gormlathie do Niall Glúndub*, on which Thurneysen based his argument for the date of the list, was just one addition. Other additions must have preceded and followed it. He shows that some of the tales whose titles appear on the list were no longer remembered when the lists were transcribed (pp. 85–6) and that some important tales are missing from them (p. 66). Interesting as these lists and other such sources may be to the literary historian, they are of little use to the historical grammarian, as they tell him nothing about the date of the actual text he has before him. This may, on the one hand, be older than the list, as is *Compert Con Culainn*, which appears on the saga-lists but survives independently in the language of the eighth century. Or, on the other hand, it may be younger, the sole survivor of an older tradition, as Mac Cana points out (p. 86) in the case of *Togail Bruidne Da Choca*, which is listed too but survives only in a late recension, probably of the thirteenth century. This irrelevance of the saga-lists for linguistic investigation is shared by other sources which are used by literary historians, such as the poem of Flannacán mac Cellaig, king of Brega,³ on the deaths of certain heroes, or Gilla Mo-Dutu ua Casaite's *Banshenchas*, on the great women of history. These texts provide us with a *terminus ad quem* for the existence of certain tales, occasionally even for the existence of a particular recension of a tale, but they do not provide a date for any text of a tale. And texts are the mine which the linguist has to work. One must not confuse the history of language with the history of literature.

3. Reference in the text to dated events. This is rare in Irish literature of the earlier period, which is almost always concerned

¹ R. Thurneysen, *Heldensage*, pp. 21–4.

² P. Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland* (1980), pp. 66–131.

³ Ed. K. Mulchrone, *Journ. of Celtic Stud.* i, 80 ff.

with the distant past and only rarely makes any mention of contemporary events. Such references are slightly more frequent in the ecclesiastical texts than in the secular tradition. A simple case is the mention in *Acallam na Senórach* of the monastery of Drogheda, now called Mellifont, founded in 1142.¹ This gives a date 'post 1142' for the compilation as it now exists. But it does not tell us how much later than 1142 the compilation may be or how much earlier than that date its first beginnings were. It gives us, in other words, a *terminus a quo* but not a *terminus ad quem* for this particular stage in the development of the text. A more complicated instance is the chronological passage in *Saltair na Rann*. Without going into excessive detail here I will merely say that the date 988 is embedded in the text of the poem in a way that indicates it as the year of writing. Following that there are fourteen stanzas purporting to name the kings of Ireland, Britain, and western Europe who were reigning at that time. There is no problem about the Irish and Scottish kings, but the other kings were all dead by the year 988, including the English king, Edgar, who had been dead for 13 years. Either the poet was woefully ignorant about current events or the stanzas on the kings were interpolated some time after 988, when the interpolator would have had to rely on written records for the names of the kings and got the English and European kings wrong.² To complicate matters the poem elsewhere contains a reference to Oengus céle Dé (*fl. c.800*) which has long been taken as an ascription but which I have sought to show is merely a literary flourish.³

I should like to discuss in more detail one particular instance of dating by this method which has presented problems not yet resolved. The text is the *Tripartite Life of St. Patrick*, which I have already mentioned as a text containing different language strata. This text was dated to the eleventh century by its first modern editor, Whitley Stokes, on linguistic grounds but without having analysed the relationship of the manuscripts or critically assessed the value of the linguistic evidence they contained.⁴ Subsequently Thurneysen and his pupil, Kathleen Mulchrone, after a detailed linguistic and textual analysis but relying heavily on the mention in the text of the King of Cashel, Cenn Gécán, 895–901, dated the *Life* to the years of his reign.⁵ More recently Fr Frederic Mac

¹ W. Stokes, *Irische Texte*, vol. iv, i, p. 273.

² G. Mac Eoin, 'The Date and Authorship of SR', *ZCP* xxviii (1960), 51 ff.

³ Id., *ZCP* xxxix (1982), 14–15.

⁴ W. Stokes, *The Tripartite Life of Patrick* (1887), vol. i, pp. lviii–lxxxix.

⁵ R. Thurneysen, *ZCP* xii, 279. Mulchrone, *ZCP* xvi, 1–94.

Donncha, himself a pupil of Professor Mulchrone, in a study of the Middle Irish homilies, claimed that a bilingual homiliarium, or book of model sermons, was compiled in Ireland about the year 1100.¹ Many of these sermons were earlier saints' lives adapted to the form of the homily. The *Tripartite Life* was one of these, he thinks, emphasizing the later stratum of the language in support of his opinion. This view of the *Tripartite Life* as a text in a state of growth accords well with the history of the text as outlined by Ludwig Bieler for the period before 901 and with the structure of the text as it survives.² There are some structural features in it which show that it was still in a state of development in the tenth century and which, incidentally, put the significance of the Cenn Gécán allusion into perspective and modify its validity as a *terminus ad quem* for the composition of the text.

The note on Cenn Gécán reads: *Ocus .xxvii. ríq rofollnaisetar fo bachaill hi Caisiul co ré Cinn Gécán de sil Ailella 7 Óengussa* (VT 2308f.) 'And 27 kings of the race of Ailill and Oengus ruled in Cashel under a crozier until the time of Cenn Gécán' (Stokes's translation, p. 197). This note is intended as a confirmation of the claim made immediately before, in l. 2302f.: *ní rí Caisil co rón-ordnea comarba Pátraic 7 co tarda grád fair* 'He is not king of Cashel until Patrick's successor consecrates him and ordains him [king]' (my translation). What is meant is not the clerical status of some of the kings of Cashel, as Stokes and others understood it, but the consecration of kings by bishops, a practice attested in the annals during the eighth and ninth centuries.³ For this ceremony the terms in use were the verb *oirnid* (borrowed from Lat. *ordinare*) and the phrase *do-beir grád for . . .* and *ar-léga grád for . . .*⁴ This phrase, then, is the equivalent in meaning of VT 1062 *Nochoba rí intí nat géba 7 nad órdnibe* 'He shall not be king whom thou wilt not accept and wilt not ordain' (Stokes's translation, p. 95).

Hitherto the note on Cenn Gécán at 2308f. has been taken in isolation when it was discussed in the context of dating the *Life*. But it belongs, in fact, to a series of about 100 similar sentences which are scattered throughout the *Life* connecting incidents of Patrick's life with subsequent historical events or situations. These

¹ Frederic Mac Donncha, 'Dáta Vita Tripartita Sancti Patricii', *Éigse xviii* (1980), 124-42; id., 'Medieval Irish Homilies', in *Biblical Studies: The Medieval Irish Contribution*, ed. Martin MacNamara (Dublin, 1976), pp. 59-71.

² L. Bieler, 'Versuch einer Grundlegung des Verhältnisses der irischen Patriciusviten zu den lateinischen', *Anzeiger der phil.-hist. Kl. der Öst. Akad. der Wiss.* 111. Jahrg. (1974), 253-73.

³ F. J. Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, pp. 159, 190.

⁴ *DIL*, N-O-P, col. 125, ll. 19 ff., A, col. 401, l. 58.

references may be simply onomastic, identifying the place where some event of Patrick's life occurred (e.g. 1092, 1227, 1568 ff.) or explaining the origin of a placename (e.g. 1067, 1508 ff.). Some of them relate to population-groups mentioned in Patrick's *Life* whose descendants are identified (e.g. 1734 ff., 1930, 2344, 2574 ff.). Many relate to prophecies (including curses and blessings) pronounced by Patrick, noting their fulfilment in later times, as when Patrick cursed various rivers which never since had fish in them (e.g. 741, 872, 1662) or when he blessed or cursed certain families who subsequently produced or failed to produce kings or bishops (these will be discussed in more detail below).

That these passages form one large group is clear from the use of certain formulae in many of them. Some of the onomastic references take the form *baile|dú|magen i tá X indiu*, as, for example, *baile i tá Saball Pátraic indiu* 377. Further instances are 2704, 2736, and 2739. In introducing the fulfilment of a prophecy 22 passages use one of the following phrases: *quod impletum est* 814, 1716, 1736, 1843, 1979, 2432, *ut impletum est* 1673, *sic impletum est* 1726, *quod impletur* 1062, 1714, 1839, 2122, 2284, *ut impletur* 1672, *probatum est* 1814, *quod probavimus* 2030, *quod factum est* 1615, *quod verum est* 2377, 2404, *is ed ón ro-comallad* 1890, *amal ro-comallad* 1930, *amal chomailter* 1654.

In the seventh-century Patrician lives by Muirchú and Tírechán, which were jointly the source of the greater part of the *Tripartite Life*, the model for some of these formulae is to be found. Several of the onomastic references in VT are taken from Muirchú and Tírechán either in the original Latin or in Irish translation, e.g. *usque in hunc diem* VT 1251 = Tír. 150, 12;¹ VT 377 quoted in the last paragraph = *ubi nunc est orreum Patricii* Muir. 78, 12. See also 80, 8; 108, 7; 110, 26; 112, 3. Formulae used in connection with the fulfilment of prophecies are rare in Muirchú, who has only two: *quod postea ita factum est* 100, 8, and *et factum est sic* 112, 12, and still more so in Tírechán who has only *quod sic conprobatur* 148, 25. The expansion of the formulae and their increased use must be attributed to the compiler of VT, who could have drawn on the vocabulary and practice of earlier hagiographers such as

¹ In the following Muirchú and Tírechán are cited by page and line from L. Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*, *Scriptores Latini Hibernici X* (Dublin, 1979). The complete list of references in these texts connecting Patrick's life with later events and situations is as follows: Muirchú, 78, 12; 80, 8; 98, 3; 100, 6; 108, 7; 110, 26; 112, 3; 112, 16; 120, 10 ff.; Tírechán, 132, 6; 132, 12; 134, 27; 134, 34; 136, 11; 136, 33; 140, 15; 140, 30; 142, 6; 144, 21 ff.; 144, 26; 144, 32; 146, 29; 148, 17; 148, 25; 148, 41; 150, 12; 150, 16; 160, 2; 160, 31; 160, 34.

Adomnán, who frequently uses formulae like *quae omnia adimpleta/expleta sunt*.¹

Not only the formulae but also the material of some of these passages has been borrowed from Muirchú and Tírechán: From Muirchú: 78, 12 = VT 377; 80, 8 = VT 403; 98, 3 = VT 625; 108, 7 = VT 2702; 110, 26 = VT 2736; 112, 3 = VT 2738 ff. From Tírechán: 132, 6 = VT 741; 132, 12 = VT 746; 140, 30 = VT 1092; 144, 21 ff. = VT 1216; 148, 25 = 1232; 148, 41 = VT 1242; 150, 12 = VT 1251; 160, 2 = VT 1693. Most of these passages are merely identifications of places or the like. The only prophecies taken over are the following: 98, 3 = VT 625; 132, 6 = VT 741; 132, 12 = VT 746; 148, 25 = VT 1232; and 160, 2 = VT 1693.

Four of these prophecies have to do with dynastic succession:

- 98, 3 = VT 625 Loegaire mac Néill and his descendants
- 132, 6 = VT 741 Cairpre mac Néill and his descendants
- 132, 12 = VT 746 Conall mac Néill and his descendants
- 148, 25 = VT 1232 The sons of Erc and their descendants.

These are the only dynastic prophecies in Muirchú or Tírechán. They must have appealed to the compiler of VT, because he not only took them over but modelled other dynastic prophecies on them. *Fógnífe far síl do síl úar mbráthar in eternum* VT 1232 is a translation of *Semen uestrum seruiet semini fratrum uestrorum* Tír. 148, 25. *Nec rex de semine tuo regnabit in aeternum* VT 1060 is clearly modelled on *nullus tamen erit ex semine tuo rex in aeternum* Muir. 98, 3 and *non erit de semine tuo rex in aeternum* Tír. 132, 6. The prophecy in Irish about the Déisi is on the same model: *rí ní bia uait tre bithu* VT 2447. Slightly developed are the following: *Ní bia rí ná epscop dot chenuíl co bráth* VT 2440, 7 *asbert Patraic na bíath rí ná epscop úadib*, 7 *is flaith echtrann bias forrú co bráth* VT 2200 ff.; also 2358, 2397, and 2655 ff.

The following sentences are similar to the foregoing but with affirmative instead of negative verbs: *bid húait rí co bráth hisin tír so* VT 1890, 7 *furácaib no beitis rí 7 airig día chenél co bráth* VT 1910, 7 *forácaib ordnidi laech 7 clérech uad co bráth* VT 2464, 7 *is uad flaithius in tíri co bráth* VT 2585, *bid rí féin 7 biait rí 7 flaithi húad ós do chlainn-siu 7 ós Ultaib huili* VT 2665. There are further examples of the same kind in VT 1760, 1774 ff., 1781, 1798, and 2205 ff.

Since these dynastic prophecies reflected a contemporary political situation known to all, there was little need for a statement about their fulfilment. Only the prophecies about Cenél maicc

¹ A. O. and M. O. Anderson, *Adomnan's Life of Columba* (London, 1961), pp. 228, 230, 232, 234, and *passim*.

Ercae VT 1062 and about the descendants of Fergus Mór mac Eircc VT 1890 carry such a statement. The statement in Tír. 148, 25 is omitted in VT 1232.

Other prophecies were, however, in need of an explanatory note to show how or when they were fulfilled. These are those in which the compiler of VT gives the name of the person, usually a king or prince, in whose person or in whose time the prophecy came true. I have counted thirteen such instances in VT. None of them is derived from Muirchú or Tírechán, though some of the names are found in the Notulae in the Book of Armagh. These concern:

- VT 769 Donnchad (probably Donnchad Mide †797). Coibdenach mac Fidgeile (unidentified).
- VT 790 Cinaed mac Irgalaig, king of Tara, †728
Flaithbertach mac Loingsig †765
Battle of Druim Corcán 728.
- VT 962 ff. Tuathal Maelgarb †544
Diarmait mac Cerbaill †565
- VT 1725 ff. Muirgius mac Maele Dúin maicc Scannláin, King of Cenél Cairpri. Mentioned in Notulae §5 = Bieler 180, 8. Mael Dúin †666.
- VT 1734 ff. Domnall mac Aedo maicc Ainmirech †642. Associated place-name Ard Fothaid in Notulae §6, Bieler 180, 10.
- VT 1814 Comman mac Algasaich (unidentified).
- VT 1890 Aedán mac Gabrán, King of Dál Riata, †608.
- VT 1930 Scandal, King of Dál nAraide, †646
Cú Cuarán †708
Echu mac Bresail †733.
- VT 2030 Connacán mac Colmán maicc Néill Fhrasaig, †853.
- VT 2213 Conchobar mac Donnchada hi Temair, 819-33.
- VT 2268 Gaíthíne mac Cinaeda, [King of the Loíchse], flor. mid-ninth century¹
Feidlimid (†847) and Conchobar (†833) in Tara.
- VT 2308 Cenn Gécán in Cashel, †901.
- VT 2521 Dungalach mac Faelgusa, fl. second half of the eighth century. Mentioned in Notulae §59, Bieler 182, 21.
- VT 2533 Soergus ua Maíl Ecoblith (unidentified). Notulae §35, Bieler 181, 25.

The sentence about Cenn Gécán finds its proper context among these *ex post facto* prophecies of political happenings. As with the other prophecies just cited, the prophecy on the consecration of the kings of Cashel by Patrick's successor is in two parts, the

¹ J. Radner, *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland* (Dublin, 1978), pp. xxii ff. M. O'Brien, *Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1962), pp. 91, 92.

prophecy itself (2302f.) and the statement of its fulfilment (2308f.), which claims that 27 kings of the seed of Ailill and Oengus reigned in Cashel by virtue of ecclesiastical installation until the time of Cenn Gécán.

Eoin Mac Néill¹ and Ludwig Bieler² regarded the Cenn Gécán reference as an 'accretion'. But it is of a piece with the other 'royal' prophecies listed above, which in turn are part of the broader series of passages linking Patrick with subsequent history. Furthermore, the phrasing of the Cenn Gécán sentences has close parallels elsewhere in VT: *Nochoba rí intí nát-géba 7 nád ordnibe* 1062 (cf. *Rex non erit qui te non habebit* 961f.) and *Ocht flathi leo co flaith Conchobuir maicc Donnchada hi Temair* 2213f. There seems to be no more reason for rejecting this prophecy than any other section of the compilation VT.

Kathleen Mulchrone argued that this reference to Cenn Gécán provided the dating limits for the compilation. If it had been put together at a later period, she argued, the name of Cenn Gécán's renowned successor, Cormac mac Cuilennáin, 901–8, would not have gone unmentioned. Initially this argument looks attractive but on closer inspection is seen to overlook many of the historical factors involved.

First it should be noted that the prophecy and its fulfilment apply not to all kings of Cashel but to those only who are of the seed of Ailill and Oengus. Now the claim of Cormac to belong to the dynasty of the Eoganachta is very weak. His pedigree, which can conveniently be seen in F. J. Byrne's *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, p. 292, consists of a list of names none of which occurs elsewhere and it joins the Eoganachta line at Bresal, an otherwise unknown son of Oengus mac Nad Fraích—the Oengus of the incident in VT. J. V. Kelleher considers Cormac's ancestry open to serious doubt.³ Donncha Ó Corráin doubts the correctness of the genealogy.⁴ Joan Radner describes it as 'patently fictitious' and recalls the tradition of the taunt offered by Flaithbertach mac Inmainén to Cormac on the eve of the Battle of Belach Mugna, *mac comathig* 'son of a stranger'.⁵

If Cormac was not of the Eoganachta Caisil, Patrick's prophecy

¹ E. Mac Néill, 'The Vita Tripartita of St. Patrick: I. Later accretions', *Ériu* xi (1930), 1–9, esp. p. 8.

² L. Bieler, 'Versuch', pp. 260–1.

³ J. V. Kelleher, 'The Rise of the Dál Cais', *North Munster Studies: Essays in Commemoration of Mon. Michael Moloney* (Limerick, 1967), pp. 230–41, esp. 231f.

⁴ Donncha Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans* (Dublin, 1972), p. 111.

⁵ J. Radner, *Fragmentary Annals*, p. 206.

did not apply to him and so there was no reason to mention him. Neither did it apply to his immediate successor Flaithbertach mac Inmainén, who was not of the Eoganachta but whose descent is not known. After Flaithbertach, who was abbot of Inis Cathaig in the Shannon estuary, had finally retired to religion in 922 the kingship fell to weaker members of the Eoganachta dynasty until the advent of Cellachán mac Buadachán in 939. After his death in 954 came a series of short ineffectual reigns until the succession finally passed out of Eoganachta hands with the accession of Mathgamain mac Cinnéitig in 964. The reign of Cenn Gécán marked a distinct break in the dynastic succession in Cashel. Especially when viewed from the vantage-point of history, all the more so at a time when the Dál Cais could be seen to have taken a firm grip on the kingship of Cashel, the caesura must have been obvious. Far from being an argument for the composition of the VT in the time of Cenn Gécán, the historical perspective which it demands could be said to argue for a much later date for the composition of the passage and the compilation of VT. Taking the note on Cenn Gécán together with the other royal and dynastic prophecies, one can see that it belongs to the series, that it is the latest reference in the series but that it has no more claim to be contemporary than any other member of the series. As they are retrospective, the reference to Cenn Gécán is probably retrospective also.

A second incident immediately following in the *Life* of Patrick, with a historical setting not entirely distinct from the foregoing, points to a similar conclusion. During Patrick's travels in Munster, we are told (VT 2379 ff., esp. 2407 ff.), he came to the district around the present city of Limerick. There he was approached by the people of Tuathmumu, Thomond, the country north of the Shannon, with gifts. He baptized them and blessed them for their pious generosity. Cairthend son of Blat, the ancestor (rather than 'senior', as Stokes translated *sen*) of the Clann Toirdelbaig, believed and was baptized. Up to that time all children born to him were deformed. After his baptism a healthy son, Echu Ballderg, was born to him. From this Echu descended Clann Toirdelbaig, the family who ruled Dál Cais from the early tenth century. The political background implied in this anecdote is one which came into being no earlier than the tenth century. About the beginning of that century the kingdom of Thomond was established, possibly as a result of the contest for supremacy between the Uí Néill and the Eoganachta kings of Cashel.¹ For

¹ J. V. Kelleher, *op. cit.*

the first thirty years or so of the century the new kingdom was ruled by Clann Oengusa of Dál Cais, descendants of Oengus, brother of Echu Ballderg. In 934 Clann Toirdelbaig, in the person of Lorcán mac Lachtnai, gained the kingship.¹ This was the grandfather of Mathgamain mac Cinnéitig who took the kingship of Munster for Dál Cais, and of his brother Brian, who succeeded him in the kingship of Thomond and of Munster and went on to become king of all Ireland with more real political power than any previous claimant to the title. The distinction accorded by Patrick to Clann Toirdelbaig in performing a miracle for their remote ancestor shows that they were the power in Thomond at the time the passage was written. This cannot have been earlier than the mid tenth century, for up to 934 the kingship of Dál Cais was in the hands of Clann Oengusa. A later date, when Clann Toirdelbaig had become well established as a major political force and were consequently known throughout all Ireland, would be the most likely time for the inclusion of this anecdote in the *Life*, which is northern in origin and orientation. On this interpretation a date 'post 940' is indicated for the compilation of VT.

Thus it would seem that Thurneysen and Mulchrone's attempt to establish the short reign of Cenn Gécán as at once a *terminus a quo* and a *terminus ad quem* for the composition of the *Vita Tripartita* was over-optimistic. As so often happens with such references, it provides a *terminus a quo* but no more. The reference to Clann Toirdelbaig lowers this limit somewhat. This appears to be the latest historical reference in VT and it leaves an interval of well over a century before the adaptation of the *Life* to the homiletic form. The constant development of the text and the consequent stratification of matter and language makes it impossible to ascribe a simple date to it. It must always be dated in terms of its growth and will therefore continue to cheat the linguists of the benefit they hope to obtain from it.

More often than not, for the dating of almost all prose narrative and much of the verse, anonymous and unanchored in time by datable references, the investigator has to rely on the evidence of the language. He must, of course, guard against the circular argument which he can very easily be guilty of, that is dating the text by means of the linguistic development shown in it and subsequently basing the history of the language on such texts. The literary and linguistic investigators can profitably take a leaf from the archaeologists' book and, in the absence of a chronology, classify their material typologically, leaving the chronology to

¹ Ibid. p. 236. D. Ó Corráin, op. cit. p. 114.

emerge according as the various members of the typological series are dated.

In a sense linguistic change is undatable, being of gradual, almost imperceptible, growth in the spoken language and still more tardy admission to the written code. The new form does not replace the old all at once, but both persist side by side for a period and are used and understood by speakers and writers differentiated perhaps on dialectal or diglossic lines. The theory relied upon by linguists in the past was that during this period of co-existence the changeover from the old form to the new took place at a constant rate which could be measured. Accordingly, a text in which the old and new forms were equally represented should have been written half-way through the period of change, and a text containing 60% old forms, let us say, should be older than one containing only 40%. This assumption, often referred to as the 'proportional method', has been criticized by several writers in recent years and it is not borne out by the investigation of dated texts except in the broadest sense.¹ The verse *Banshenchas*, which we know to have been written in 1147, contains no independent object pronouns, even though, by the mid twelfth century, the infixed pronoun had been almost completely ousted by the independent. The anomalies caused by such stylistic preferences on the part of authors throw the scale of change out of gear and render it only a very rough indication of the period in which the text was written.

In dating linguistic change much use has been made of the *Annals of Ulster* and the *Annals of Inisfallen*. Both of these sets of annals were kept from year to year over centuries and illustrate strikingly the changes which took place in the language during the period for which they were contemporary. We are fortunate in possessing the original manuscript of the *Annals of Inisfallen*, first written in 1092 and then kept up from year to year until 1326.² In the case of the *Annals of Ulster* the original manuscript is lost and we rely on a fifteenth century copy. Even in this later hands have made additions, a fact not indicated by Hennessy in his edition.³

I am uneasy about the use of annals to date linguistic change, especially when this is done in a mechanical way. They present us with a very narrow segment of the language. The entries are short

¹ Most recently by K. Jackson in his lecture to the Sixth International Congress of Celtic Studies, Galway, 1979. Cf. G. Mac Niocaill, 'The Proportional Method in Dating Irish Texts', *Studia Celtica* iii (1968), 47-52.

² S. Mac Airt, *The Annals of Inisfallen* (1951).

³ W. M. Hennessy, *Annals of Ulster*, 4 vols. (1887-1901).

and formulaic, referring in the main to deaths, battles, enthronements, burnings of monasteries and settlements, and the maiming of individuals. Thus their morphological and semantic range is quite limited. There is little connected narrative in them for the period before 1200 with a consequent dearth of pronouns, conjunctions, and subordinate clauses. The only tense of the verb that is well represented is the preterite and, apart from proper names, the nouns are comparatively few. It is dangerous to build too large a structure on such a shallow foundation. This has been shown by Professor Kenneth Jackson in his lecture to the Sixth International Congress of Celtic Studies in Galway in 1979, when he demonstrated graphically how the sparse attestation of certain forms in the annals can lead to the distortion and misinterpretation of their evidence for dating. But the annals can, of course, be used as a general guide and they provide a useful *terminus ad quem* for those grammatical developments which appear in them. They do not, on the other hand, provide a *terminus a quo* for the emergence of new features nor a final date for the use of obsolescent forms.

This paper may appear to take too negative a view of many of the tools used in the past in the investigation of Middle Irish grammar. It is rather a plea for the identification of the proper purpose of these tools and for their use within the limits of their utility. The material with which we have to work being scarce and uncertain, the temptation is great to eke it out by taking hints for evidence and conjecture for certainty. But as in laying down tiles the repeated millimetre out of line increases to an inch by the end of the row, so the repetition of inaccuracy leads to distorted conclusions.

There is need for complete and competent editions of the key texts, where these do not already exist. The *Tripartite Life*, the passions and homilies from the *Leabhar Breac* and elsewhere, *Saltair na Rann*, *Acallam na Senórach*, the poems reliably attributed to well-known authors, and most of the saga material need to be re-edited and reanalysed. This process is in train for SR and it is to be hoped that the untimely death of David Greene will not prevent his co-editor, Fergus Kelly, from bringing the work to a successful conclusion.

An essential of any linguistic investigation is that it should embrace all the material available in a particular category, not merely those forms which suit a preconceived grammatical model. The 'mix' of old and new forms is characteristic of Middle Irish

and should be fully illustrated in any description of the language. Furthermore, the absence of the particular feature under investigation should be noted, e.g. the omission of the preverb *ro* in preterite forms or the omission of the pronominal object during the period when the infixed pronoun was yielding place to the independent pronoun and there seems to have been some hesitation about usage.¹ Such omissions are as much part of the linguistic picture as the varying usages themselves.

We have seen that the 'proportional method' of assessing the date of change of linguistic usage is not in itself reliable when used as a mechanical index of those changes. But the proportions of old and new forms are a help in building up the 'profile' of the language of a text, taking all relevant features into account in the description of the language. This profile may then be compared with the linguistic profiles of known dated texts of the same genre. Where there are no comparable dated texts, it can be compared with undated texts, aiming at a statement of the kind: 'Text X shows a more advanced pattern of development than Text A but less advanced than Text B.' This should make it possible to place the texts in a typological order, even where they cannot be dated with any precision. This will provide a sequence of texts and a series of such profiles testifying to the language 'mix' which was acceptable at different times, irrespective of whether this mix is composed of much or little archaism or modernization.

This is indeed a task of many years and in terms of the manpower involved in Celtic Studies it is a task of generations. But it is only by such a patient teasing-out of the tangled strands of evidence that this complex linguistic amalgam, Middle Irish, can be elucidated.

¹ Cf. *ZCP* xxviii (1961), 192.