

1983

The Fifteenth Annual Conference was held at Ennismore, Montenotte, Cork, by kind invitation of Mr Aidan Macdonald in collaboration with the Department of Old and Middle Irish, University College, Cork. Speakers included: on March 24th Breandán Ó Cíobháin, 'The correspondence of toponymic elements to archaeological features in Co. Waterford'; on March 25th Aidan Macdonald, 'Adamnán's use of place-names', Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Some early Irish names', Pádraig Ó Riain, 'Saint, site, and sept', Kenneth Nicholls, 'Place-names and Anglo-French settlement in Ireland', and Margaret Faull, 'The use of place-names in archaeological work in Yorkshire'; on March 26th Deirdre Flanagan, 'Some less frequently attested Irish place-name elements of archaeological interest', Victor Watts, 'Medieval fisheries in the Wear, Tyne and Tweed - the place-name evidence', and Richard Warner, 'Archaeology and the identification of sites for the toponymist'. We are pleased to be able to publish three of the papers in revised or summary form in the following pages.

It has been many years since the Council's conference last gathered in Ireland and the Cork meeting brought fresh faces, voices, and topics, and an exceptionally friendly and lively exchange of views. On the Sunday afternoon, conference greatly enjoyed an excursion to the historic town and harbour of Kinsale. One of the abiding impressions for those of us from across the water was the far from Lenten warmth, comfort, and good food provided by the genial friars of the Ennismore Retreat and Conference Centre.

PETER McCLURE

IRISH SAINTS' GENEALOGIES*

The most recent general work on the Irish royal genealogy is by D. Dumville (1981), who brought together, examined and refurbished opinions on the subject, of which some had enjoyed currency since E. MacNeill (1911, 1920, 1921). Dumville (p.84) concludes that 'the genealogy is . . . able to be a legal title, a political weapon, and an expression of learning'. Also, while we may allow for the corrective influence of what Dumville (1981, 87) terms the concept of historical time - i.e. a period for which some historically accurate genealogical information must be available - the early part of the royal genealogy is almost invariably fictitious. The threshold of Irish historical time has been variously placed at 300 A.D. (MacNeill, 1921, 57), 400 A.D. (T. F. O'Rahilly, 1946, 200, 266-9) and 600 A.D. (M. A. O'Brien, 1973, 217n). But already in the seventh century Irish secular genealogies were being written down, sometimes *in extenso*. Furthermore, as M. Dillon (1973, 6-8) has suggested, the Irish practice of naming and praising ancestors, often by reciting genealogical poems in association with the consecration of kings, seems to reflect 'the earliest form of Indo-European kingship'.

Unfortunately, while a good deal has been written on the functions of the royal genealogy, the transmission of the massive Irish corpus of genealogical texts still awaits investigation of any kind. J. V. Kelleher (1968) has made some suggestions concerning the date and provenance of the text, but these are based on its arrangement, not on its history. So, while it is by no means certain that a study of the manuscript history of the text will result in a major revision of opinions already formed, it will certainly provide a much more authoritative basis for them. The recent history of the collections of Irish saints' genealogies lends force to this view.

Dumville's dictum regarding the collections of royal genealogies again applies; 'the farther west one goes, the more there are' (1981, 76). Indeed, the saint's genealogy is by and large an exclusively Celtic phenomenon. Furthermore, while Welsh tradition is represented by a number of texts, notably *De situ Brecheniauc* and *Bonedd y Saint*, together with their several offshoots, which may have been composed in the eleventh and twelfth centuries respectively (Bartrum, 1966, 14, 51), these are greatly outnumbered by the Irish materials, which comprise not only several early independent recensions of the main collection, running to over four hundred genealogies, but also numerous independent tracts, such as that on the mothers of the Irish saints, which add a great deal of genealogical information to the main text (Ó Riain, 1984).

Surprisingly perhaps, given its uniqueness, the Celtic saint's pedigree has not attracted much attention, but then, as Genicot (1975, [8]) points out, the genealogical text has always been *un genre mineur*. There are exceptions, however, notably the great Belgian Celticist and Bollandist, Paul Grosjean and the Harvard historian, J. V. Kelleher, who, as scholars will, have expressed opposite views of the value of the saint's genealogy. Grosjean (1958, 389n), labelling it *une coordonnée hagiographique*, placed the genealogy on a level equal in importance for the Celtic saint to the two *coordonnées* (relating to burial-place and feast-day) which his fellow Bollandist, H. Delehaye, established as the *bona fides* of the western European saint. (These latter, by the way, while no doubt justifiably held in high regard by continental hagiographers, are no more than very makeshift guides to the authenticity of the Celtic saint). For Kelleher (1963, 119), on the other hand, the saint's genealogy, as it survives in the genealogical corpus, is a proof that the christian revolution in

Ireland was over, for the composition of this collection 'had but one real purpose, to conceal forever the fact that some of the notable early clerics had been unpalatably plebeian'.

Both opinions were expressed very much *en passant*, neither scholar having made a special study of the corpus of saints' genealogies, although Grosjean (1931) did edit two recensions of the text. I mention them here, therefore, in order to dispose of the false premise on which both are based, namely, that the corpus is an early text. Kelleher (1963, 118-9) first implied that it should be dated to the eighth century. Later, he revised this opinion, stating that 'it was probably put together in the ninth century' (1968, 143). The latter date is followed by Dumville (1981, 76), who places the collection of the genealogies of Irish saints from 'at least the ninth century onwards'; the former is adopted by Ó Corráin (1981, 330) who suspects that the genealogies of the saints were mostly 'put together in the eighth century'.

In fact, the earliest recension of the corpus, which was written into the early twelfth-century Book of Glendalough (better known as Bodleian manuscript Rawlinson B502), cannot have been redacted at a date before c. 950 A.D., since it includes a list of Colum Cille's successors, the latest of whom, abbot Dubthach, died in 938 A.D. His successor, abbot Dub Dúin, lived until 959 A.D. On this and other evidence I place the provenance of this recension at Kells in co. Meath, and date the text, at the earliest, to the second half of the tenth century. Ironically, this is not the recension on which Kelleher based his opinion of the text's very much earlier date of composition. His reference to the arrangement of the entries along tribal lines similar to those of the secular corpus (a coincidence which, incidentally, constitutes one of his arguments for dating the secular text to the eighth century) shows that he had in mind the recension preserved in the mid-twelfth-century Book of Leinster, and in some derivative manuscripts. Demonstrably, however, the redactor of this recension was the scribe of the manuscript, Aed mac Crimthainn, who used as his main source the earlier Book of Glendalough version (Ó Riain, 1984; cf. Ó Riain, 1981a). Surely then, since Kelleher's presumed eighth- or ninth-century text turns out to have been first composed in the late twelfth century, speculation regarding the provenance and date of such collections is idle, until the history of their textual transmission has been thoroughly investigated.

Failing such an examination, however, one rough and ready guide to the date of a pedigree may be mentioned, at least as far as the saints are concerned, that is, its length. What Genicot (1975, 11) has to say of the Welsh genealogies, *qu'elles s'allongent progressivement*, applies with equal force to the Irish materials. Indeed, it may be stated as a general principle that the earlier the source, the shorter the Irish saint's genealogy. St. Patrick, who is furnished with a full-length pedigree in every recension of the corpus, including material from the ninth-century *Historia Brittonum*, whose reception in Ireland was in any case comparatively late (Dumville, 1976, 272), is a case in point. In none of his early *vitae*, not even in the vernacular *Tripartita*, to which we may assign a date in the second half of the ninth century, is there an attempt made to provide a descent in excess of the four generations which Patrick himself had placed on record. And it is only in some copies of the eleventh- or twelfth-century abbreviated version of the *Tripartita* that we find his pedigree fully fitted out in accordance with the corpus tradition.

The length of a saint's pedigree, needless to say, has little or no bearing on its credibility or on its function. As far as the former aspect is concerned, I take the general view that most of the Irish (and indeed Welsh) saints had no existence as

historical persons. They represented either surrogate pagan deities (Ó Riain, 1977a) or localized manifestations (in other words, doublets) of originally single and sometimes genuine cults, such as those of Colum Cille (Ó Riain, 1983) or of his tutor, Findbarr (Ó Riain, 1977b, 1981b). Moreover, even in those few cases where genuine people are involved, we cannot be certain that the pedigrees convey accurate information, bearing in mind that the so-called Age of Saints comes to an end around 600 A.D., the date beyond which, as we have seen, Irish genealogies generally become untrustworthy.

Manifestly, then, the church's concern with the pedigrees of its saints was motivated by other than a purely historical interest. Dumville (1981, 76) sees the church's 'stake in genealogy' as a consequence of its 'large stake in kingship', 'good blood' and 'descent from appropriate tribal groupings' becoming requisites of its saints. If so, which were the appropriate tribal groupings? Ó Corráin (1981, 328-30) in his recent, very perceptive study of the Irish hereditary clerical families, states, as a general principle, that these 'were usually discarded segments of royal lineages, pushed out of the political struggle and forced to reprise themselves in the church'. Ó Corráin further suggests that the genealogies of the saints 'primarily served the needs of such clerical dynasties'. In other words, we may usually expect a correlation between the descent of the founder-saint and that of the local clerical family enjoying his succession. Among other examples, Ó Corráin cites the case of the clerical family of Dromiskin, co. Louth, the Uí Chrístáin who 'impossibly identified' their eponym, Críctán, with the grandfather of St Rónán, patron of the local church. He also draws attention to the classic example of Trim, co. Meath, where 'ecclesiastical and secular succession' are found side by side. The evidence is, however, by no means uniform. Thus, as Ó Corráin (1981, 330) admits, certain factors run 'counter to the general relationship of church and [local] dynasty', some monasteries keeping up 'close contact with the homeland of the founder, often from a different part of Ireland'. A case in point is the important church of Lismore, whose patron was Mochuta of the Ciarraige. The saint's biographer, whose view was no doubt coloured by his own eleventh- or twelfth-century experience (Kenney, 1929, 452), affirms that the saint's successors were 'to belong to this family for ever', and while there is no evidence to support Canon Power's (1937, 5) sweeping statement that the 'saint's successor in Lismore was, for centuries, a Kerryman, the only one whose genealogy survives, Flann son of Foirchellach († 825), pluralist 'abbot of Lismore, Emly and Cork', is assigned to the Ciarraige Luachra. Another possibly very important example is implied by an identification only very recently made. Brigit's early vernacular life describes her visit to the hitherto unidentified church of Cell Lasre in the southern part of Brega, where she is made welcome by St Lassar (Ó hAodha 1978, 32). The life goes on: 'Lassar gave her her church and Brigit is venerated there'. The same church is mentioned in a tract listing Brigit's *subiectae* (or affiliated churches) in the hagiographical part of the Book of Leinster (Stokes, 1890, 336; Ó Riain, 1984). There, however, it is stated that the church lay in Uí Bresail, the name given in Brigit's genealogy to her own family, which, however, is associated with the Kildare/Offaly region. If it could be shown therefore that Uí Bresail of Cell Laisre referred to the southern part of Brega, then we have a genealogical tie-up between the family connected with one of the churches affiliated to the saint's *paruchia* and that of the saint herself from a different part of Ireland. The clue was provided by K. W. Nicholls who pointed out to me that the exotically named townland of Brazil in the parish of Killossery (from Cell Laisre), co. Dublin, was known as 'Obressell' (from Uí Bresail) in Norman documents. Also the early dedication at Killossery is to Brigit and this confirms the identification. May we not

infer that segments of families with a vested interest in a saint sometimes promoted the cult by travelling with it? A great deal of further investigation is required, but if this was a common feature of the early Irish church it would not only explain why hereditary clerical succession in paruchia churches 'cut across dynastic lines' (Ó Corráin, 1981, 330), but, given the freedom of movement so characteristic of the Irish professional classes, it would also help to illumine the obscure background to the emergence of the paruchia system in Ireland and, perhaps, in Wales (Hughes, 1966, 65-78).

The pattern of succession at Lismore and, presumably, at Killossery, where the headship of the community remained within the founder's family, has some similarities with a claim made in the law-tract Córus Béscna which, as interpreted among others by J. Ryan (1931, 263-71) and K. Hughes (1966, 160-61), required that the succession rest 'first, in the family of the patron saint'. If this family could not produce a suitable candidate, however, the succession passed to 'the family of the landowner'. In some cases both of these families were the same, but, given the several other conditions laid down, there did exist a basis in law for a switch from the family of the patron. And, as time went on, this was no doubt exploited to the full, if political or ecclesiastical expediency required it. One wonders, for instance, what legal point was invoked by the Uí Bhriain when, in the late eleventh century, they intruded a Dál Cais clerical family, the Uí Rebacháin, into the succession at Lismore. Certainly, no attempt appears to have been made to tailor the patron saint's genealogy accordingly. Yet precisely this stratagem was adopted in the following century when a similar intrusion interrupted the traditional pattern of succession at the monastery of Cork. The ancestors of the O'Mahonys, the Uí Echach of Munster, were the most powerful family in what was to become the diocese of Cork in the twelfth century. The lives of Cork's patron, St Findbarr, acknowledge this in a number of ways but most spectacularly, perhaps, in the association of the saint's birth with what is presumed to have been one of the main settlements of the Uí Echach, Ráith Raithlenn, now Garranes Fort, near Crookstown, co. Cork. Remarkably, however, Findbarr's place of birth is at odds with his ancestry, for, we are told, 'the race and stock of St Bairre [as he was known hypocoristically] removed . . . from the territory of Connaught, and occupied a possession and land . . . in the district of Muscraige Mittíne [Muskerry of Mittíne, an area roughly corresponding to the baronies of West and East Muskerry, co. Cork]'. Accordingly, Findbarr's descent is traced, not to a local Cork family, but to the Uí Bhriúin of north Connacht (Plummer, 1910, 65; 1922, 11).

This cannot have always been the case, however, for very much in keeping with the story of the saint's birth in the household of Tigernach, king of Uí Echach, we find an alternative pedigree which not only traces Findbarr to the Uí Echach, but also dates him to one generation after the king, thus agreeing perfectly with the chronology implied by the lives (Walsh, 1918, 115). Furthermore, the full name given him in the Uí Echach pedigree is Bairrfhind, whence the saint's usual hypocoristic Bairre, whereas the Connacht pedigree more usually names him Findbarr, a form which, by right, generates the hypocoristic Finnio (whence Finnian). Also, Bairrfhind of the Uí Echach pedigree is followed by the placename element Metíne which, as we saw above in association with Muskerry, is where the saint's family is supposed to have lived. And finally, to clinch the argument, the saint is traced to the Ceinél Lóegaire branch of the Uí Echach, to which also belonged the Uí Shelbaig, traditionally the family in line of succession to the Cork saint.

Given that this is the more traditional, local statement of the saint's descent, why was it jettisoned in favour of an imported Connacht pedigree? The reason appears to have been the arrival in Cork after 1134 (by way of reparation for the pillaging of the abbey of Saint Mary of Cong by Cormac Mac Carthy, king of south Munster) of a colony of Connacht monks, one of whom, Gilla Aeda Ua Muigin (†1172), was to become Bishop of Cork, and successor of St Findbarr. Thus Findbarr's Connacht descent seems to have been a ploy designed to gain acceptance for what we know to have been a controversial appointment (Bolster, 1972, 78). If so, then the saint's pedigree sometimes served, if not as a legal title, then certainly as a very powerful piece of supporting evidence for the abbot's claim to right of succession.

The regularity with which the descent of the saint agrees with that of his successor has yet to be established. Underlying it, however, wherever it occurs, is surely a recognition of the genealogy's potential value as a legitimizing text, a quality which it appears to have retained even in late medieval times. Thus, the Uí Rodacháin, coarbs or successors of St Caillín at Fenagh in co. Leitrim between 1377 and 1532, rejoiced in the same traditional ancestry as their patron. And, while there is no basis in fact for the agreement - apart from anything else, Caillín is a doublet of Colum Cille - its very mention is surely significant. Also, if we had an early coverage of the Uí Rodacháin, we would no doubt discover that their own affiliations underwent several changes, according as political fortunes changed about them. Writing in the twelfth century, the biographer of St Colmán of Lynn in co. Westmeath, who is traced to the local dynasty of Clann Cholmáin, alleges that the saint's brother, Anfossaid by name, took the church of Clongowney so that 'from him sprang the Uí Maenachain and the hUí Maelumae', the hereditary clerical families of that church (Meyer, 1911, 8, 34). As well as being an excellent example of insistence on the pretence that the hereditary clerical group should belong to the saint's family, this statement underlines the willingness of such families to change sides. For, unknown to our biographer, a second, independent tradition asserts that these two clerical families descended from a segment of the ruling dynasty of Uí Fháilge (O'Brien, 1962, 58), a group which may once have controlled that part of Westmeath in which Clongowney lies.

In sum, therefore, the Irish saint's genealogy offers little or no information on the saint. It does help, however, to plot the progress of his cult. Furthermore, being almost invariably retrospective in character, it can illumine the pattern of succession in his church, or churches. This last is perhaps its most important, if also its most neglected, aspect. In some cases, the genealogy must have had a quasi-legal force. The transmission of Findbarr's pedigree in Cork is a case in point. Yet it was certainly not the only possible legitimizing factor at the disposal of the saint's successor. Its evidence could just as easily be cancelled out by recourse to other stratagems. Thus when Kevin's life was written at Glendalough, his successor was obviously in no position to lay claim to the same descent as the patron saint. Instead, he instructed the saint to ordain 'that the erenach [i. e. abbot] in his church should be habitually of the children and posterity of Dímma [son of Fergna], though they were exiles from Meath' (Plummer, 1922, 123). Here he is, of course, disclosing his own affiliations, as well as his family's origin legend. Similarly in the early thirteenth-century life composed for St Abbán, the author introduces himself as the descendant of a man unrelated to the saint but of whose seed the saint is made to prophesy that they shall be 'rulers and dignitaries' (principes et potentes) of his civitas (Plummer, 1910, 20). We may note that in both cases, while the saint's genealogy has no say in the conveyance of title to his successor, the emphasis is nonetheless on descent.

The importance of the hereditary factor in the organisation of Irish and, as W. Davies (1982, 76, 156) most recently shows, Welsh monastic life, has long been recognised. Only in recent studies, however, such as those of Dumville (1981) and, especially, Ó Corráin (1981) is an awareness shown of a connexion between the saint's genealogy and the question of hereditary office. Here, somewhat randomly perhaps, I have tried to develop this awareness by reference to examples of how the connexion may have worked on the ground.

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NOTE

- * This is a revised version of the paper given at the XVth Annual Conference of the Council for Name Studies on March 25th, 1983, at Ennismore House, Cork.