

Review: Pádraig Ó Riain (ed.), *The poems of Blathmac son of Cú Brettan: reassessments*: Irish Texts Society subsidiary series 27. Irish Texts Society. London 2015. x + 201 pp. € 21. ISBN 9780957566149

The annual Irish Texts Society seminar has hitherto yielded many valuable reassessments on previous ITS publications. The present book is the fruit of the ITS seminar in November 2014 that celebrated the jubilee of James Carney's *The Poems of Blathmac* (ITS vol. 47, London 1964). All five speakers at the seminar have contributed to this volume, giving readers an exceptionally comprehensive review of the different aspects of Blathmac's poems. However, it should be noted from the start that all contributors only attend to the two poems ascribed to Blathmac, whereas the two other poems edited by Carney in the same book, those on the 'Gospel of Thomas' and on the Virgin Mary, have not been treated in the present volume.

James Carney's life, career and struggles are oratorically recapped by Seán Ó Coileáin in the first chapter (1-46). In this earnest account, Ó Coileáin reveals Carney's uneasy academic experience and outlines the development of his most important thoughts. Not trained as a (comparative-historical) linguist, not engaging in the 'pilgrimage' to the Southwest, and not having collected oral folklore, Carney appeared quite unorthodox among his peers and thus suffered no little discredit and estrangement. It is in defence of his linguistic competence that Carney provides an elaborate apparatus to his edition of the poems of Blathmac, a treatment that surpasses all but one of the preceding ITS editions (22). His firm stance against the 'nativists' dragged him into even fiercer debates, but his theory finally gained wider acceptance that it becomes now justified to divide the study of medieval Irish literature into pre-Carney and post-Carney phases (33). Not all of his radical and at times provocative ideas finally stand the test of time, but as Ó Coileáin states, 'James Carney's greatest bequest has been to rid us of the old certainties' (44).

The second chapter (47-103) by David Stifter is titled 'The language of the poems of Blathmac', but covers a far larger ground than linguistic issues. By discussing the identity and location of Blathmac (49-58), the manuscript (59-60) and sources used by Blathmac (60-65) besides analysis of the poems' metrical (65-70) and linguistic features (70-102), Stifter's chapter can well be regarded as an updated introduction to the edition. While hailing the discovery of verses in NLI MS G50 as 'the largest addition of text to the corpus of Early Irish in the 20th century' (47), Stifter warns that 'the claim that the *Poems of Blathmac* are literary products of the mid-8th century is no more than an (*sic*) hypothesis that can potentially be falsified, but that cannot be verified as such' (53). Blathmac's patronym (Cú Brettan) suggests connection with Britain or even British ancestry, and his home territory in Ulster certainly was prone to receive British influence. On the other hand, the rare British loanwords *pailt*, *mórach* and *feról* may not be as significant as Stifter suggests (54-5, 96-7) in supporting a strong British link on the poet's side, since these rare loanwords may well have been part of the *bélrae na filed* stock and used by the poet to demonstrate his learnedness. For instance, *Sanas Cormaic* contains a number of British (loan)words possibly culled from Irish literary sources, such as in CormY 450 where a line ascribed to Néide mac Adnai employs the

British word *da* ‘good’ in *doiduíne* ‘a good man’. The rarity of such loanwords may be due to the scarcity of surviving Old Irish verses, as evinced also by the large number of previously unattested Irish verbal forms and lexemes in these two poems (85-6, 95-6). Overall, in his articulate linguistic analysis, Stifter commends numerous emendations and interpretations of Carney’s edition as well as makes useful methodological observations as regards linguistic dating of early Irish texts. For example, when discussing the retention or removal of hiatus in the poems (72-6), Stifter distinguishes causes of metrical exigency, learned Latinism, intra-paradigmatic analogy and genuine historical progress, and on the last cause he rightly points out that ‘only where morphological or phonological simplification occurs systematically across a broad range of words or across an entire category is it legitimate to speak of actual phonological progress’ (76). Truism as it seems, this basic rule of historical linguistics is not always carried through in dating early Irish texts. We are grateful to Stifter for his reappraisal of Blathmac’s poems, and are looking forward to the PhD dissertation by Siobhán Barrett of Maynooth University under Stifter’s supervision, which certainly will bring further insight into the language of Blathmac.

Liam Breatnach in his chapter ‘Legal and societal aspects of the poems of Blathmac’ (104-118) offers a lucid demonstration of how Blathmac fuses perspectives of medieval Irishmen with Scriptural sources. Breatnach illustrates by means of a passage from Middle Irish *Sermo ad Reges* (104-5), that even in translating Latin, Irish literati would add extra materials to adapt the biblical concept to the conditions of their own society. He then concentrates on two topics, namely clientship and healing, that are reflected in the poems of Blathmac. A number of legal sources are quoted by Breatnach, most of which in Old Irish from roughly the same era as Blathmac, to explain the rich legal and societal references in the poems. Blathmac can be very explicit in referring to legal practices, even in line 396 directly employs the legal saying *sénae iar n-aitite* ‘denial after admission’ (111). God and the Jews are consistently represented as in the relationship of lord and clients, the violating of which by the Jews entails the forfeiture of their land according to early Irish law (112-4), thus clarifying the meaning of *orbbadail* in line 466 of the first poem (‘division of the failed client’s land’ rather than ‘dispersal of heritage’ as translated by Carney). Blathmac is also familiar with the institution of sick-maintenance and especially mentions *nómad* ‘a nine-day period’ for measuring the injury before removal (*dingbál*), but such a practice had become obsolete, according to *Críth Gablach*, in the early eighth century. This reference thus provides a possible dating criterion.

The next chapter by Brian Lambkin (‘Blathmac’s *Bithchuíniu*: “perpetual keening” and migration’, 119-55) examines a range of topics and tries to group them under the two rubrics of keening and migration. Lambkin’s concepts of keening and migration are very broad. ‘Keening’ denotes not only the literary genre and ritual practice, as defined by Kaarina Hollo (‘Laments and lamenting in early medieval Ireland’, in H. Fulton (ed.), *Medieval Gaelic literature and society* (Dublin 2005) 83-94:83), but also general weeping or sorrow in various changes (‘migrations’) in the stages of life (119-20). While this inclusiveness may help shed new light by comparing different contexts, one finds it difficult to follow how, for instance, the crying of Laisrén after seeing a carnal vision can be regarded as a keening (128-9). Lambkin’s reasoning is that Blathmac’s

invocation ‘Come to me, Mary’ places the poet in the person of John the apostle, into whose care Jesus entrusted his mother (126), and therefore keening involves obligation to provide accommodation for the bereaved, instanced by Blathmac’s line 592 ‘come on a visit to me’ (127-8). So when Laisrén was similarly invited to a student’s home in a ‘near-death’ sickness and had a wet dream, his mourning is a ‘pre-death keening’ to beseech an angelic visit for a good vision (128-9). First of all, as argued by Stifter and Ó Dochartaigh in the same volume (69 n. 83 and 159), the second poem may not be a keening at all, and the reference to John in lines 885-9 is part of his laudatory accounts of the apostles, hardly a call to imitate John in inviting Mary home (126). Secondly, as Lambkin himself admits (127), there is no direct evidence in Irish tradition of an obligation to take home the bereaved. Laisrén’s carnal vision clearly results from the uncleaned cloak he slept on, as explained in *The Monastery of Tallaght* text itself, and has nothing to do with his (near-)death or bereavement. It is also surprising that Lambkin thinks that ‘in terms of the native Irish legal tradition, the only option for one “at the foot of the gallows” was to plead to his king or lord for mercy by keening’ (144-5). Perhaps this is a rule that no other scholar has yet noticed amid the huge corpus of early Irish law, but at least Lambkin’s reference to the fasting against a *nemed* (145) is inappropriate. In early Irish law, fasting against a *nemed* is a substitute for distraint or other enforcement to pressurise the defaulting *nemed* into conceding justice, and this certainly does not apply to the case of a Christian ‘keening the imminent danger of his own death and “exile” into eternal damnation’ (144).

The last Chapter by Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh (‘Devotional and liturgical themes in the poems of Blathmac’, 156-72) traces the textual sources drawn and imitated by Blathmac by situating the two poems in the late antique and medieval Christian literary tradition. Ó Dochartaigh points out that ‘Blathmac’s poems are related to a wider tradition of Old and Middle-Irish verse adaptations of biblical or apocryphal narratives’, and the biblical paraphrase is a genre that combines Christian devotional needs and classical didactic tradition (160). The Old Testament account in the poems is quite canonical, while Blathmac’s eschatology betrays accounts from the apocrypha (163), and influence from *Vetus Latina* and early medieval liturgical texts is clearly visible (166). Stanza 152 of the second poem, especially, is one of the earliest evidence for the liturgical formula of *Ave Maria* antiphony in the West (168-72).

This volume as a whole constitutes a detailed introduction and provides an up-to-date bibliography to Carney’s edition. It will certainly generate further interest in the four Old Irish poems in that edition in the years to come.

Fangzhe Qiu

Department of Early Irish, Maynooth University, Ireland

fangzhe.qiu@nuim.ie