

guises, as mother and intercessor, against the art, drama and, most importantly, the lore and legends of post-Reformation Ireland. The Irish have always been selective in what they chose to use from Marian iconography, as this essay highlights and the cult of the Virgin, although promoted by the various orders (particularly by the Franciscans), was very much in the hands of the laity. It takes us from the realms of high art, so frequently encountered in the other studies, to the popular, with its Counter-Reformation efforts to keep the cult alive and the possible loss of interest in the period immediately preceding the Famine.

No collection of essays on devotion in medieval Ireland would be complete without a study on its metalwork, and in particular, its reliquaries. Raymond Gillespie, in an insightful analysis of the late-sixteenth-century shrine of St Caillin of Fenagh moves us from the Christological to the hagiographical and in doing so provides us with a case study that highlights the need to understand these works against the social and political background against which they were made. To understand these works fully, as Ryan has already shown, we need to know about their makers and the context in which they were created. This was a period in which the secular impacted greatly on the sacred and was used for particular ends, as Raymond Gillespie shows. Here, personal, political and religious factors are all referenced in the creation of this particular work and show how history and its needs are never too far away from religion.

The authors and editors of this volume deserve to be thanked for sharing their scholarship and providing us with truly inter-disciplinary and original material. After centuries of neglect, it is rewarding to see research into the late medieval period in Ireland develop and I am sure that these essays will stand as one of the pillar stones for the future.

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Windows on late medieval devotional practice: Máire Ní Mháille's 'Book of Piety' (1513) and the world behind the texts

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It may appear somewhat puzzling that the first contribution to a volume on *Art and devotion in late medieval Ireland* focuses on the written word rather than visual imagery. However, this decision is quite deliberate. What follows is an attempt to offer a general sketch of the variety of religious ideas in circulation in late medieval and early modern Gaelic Ireland. When compared with the survival of manuscripts from late medieval and early modern England, extant sources for Gaelic Ireland are disappointingly few. However, the texts that do survive are rich in their potential for uncovering a devotional world. Chronicles such as the Annals of Ulster, Annals of Connacht and Annals of Loch Cé are full of both explicit, but also and more often, incidental references to the devotional mindsets of their compilers and their contemporaries.¹ Irish hagiography, which experienced a revival in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with the compilation of saints' lives in the Irish language (marking a change from the Latin compositions of the pre-Norman period) can also be used to great effect: not, it must be cautioned, to understand the spirituality of the time during which the saint lived, but, rather to catch a glimpse of the assumptions of the biographer and his contemporaries.² However, the most comprehensive body of evidence for late medieval and early modern native Irish religious ideas must surely be the corpus of bardic religious poetry which survives, consisting of nearly four hundred poems specifically dedicated to devotional themes.³ Of all surviving sources from Gaelic Ireland, these poems are of unrivalled value in helping us to unlock the religious mind of the medieval Irish and, as demonstrated below by Karena Morton, can be used to great effect in understanding religious iconography such as that found in the Clare Island wall paintings. Devotional collections compiled during this period, consisting of pious legends, religious poetry, catechetical tracts, saints' lives and other miscellanea assist scholars in refining their search for the religious mind of the Gaelic Irish. When such collections can be traced to an individual or family responsible for their commission, such as the

¹ See B. Cunningham and R. Gillespie, *Stories from Gaelic Ireland* (2003). See also R. Gillespie below in this volume. ² See, for example, R. Gillespie, 'A sixteenth-century saint's life' (2004). ³ S. Ryan, 'A slighted source' (2004).

'Book of Piety' of Máire Ní Mháille discussed here, and in the case of the *Seanchas Búrcach* manuscript examined by Bernadette Cunningham in this volume, we are afforded a rare snapshot of piety in practice. An appreciation of what devotional and other religious texts can reveal about the practical piety of their compilers (and their audience) can thus be of great value before beginning to explore the world of religious art.

It must have been a busy time for Ciothruadh Mág Fhindgoill in the weeks and months leading up to the last day of May 1513. On that date the Tory Island scribe included in one of the colophons to his compilation of religious material, details of its composition and enjoined upon the reader to bless his pitiful soul and the souls of his successive wives, especially that of his latest wife, black-haired Mór.⁴ The material assembled was commissioned by Máire Ní Mháille, wife of Ruaidhrí Mac Suibne Fanad, a Donegal noblewoman, known widely for her personal piety. Indeed, both she and her husband were to found a Carmelite priory at Rathmullan three years later and would both die in the Carmelite habit within ten years.⁵ Perhaps more than any other text, what has become known as the *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* affords us a unique insight into the devotional tastes of a member of Gaelic Irish society at the end of the late medieval period. Because we know that the text was actually commissioned by Máire, a direct link can be drawn between the content of the manuscript and the devotional life of its creator. So what sort of religious material was, in fact, of interest to this noblewoman? A brief examination of the content of Mág Fhindgoill's work provides some answers.

Firstly, it must be noted that the material does not fit easily into a single category or classification. Rather, it comprises a variety of pious legends, saints' lives, morality tales, lists, and catechetical and didactic devices. Its range spans the meditative and practical aspects of Catholicism, juxtaposing hagiographical with liturgical and sacramental concerns. The collection, rather than taking an insular approach, reveals instead a concern for some of the most popular elements of late medieval western European spirituality. As far as this noblewoman was concerned, this personal book of piety exuded devotion *à la mode*. There appears the famous story of the Finding of the True Cross by St Helena, mother of Emperor Constantine. An Irish version of the popular Latin life of Mary entitled *Vita Rhythmica* also features as does the Harrowing of Hell text, all staple material of the late medieval European devotee. Predictably, the theme of Christ's

⁴ *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, ed. P. Walsh (1920), p. xlvi. The manuscript, RIA 24 P 25, consists of three portions, the first of which has come to be known, through the work of Paul Walsh as the 'Book of Piety'.
⁵ S. Meigs, *The Reformations in Ireland* (1997), p. 14. For the piety of medieval Irishwomen in general see D. Hall, *Women and the Church in medieval Ireland* (2003).

Passion and Death finds appropriate place in the collection, appearing in the Gospel of Nicodemus text and an abbreviated version of the work known as *Liber de Passione Christi et doloribus et planctibus matris eius*.

The saints that are included in Máire's collection reflect both a concern for native candidates and their more universal counterparts. Lives of both St Patrick and St Colum Cille are to be found, while the popular virgin martyrs St Catherine of Alexandria and St Margaret are similarly not forgotten. Catherine had long since gained favour with visitors to the pilgrimage site of St Patrick's Purgatory, having displaced St Adomnán to become the only non-native saint to be patron of a penitential bed sometime after the pilgrimage was revitalised by the Augustinians in the mid-twelfth century.⁶ The saint's life was designed, primarily, to be heard and remembered, making it accessible to the non-literate members of a family, including children, as is evidenced by the manner in which the scribe concludes the tale:

So that so far is the life and death of Catherine the Virgin and it was Enóg Ó Giolláin and I myself who drew it from the Latin and a curse on all my implements, and everyone who shall read or listen to, or memorise it will gain Heaven for himself and three others he most likes *et reliqua*.⁷

Such a formula provided an incentive for the reader or listener to learn the tale (or at least its key elements) by heart and thereby acquire the assistance of the saint in his or her hour of need, that hour being unquestionably the hour of death. It should be noted that this device was used elsewhere in continental Europe: the ubiquitous thirteenth-century collection of saints' lives entitled *Legenda aurea*, compiled by Jacobus de Voragine, reported that Catherine, before she was beheaded, prayed to God that 'any who should remember my passion, be it at death, or in any other necessity, and call me [...] shall have by thy mercy the effect of his request and prayer' after which a voice from Heaven allegedly replied: 'to them that shall hallow thy passion I promise the comfort of Heaven'.⁸ This device also brought the character of the story alive, leading the individual into a direct encounter with the saint and her blessings. The scribe himself was not merely performing a duty, but actually wrote out of an experience of devotion to his subject. This comes across quite strongly in a personal petition included in lines at the end of fo. 105, col. 1 of the *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*

⁶ P. Harbison, *Pilgrimage in Ireland* (1991), p. 65. ⁷ *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, p. xlvi. ⁸ C. Tait, 'Harnessing corpses' (1999), p. 263. Bardic poet, Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaigh used a similar formula in a thirteenth-century poem: 'I pray, too, to the prophet who will give Heaven to all who learn off what I compose; may he bring to Heaven every man who recites it': *Dán Dé* (1922), poem 25, v.76.

manuscript: 'I beseech the mercy of God through the intercession of Catherine the Virgin, and it is not easy to steal me away today from Sile.'⁹ The inclusion of a life of that other favourite female saint of the middle ages, St Margaret, in a noblewoman's book of piety is hardly surprising. Margaret was renowned for her effectiveness as a patron of women in childbirth. This reputation undoubtedly arose from the legend attached to the virgin martyr which related how the saint was swallowed by a dragon and eventually managed to extricate herself from the monster's body by making the sign of the cross and exploding the offending beast.¹⁰

Many of the elements within Máire's 'Book of Piety' are instructive of how to live a good life and attain salvation, something which this noblewoman was clearly interested in doing. Among them are included the following: a homily on the Ten Commandments, advice to those who wish to please God and man, three reasons why God shortens the sinner's life, four things which prevent holiness, three things which lead to Heaven, three things which lead to Hell, three reasons why one should despise the world and three reasons why one should trust in God. In addition, there appears a tract on drunkenness, the story of a woman who was in the habit of using bad language and a tract on hypocrisy. In the case of the woman using bad language, according to the legend, upon her death her body was cut in two and only the lower half was buried in consecrated ground. One wonders whether Máire considered these aforementioned vices particularly applicable to her own personal life and thus ensured that they were included in her collection as a perpetual reminder of the need for continuing self-improvement. Should Máire have had cause to have recourse to them, there were no shortage of female role models to be imitated in her eclectic compilation, including the heroic apocryphal Veronica who, after Christ's death, succeeded in procuring the death of Pontius Pilate and his deposition in the Tiber river.¹¹

The elements of Máire Ní Mháille's 'Book of Piety' that most graphically illustrate the devotional world of the noblewoman behind the text are surely those directly associated with sacramental and liturgical life, in addition to prescriptions for the exercise of effective personal prayer. In essence, the business of worship looms large among this noblewoman's religious concerns. The sixteen conditions necessary for a good confession, found in Antoninus of Florence's *Confessionale-Defecerunt* and attributed to St Thomas Aquinas, are included here. This list is found elsewhere in two fifteenth-century Franciscan manuscripts from Cork and Clare respectively and the extant library catalogue of the

⁹ *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, pp. xliv-lxiii. ¹⁰ S. Ryan, 'Popular religion in Gaelic Ireland' (2002), i, p. 257. ¹¹ *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, p. lvii.

Franciscan friars at Youghal shows, furthermore, that a copy of the *Confessionale-Defecerunt* was held there. Perhaps Máire first encountered the list through contact with the Donegal Franciscans and thereby wished to have it included in her collection.¹² Proper sacramental observance was considered imperative as a tract on the Eucharist beginning with the words 'the decree states that every Christian is obliged to receive the Body of Christ once a year' demonstrates.¹³ The citation of the correct formula for making a general confession underlines this approach.¹⁴ Yearly reception of the Sacrament of Penance and Holy Communion was required of every Catholic, under pain of excommunication, since the decree *Omnis utriusque sexus*, promulgated by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Of course, for those whose motivations for attending mass were more mercenary than devotional, there were always incentives available to kick-start one's reluctant piety.

The list of benefits to be gained from attending mass, known widely as the *merita missae* and attributed spuriously to St Augustine, proved immensely popular. The favours to be merited had something for everybody: the faithful would not lose the sight of their eyes that day; nor would they die that day; during the time one spent at mass, the ageing process was suspended; a person would not suffer from indigestion, would have his or her Purgatory shortened and every good thing would come to him or her, including the success of business dealings; furthermore, one would not be held accountable for any oaths sworn in vain that day (this may have proved appealing to Máire, if she was, in fact, accustomed to the occasional expletive). These benefits could be received at every mass but were conditional upon hearing mass 'in full, from beginning to end' as stressed in the preamble to the list in *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*.¹⁵ This proviso perhaps explains also why Pope Clement V was prepared to grant an indulgence to all who read or heard the Gospel of St John, particularly the Prologue, which was recited at the end of the Eucharistic celebration in both the Roman and Sarum rites. In the late medieval devotional world, it was often necessary to coax congregations into conformity. By choosing to include a reference to this indulgence in her devotional collection, Máire Ní Mháille obviously believed in its efficacy.¹⁶

Concern for the proper observance of the Sabbath is also evidenced in Máire's inclusion of the ninth-century 'Law of Sunday' or *Cáin Dombnaigh* text with three stories concerning the violation of Sunday following.¹⁷ Texts treating of devotion to the 'Twelve Golden Fridays' appear twice in the 'Book of Piety'

¹² G. Dottin, 'Notice du manuscrit irlandais' (1894), 79-91; for discussion of these see C.N. Ó Clabaigh, *The Franciscans in Ireland, 1400-1534* (2002), pp. 122-3; also S. Ryan, 'The most traversed bridge: a reconsideration of elite and popular religion in late medieval Ireland', (forthcoming, 2006). ¹³ *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, p. lvi. ¹⁴ Ibid. ¹⁵ Ibid., p. l. ¹⁶ Ibid. ¹⁷ Ibid., p. lv.

within *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*.¹⁸ The origins of the devotion were attributed to one Pope Clement, who was told, in a vision of the apostles, that there were twelve golden Fridays in the year and whichever Christian observed them by fasting on bread and water would be borne to paradise in the company of one of God's angels after death. Some knowledge of the liturgical year was required in order to properly attend to the devotion's requirements and the location of the special Fridays was helpfully outlined in prose and verse form in Máire's collection.¹⁹ That these Fridays were, indeed, observed around the time of *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne's* compilation can be seen from the marginal note of a travelling scribe in a manuscript dating from 1517 (British Library Egerton MS 1782). The note was written on 2 February:

It is Friday today and the fast of the first feast of Mary falls on it and far away is Enniscorthy on the brink of the Slaney where I was a year ago at the festival of the Leinstermen and may my blessings go to them since I cannot come to them. I am in Cluain Plocáin (Roscommon).²⁰

Although we know that Máire Ní Mháille commissioned the 'Book of Piety', presumably for her own use and that of her family and, concomitantly, that it is reasonable to assume that the inclusions were of some importance in her own spiritual life, probably the best indication of this can be found in the wording of her obit, which is entered in a space, presumably left blank for such an addition. The entry is in another hand, that is, not that of Ciothruadh Mág Fhindoigill, the principal scribe of the 'Book of Piety'. It reads as follows:

And at the end of four years [after the death of Mac Suibhne], his noble, loveable wife, the daughter of Ó Máille, the most generous and the best mother, and the woman of most fame in regard to faith and piety of all who lived in her time, died. This is the manner in which she passed her days: she used to hear mass once each day, and sometimes more than once; and three days in each week she used to spend on bread and water fare, with Lenten fast and winter fast, and the Golden Fridays. She also caused to be erected a great hall for the Friars Minor in Dun na nGall. Not only that, but many other churches we shall not here enumerate that woman caused to be built in the provinces of Ulster and Connacht. It was she also who had this book of piety above copied in her own house, and all affirm that in her time there was no woman who passed her life better than she.²¹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. lii, liv. ¹⁹ G. Mac Niocaill, 'Na haointe órga' (1958–61), 32–3. ²⁰ *BL Cat. Ir. MSS.*, ii, pp. 260–1. ²¹ *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, pp. 67–9.

At least three elements in the account of Máire's life (she died in 1522) correspond with the choice of material featured in her Book of Piety. The inclusion of a tract on the Eucharist and the list of *merita missae* or benefits of the mass make perfect sense when we learn that Máire herself attended mass at least once a day. As a patron of the Friars Minor in Donegal, it is no surprise to find the inclusion of some material clearly of Franciscan provenance such as the sixteen conditions for a good confession. In addition, the 'Book of Piety' contains a prose tract comprising fifteen prayers of meditation on the fifteen pains of Christ's Passion. Reference to Christ suffering 'fifteen pains' can be found in the bardic religious poetry of both Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (d.1448) and the Franciscan, Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn (d.1487) and in a complete list found in a seventeenth-century manuscript, British Library Sloane MS 3567, written by Cú Chonnacht mac Aodha Meig Uidhir in 1664–5. In the latter example, the text begins 'Na cuig paidreacha dég as coir do rádh i ccuimhne na ccuig ccás .x. as cruaidhe i raibh Criost ag faghail na paise' ('The fifteen prayers proper to say in commemoration of the fifteen bitterest agonies of Christ in the Passion').²² These meditations are in the tradition of the renowned Fifteen Oes of St Bridget of Sweden, although less learned and complex in style. Máire's inclusion of the *Liber de Passione Christi* text also suggests a Franciscan influence on her devotional life. Most explicitly, however, her obit provides evidence that she observed the 'Twelve Golden Fridays' as found in her 'Book of Piety', demonstrating that the religious material collated by Máire did not simply remain on a page. Indeed, it shows, in this noblewoman's case, an important link between page and praxis.

As noted above, Máire Ní Mháille's 'Book of Piety', contained within the larger *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, provides a unique glimpse of the devotional world of a Gaelic noblewoman at the end of the late medieval period. In few other sources is there to be found such a strong connection between devotions within a text and their practice. However, the material chosen by Máire fits into a larger picture of this kind of manuscript tradition in the north-west of Ireland in general, which continues right through the sixteenth century as observed by both Bernadette Cunningham and Raymond Gillespie below. When examined closely, a degree of overlap can be found in manuscripts such as *Leabhar Breac* (written by members of the MacEgan family of scribes of north Tipperary and south Galway in the fifteenth century), *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* (associated with members of the Ó Maoilchonaire family of Co. Roscommon and compiled

²² *Aithdioghlaim dana* (1939–40), poem 78, v. 10; *Philip Bocht Ó hUiginn* (1931), poem 3, v.20; R. Flower, 'The revelation of Christ's wounds' (1927), 43–4; Ryan, 'Popular religion in Gaelic Ireland', i, pp. 95–103. See also the contributions of Bernadette Cunningham and Catherine Yvard to this volume.

around the middle of the fifteenth century), British Library Egerton MS 1781 (c.1484-7 and associated with the Mac Parrthaláin family, scribes of the Mac Shamhradháin family of Tullyhaw, Co. Cavan) and *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* (fig. 1). Indeed the coincidence of material between Egerton MS 1781 (which was in the hands of the O'Rourke family of Co. Leitrim throughout the sixteenth century) and *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* deserves some attention. In both collections, the following subjects appear: the Finding of the True Cross, the Old French tale of Fierebras the giant who challenges Charlemagne, a life of St Margaret, a life of St Catherine, a formula for general confession beginning 'A oide et a athair inmuin innsim mo cair do Dia', a life of St Alexius and a tract on the Eucharist treating of the obligation to receive the Body of Christ once a year. In some cases, such as that of the formula for Confession and the tract on the Eucharist we are dealing with a common text, whereas in others, such as in the case of the lives of St Catherine of Alexandria and St Margaret of Antioch, the versions given are different. What is most significant, however, is the commonality of subject matter. Two other players also share material with both Egerton 1781 and *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*. They are *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* (already noted) and Trinity College Dublin MS 667/1699 (compiled about 1455 in a Franciscan house – possibly in Co. Clare).²³ Despite some variations in detail (for example, the versions of the lives of SS Catherine and Margaret differ in Egerton 1781 and *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*) it can be observed that some elements recur in three of the manuscripts and, in the case of the Finding of the True Cross, in all four, denoting an obvious interest in particular subjects. The story of the Finding of the True Cross, the sixteen conditions for a good confession and the popular tale of *Spiritus Guidonis*, known in England as the *Gast of Gy*, with its revelations about Purgatory, all appear in three of the manuscripts: *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum*, TCD 667 and *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*. This is an area which requires more detailed examination in the future and which may yet yield valuable insights regarding the transmission of religious ideas in late medieval Ireland.

Apart from obvious devotional collections such as the *Liber Flavus Fergusiorum* and *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*, there are many other texts that are worthy of our attention and which can provide us with important insights into contemporary piety. The renowned life of Colum Cille (*Betha Colaim Chille*), compiled by Manus Ó Dombnaill [O'Donnell] in 1532, although allegedly recounting the story of a sixth-century Irish saint, imbues its subject with a concern for an

²³ TCD MS 667 consists of a number of devotional tracts in Latin while TCD MS 1699, containing similar material in the Irish language, forms an insertion within TCD MS 667, dating, it seems, to the manuscript's original compilation by the Franciscan order. For this reason, both elements are treated here as one composite manuscript which is cited as TCD MS 667/1699.

| Subject Matter (regardless of version) | <i>Liber Flavus Fergusiorum</i> c.1437-40 Roscommon | TCD 667/1699 c.1455 Clare | Egerton 1781 c.1484-7 Cavan | <i>Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne</i> 1513-14 Donegal |
|--|---|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---|
| Finding of the Cross | √ | √ | √ | √ |
| Story of Fierebras | √ | | √ | √ |
| Life of St Margaret | | | √ | √ |
| Life of St Catherine | | | √ | √ |
| Fourteen benefits of the Mass | √ | | | √ |
| Homily on the Ten Commandments | √ | | | √ |
| <i>Spiritus Guidonis</i> | √ | √ | | √ |
| Sixteen conditions for Confession | √ | √ | | √ |
| Life of St Alexius | √ | | √ | √ |
| Law of Sunday tract | √ | | | √ |
| Treatise on Blessed Eucharist | √ | | √ | √ |
| Formula for General Confession | √ | | √ | √ |
| Tale of woman using bad language | √ | √ | | |
| <i>Liber de Passione Christi</i> | √ | | | √ |

1 Four devotional manuscripts and their themes in late medieval Ireland.

important feature of late medieval devotion: the Gregory Trental.²⁴ Saint Gregory's Trental (alternatively known as the 'Golden Trental') consisted of thirty masses, celebrated over the period of a year, three masses on each of the ten

²⁴ *Betha Colaim Chille* (1918, repr. 1994).

principal feasts of Christ and Mary – Christmas, Epiphany, Candlemas, the Annunciation, Easter, the Ascension, Pentecost, Holy Trinity, the Assumption and the Nativity of Mary. The masses were to be offered for the holy souls in Purgatory.²⁵ The legend behind the devotion told how Pope Gregory's mother, considered by all to be a pious woman, had in her youth conceived a child illegitimately and subsequently murdered it to cover her shame. She had never confessed this sin and therefore died unshriven. After her death, she appeared to her son during mass as a grotesque creature who was undoubtedly suffering the pains of Purgatory. She requested her son to say thirty masses over the period of a year for her release. He did and she subsequently appeared to him radiant and enjoying the glory of Heaven.²⁶ The devotion spread quickly and by 1410 it had acquired the title of 'Golden Trental' in England, presumably because of its alleged efficacy.²⁷ This devotion was also popular in Ireland, with both Anglo-Norman and Gaelic Irish Catholics alike. The will of one Nicholas Suttowne, clerk, who left his body to St Werburgh's church, Dublin (20 July 1478), stipulated that after death he requested a priest to celebrate for him 'for three years the Trental of St Gregory'.²⁸ Manus Ó Domhnaill, obviously considered the Trental important enough to have Colum Cille perform the ritual on discovering the skull of Cormac Mac Airt:

And he left not that place ere he had said thirty masses for the soul of Cormac [...] and at the last of these masses the angels of God appeared to Colum Cille bearing with them the soul of Cormac to heaven to enjoy glory everlasting through the intercession of Colum Cille.²⁹

A particular devotion could acquire no greater endorsement in Gaelic Ireland than to be seen to be practiced by a saint of such great stature as this 'national' patron. An insertion, such as the example above, into the standard lore of Colum Cille superimposed a late devotion upon an earlier era, thus giving the current devotion greater credibility. It can be reasonably assumed that Manus Ó Domhnaill himself approved of the 'Golden Trental' insertion and that it may, indeed, have featured prominently in his own devotional life. *Betha Colaim Chille* indeed reveals more about sixteenth-century piety than its counterpart a millennium before it, when the saint himself lived.

The most unlikely of texts can reveal the most interesting nuggets of information regarding popular ritual and belief. Richard Stanihurst (1547–1618), while writing of Irish baptismal customs in the sixteenth century, makes the

²⁵ E. Duffy, *The stripping of the altars* (1992) pp. 370–1. ²⁶ *Ibid.* ²⁷ *Ibid.* ²⁸ Deed 327 in R. Refaüssé and M.J. McEnery (eds), *Christ Church deeds* (2001), pp. 95–6. ²⁹ *Betha Colaim Chille*, p. 129.

following claim: 'Others write that gentlemen's children were baptised in mylke and the infants of poore folk in water who had the better or rather the onely choice.'³⁰ While the idea of christening a child in milk might appear bizarre to modern ears, Stanihurst's claims are perhaps not without substance. In an account of the twelfth-century Synod of Cashel by Roger Howden, found in the *Gesta Regis Henrici II*, the following entry appears:

In the council they ordered and commanded by authority of the pope [present, so to say, in his legate?] that infants be baptised in church, by priests and with the use of the words 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. For the custom in various places in Ireland formerly was that immediately the child was born its father or some other person plunged it three times into water and if it was the son of a rich man it was plunged three times into milk and afterwards the water or milk was thrown out into the drains or some other unclean place.³¹

Whether the practice persisted into the sixteenth century is uncertain. However, there is evidence to suggest that as late as 1627 baptisms, not in milk but in beer were not uncommon, prompting a firm clarification of the invalidity of this practice as can be seen in a contemporary Franciscan manuscript:

Since, as we have learned from what you have told us, it sometimes happens that, because of the shortage of water, the infants of your country are baptised in beer, we reply to you, in the sense of the enclosed, that, since according to canonical teaching, those [infants] should be reborn from water and the Holy Spirit, those who are baptised in beer should not be regarded as validly baptised.³²

By far, the most useful texts for peeling back the layers that enwrap the devotional concerns of the Gaelic Irish laity over an extended period of time are those containing bardic religious poetry. While a comprehensive examination of this source cannot be afforded here, it is, nevertheless, important to note that any treatment of the late medieval Irish devotional world ignores this marvellous source at great cost.³³ Bardic poems, commissioned by wealthy patrons, both

³⁰ L. Miller and E. Power (eds), *Holinshed's Irish chronicle ... [1509]* (1979), p. 115. ³¹ Quoted in J. Watt, *The Church in medieval Ireland* (2nd ed., 1998), p. 240. ³² HMC, *Report on Franciscan manuscripts preserved at the convent, Merchant's Quay, Dublin* (1906), p. 101: The Latin text reads 'Cum sicut ex tua relatione percepimus, nonnumquam propter aquae penuriam infantes terrae tuae contingat in cervisia baptizari, tibi tenore praesentium respondemus, quod, cum secundum doctrinam canonicam oporteat eos ex aqua et Spiritu Sancto renasci, non debent reputari rite baptizari qui in cervisia baptizantur.' ³³ See Ryan, 'A slighted source'.

secular and ecclesiastical, and performed in public or semi-public settings provide a unique glimpse of what audiences were both capable of and interested in hearing. An examination of the evolving subject matter of the religious poems over time can tell a lot about the development and assimilation of devotion. In fact, the poetry itself can act as a very effective mirror image of the religious sensibilities of both its creators and its hearers. In the case of some poems containing homiletic material, for instance, we are afforded a valuable insight not into what was designed to be preached (as in written sermons), nor what actually was preached, but far more crucially and more often, into what was heard.

The following examples from the fifteenth-century poet Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn serve as a useful illustration of how the subject matter of religious bardic poetry could tie in with the sort of devotional concerns evident in a text such as Máire Ní Mháille's 'Book of Piety' in *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne*. A poem by Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn (d.1448) entitled *Beag nach tainig mo thearma*, which deals with the subject of life coming to an end and preparation for death, reads like a guide to repentance and forgiveness such as might be presented by mendicant friars in homiletic form. The introduction of the figure of Mary Magdalene as a model to be imitated was a staple of medieval homilies. In the following verses one can recognize the retention of this style:

Mary Magdalene was a foe to God and his creatures; yet Christ's love in her heart blotted out her sins against God: his love enters her heart.

One day when she sees Christ after a journey she began washing his fair feet so that the palms of her hands were reddened.

Not water but tears she rubbed on them – great strength of sorrow! – and washed his feet and fair knee as her eyelashes dripped upon them.

His slender sole and soft foot she washed with her eyes' tears and then rubbed His feet with her hair.

There was no sin she had committed while squandering her youth but was forgiven her in return for her tears.

God then said – eager the testimony and blessed she who heard the word – 'More dutiful is Mary to me than all the faithful'.

God would forgive me all my sins in youth as he forgave that woman her wasting the flower of her life in sin.³⁴

34 *Dán Dé*, poem 5, vv 24–30.

The steps of reflection followed both in sermons and meditative treatises as suggested in texts such as Ludolf of Saxony's *Vita Christi* and Johannes de Caulibus's *Meditationes Vita Christi* – both of which are catalogued as being among the collection of the Franciscan friary at Youghal – involve a progression from recalling a biblical scene (*articulus*) to extracting a moral lesson from it (*documenta*) and finally culminating in a personal response to what has been heard or read, in the form of a prayer (*actus conformationis-oratio*).³⁵ In the Magdalene *pericope* within Tadhg's poem, this sequence is followed exactly. In verses 24–7 the story of Magdalene's conversion is related while verse 28 explicates the meaning behind the incident – that there is no sin that tears (or, more precisely, contrition) will not wipe away. Verse 30, meanwhile, concludes the *pericope* with a personal application of the lesson learned from the biblical story. A similar style can be discerned in the poem *A-táid trí combruig am chionn*, which is also ascribed to Tadhg Óg Ó hUiginn. In this case, the story of Adam and Eve's sin is related with a view to an instruction on penance. The text merits quoting in full, owing to the importance of the message contained therein:

When Adam's wife incurred God's ire owing to the tenth tree, his kinship with me had not begun and yet he did a deed of mercy.

Adam's wife would not respect the Tree of Knowledge; nor, alas, would Adam have regard for the king's cess.

He would have asked of them only penance as *éiric*; he would have pardoned, had they only asked him, that couple's breach of the commandments.

Though Adam's mind changed not yet, so that fear might affect him God increased his reproaches; he awaited an answer.

The Creator's love went out to him so that he might consent to yield: 'Which of you', said God, 'has appealed to me in hope of pardon?'

Said Adam, 'The apple for which Thy wrath flamed against us – after all I did not pluck; blame the woman for it'.

God's Son, hoping for repentance, turned to speak with Eve; she too was set on denying any offence of him.

As his mercy moved him 'twas God's wish to plead with her about the tree's spoiling; but after speech with her, he desisted.

35 S. Wenzel, *Preachers, poets and the early English lyric* (1986), p. 14.

They denied their guilt, though Jesus saw their heart; yet escape was easy for both by confessing their sins.

Though loth, he ordered them to be driven from Paradise's wood and to set forth wandering for not consenting to repent.

I would fain feel my heart sad owing to my unbelieving mind; in the hour of penance may my case not be Eve's.

I crave pardon of my sins – humility is dear to Jesus; Heaven's King has become one of my race to make settlement with you.

If henceforth I renounce my past deeds the graver is any fresh crime in my heart, in return for what I shall have got (i.e. pardon).³⁶

Here, many of the conditions outlined as necessary for a good confession, particularly those found in the *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* compiled for Máire Ní Mháille, are highlighted in the form of the Adam and Eve story. It is stated in verse 20 that God would have pardoned the pair, had they asked him. Clearly, admission of guilt was considered integral to the sacrament. Interestingly, Adam and Eve are said to have broken the commandments. Increasingly, the Ten Commandments formula was encouraged as a suitable means of examining one's conscience before going to confession.³⁷ Verses 23 and 24 demonstrate Adam and Eve's continued efforts to deny their sin which results in their eventual banishment from Paradise. Throughout these verses there are continual references to God's willingness to forgive. However, there are also indications of a deep mistrust, on Adam and Eve's part, in the mercy of God. The text in the *Leabhar Chlainne Suibhne* encouraged confidence in God's mercy, leading to a fitting resolution of sinfulness within the sacrament.³⁸ The moral of the story is contained in verse 27: refusing to confess sin results in banishment from paradise. Finally, the poet makes a personal application of the teaching, resolving to be humble in his confession of sin (another recommendation of Antoninus of Florence in his *Confessionale-Defecerunt*) and to avoid the fate of Eve.

Poems such as these can provide an insight into the kind of material that was preached to congregations, particularly by the famed mendicant friars. Furthermore, they demonstrate that the kind of material copied into devotional collections for noblewomen such as Máire Ní Mháille could almost be termed extensions of the church sermon – in essence, sermons that one could bring home.

³⁶ *The Irish Monthly: yearly volume* (1922), vv 18–30. ³⁷ See J. Bossy, 'Moral arithmetic: seven sins into Ten Commandments', (1977), pp. 214–34. ³⁸ Ryan, 'Popular religion in Gaelic Ireland', i, p. 328.

Late medieval devotional texts, when approached carefully and yet with some imagination, can prove useful as windows on a vibrant devotional world. They can be used as an invaluable aid in our understanding of Irish medieval religious iconography and, consequently, any worthwhile study should take account of both.

However, in order to reap the most from such a study, these texts or images must not be examined in isolation. A study of late medieval Gaelic Irish piety without reference to its larger European context will ultimately founder. There is much yet to be done, particularly with regard to tracking the geography of the transmission of religious ideas in Gaelic Ireland. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, in order for future studies to be truly effective, text and image should never be allowed to stray far apart from each other.