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# The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature

Charles D. Wright

# THE IRISH TRADITION IN OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE

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# Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| *AB* | *Analecta Bollandiana* |
| *Archiv* | *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* |
| *ASE* | *Anglo-Saxon England* |
| ASPR | The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, ed. Krapp and Dobbie |
| *BBCS* | *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* |
| *BCLL* | *A Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature 400–1200*, ed. Lapidge and Sharpe [cited by no.] |
| BL | British Library (London) |
| BM | Bibliothèque Municipale |
| BN | Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris) |
| CCCM | Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis |
| CCSL | Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina |
| *CLA* | *Codices Latini Antiquiores*, ed. Lowe [cited by volume and no.] |
| *CMCS* | *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* |
| CSEL | Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum |
| *DIL* | *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, gen. ed. Quin |
| EEMF | Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile |
| EETS | Early English Text Society |
| os | Original Series |
| ss | Supplementary Series |
| *ES* | *English Studies* |
| *ESt* | *Englische Studien* |
| FFC | Folklore Fellows Communications |
| HBS | Henry Bradshaw Society |

| | |
|---|---|
| *HE* | Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica*, ed. and trans. Colgrave and Mynors |
| *Hib.* | *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis*, ed. Wasserschleben |
| ITS | Irish Texts Society |
| *JCS* | *Journal of Celtic Studies* |
| *JEGP* | *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* |
| *JTS* | *Journal of Theological Studies* |
| *MÆ* | *Medium Ævum* |
| MGH | Monumenta Germaniae Historica |
| Auct. antiq. | Auctores antiquissimi |
| SS rer. Merov. | Scriptores rerum Merovingicarum |
| MMIS | Medieval and Modern Irish Series |
| *MLN* | *Modern Language Notes* |
| *MLR* | *Modern Language Review* |
| *MP* | *Modern Philology* |
| *MS* | *Mediaeval Studies* |
| *NM* | *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* |
| *NQ* | *Notes and Queries* |
| *PBA* | *Proceedings of the British Academy* |
| *PHCC* | *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* |
| PL | Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina, ed. Migne |
| PLS | Patrologiae cursus completus, Series Latina: Supplementum, ed. Hamman |
| *PMLA* | *Publications of the Modern Language Association* |
| *PQ* | *Philological Quarterly* |
| *PRIA* | *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* |
| *RB* | *Revue bénédictine* |
| *RC* | *Revue celtique* |
| *RES* | *Review of English Studies* |
| *SC* | *Studia Celtica* |
| SLH | Scriptores Latini Hiberniae |
| *SM* | *Studi Medievali* |
| *SP* | *Studies in Philology* |
| TLS | Todd Lecture Series |
| TU | Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur |
| *ZCP* | *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* |

Biblical quotations are from *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam versionem*, ed. R. Weber, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart, 1983); translations are from the Douai-Rheims version. I have not attempted to standardize the presentation of Old and Middle Irish in quotations from printed editions. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

# Contents

# 1

# Introduction

A pivotal fact in the ecclesiastical history of the English nation, according to Bede, was that the Irish monks and missionaries who came to England during the first century of the conversion had certain distinctive customs that attracted the attention, and disapproval, of their counterparts who had been dispatched from Rome. Irish irregularities (from the point of view of the Romanists) in the calculation of Easter, the form of tonsure and the ordination of bishops were the focus of dissension, but the Irish were distinctive in other ways, notably in their rigorously ascetic devotional practices.[1] Inevitably, Irish forms of devotional expression were adopted by English ecclesiastics educated in the Irish tradition. Cuthbert, for example, was an Anglo-Saxon bishop whose way of life bore a distinctively Celtic impress.[2] It is natural to suppose that Irish Christian literature of the early Middle Ages would have reflected characteristic emphases of Irish learning and spirituality, and that Irish literary traditions would also have been assimilated by English authors trained in Irish schools or exposed to Irish books.[3]

[1] On Irish devotional practices, see L. Gougaud, *Devotional and Ascetic Practices in the Middle Ages* (London, 1927).

[2] See C. Stancliffe, 'Cuthbert and the Polarity between Pastor and Solitary', in *St Cuthbert*, ed. G. Bonner *et al.*, pp. 21–44, at 39–42. Later legend actually made Cuthbert an Irishman. See the references given by D. Ó Cróinín, 'Is the Augsburg Gospel Codex a Northumbrian Manuscript?', *ibid.*, pp. 189–201, at 190, n. 4.

[3] Bede (*HE* III.3) states that during the rule of King Oswald, 'inbuebantur praeceptoribus Scottis paruuli Anglorum una cum maioribus studiis et obseruatione disciplinae regularis'. Aldhelm and Bede both testify to the frequency with which English monks were schooled in Ireland (see below, pp. 42–3). Prominent Anglo-Saxons who spent periods of study in Ireland include Aldfrith, Ecgberht, Willibrord and Æthelwine, to name only a few (for a fuller list from Bede and other sources,

Certainly, the potential for such influence existed, for the Irish played a formative role in the Christianization of the pagan Anglo-Saxons – as Bede often warmly acknowledges – and scholars no longer assume that Irish cultural influence in England evaporated after the Synod of Whitby.[4] David Dumville has spoken of

> Anglo-Celtic contacts ... which might at any point in Anglo-Saxon history have made possible the borrowing or imitation of Celtic literary forms, themes, or motifs by English literary artists (or vice versa, indeed); given a history of constant (if varying) contacts between England and the Celtic-speaking countries in this period, we can never hope fully to understand the culture of the one without reference to those of the others.[5]

see Ó Cróinín, 'Rath Melsigi', p. 23, n. 2). On Rath Melsigi, which Bede (*HE* III.27) identifies as a destination for many Englishmen, see Ó Cróinín, 'Rath Melsigi'. The Irish monastery at Mayo, called 'Mayo of the Saxons', founded by Colmán after the Synod of Whitby, was also occupied by English monks up to Bede's time (*HE* IV.4) and beyond. See N. K. Chadwick, 'Bede, St Colmán and the Irish Abbey of Mayo', in *Celt and Saxon*, ed. Chadwick, pp. 186–205 (Ó Cróinín, 'Rath Melsigi', p. 26, n. 1, doubts that Ecgberht was connected with Mayo). Hughes, 'Evidence for Contacts', pp. 51–3, discusses the case of Mayo and other apparent English foundations in Ireland. The island monasteries of Iona and Lindisfarne were, of course, the major centres for the transmission of Irish learning to England. On Iona and its *paruchia*, to which Mayo belonged, see H. Moisl, 'Das Kloster Iona und seine Verbindungen mit dem Kontinent im siebenten und achten Jahrhundert', in *Virgil von Salzburg*, ed. Dopsch and Juffinger, pp. 27–37.

[4] See especially Hughes, 'Evidence for Contacts', and Kelly, 'Irish Influence in England'. For contacts in the tenth and eleventh centuries, see also Bethell, 'English Monks and Irish Reform'.

[5] '"Beowulf" and the Celtic World', p. 110. Since I do not think there can be any *a priori* objection on historical grounds to the possibility of Irish influence on Old English Christian literature, and because the historical evidence is generally well known and has frequently been surveyed in previous scholarship, I do not intend to offer a general survey of my own here; I do discuss, however, the evidence for Mercia and for an Irish-influenced Mercian literary milieu in ch. 5 (below, pp. 267–70). For convenient surveys of the Irish mission and Irish cultural influence in Anglo-Saxon England, see C. H. Slover, 'Early Literary Channels between Britain and Ireland', *University of Texas Studies in English* 6 (1926), 5–52, and 7 (1927), 5–111; N. K. Chadwick, 'The Celtic Background of Early Anglo-Saxon England', in *Celt and Saxon*, ed. Chadwick, pp. 323–52; C. L. Wrenn, 'Saxons and Celts in South-West Britain', in *Transactions of the Honourable Society of Cymmrodorion* 1959, pp. 38–75; Dunleavy, *Colum's Other Island*; R. W. D. Fenn, 'Irish Sea Influence on the English Church', in *The Irish Sea Province in Archaeology and History*, ed. D. Moore (Cardiff, 1970), pp. 78–85; Bieler, 'Ireland's Contribution'; M. McNamara, 'Ireland

Historical circumstances, then, were clearly favourable for literary relations between Ireland and England; but it has proved difficult to define precisely how Irish Christianity and literature did influence Anglo-Saxon writers.

Scholars who have tried to isolate Irish and 'Roman' strands in the English cultural weave have often resorted to impressionistic characterizations of 'Celtic' temperament. Typically, Roman and English 'gravity' and 'sobriety' are contrasted with Irish 'imagination' and 'exuberance' – a colourful Celtic fringe around a sturdy Saxon warp and Roman weft. The great palaeographer E. A. Lowe argued that one can attribute an Insular manuscript of uncertain origins to an Irish or an Anglo-Saxon scribe 'by paying heed to the temperamental differences of the two nations, which existed even then'.[6] Lowe suggested that 'The variability in the treatment of d, n, r, s ... may spring from the exuberance of the Irish imagination',[7] and hazarded a rough typology of the palaeographical manifestations of the 'temperamental differences' between the Irish and English:

> With the departure of the Irish from Northumbria their influence wanes; the English pupils begin to find their feet and English genius for sobriety and orderliness asserts itself. It now becomes possible to distinguish an English from an Irish manuscript. Broadly speaking, the Irish type of Insular differs from the English in that it is freer, more incalculable, in short, less bound by rules and regulations than the English type modelled upon it. The Irish scribe often behaves as if the written line were something elastic, not a fixed and determined space which has to be filled in a particular way. He seems often guided by whim and fancy. The English scribe, by comparison, is balanced and disciplined.[8]

Applying these criteria to the Book of Durrow, Lowe argued that 'perhaps English workmanship accounted for the orderliness of its script and the balance and sobriety of its ornamentation'.[9]

and Northumbria as Illustrated by a Vatican Manuscript', *Thought* 54 (1979), 274–90; Campbell, 'The Debt of the Early English Church to Ireland'. On Bede's generally sympathetic attitude towards the Irish, see now the analysis of W. Goffart, *The Narrators of Barbarian History (A. D. 550–800)* (Princeton, NJ, 1989), pp. 306, 309–13 and 326–7.

[6] *CLA* II, 2nd ed., p. xvi.

[7] *Ibid.* But Lowe cautiously added, 'On the other hand it may go back to the unknown models from which the first Irish scribes learned the art of writing.'

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

A. B. Kuypers distinguished between confessional prayers of Irish or Roman inspiration by appealing to similar temperamental differences. Contrasting the 'sobriety and restraint' of certain prayers in the Book of Cerne (Cambridge, University Library, Ll. 1. 10) with the 'pious *abandon*' and 'emotional effusiveness' of others,[10] Kuypers concluded that 'we are in the presence of two currents of influence, issuing in two types of prayer: – the Roman type which, while keeping in check devotional feeling, manifests a high quality of thought, art, and liturgical culture; and the Irish, which is predominantly an outpouring of feeling and devotion'.[11] These polarities were elaborated by Edmund Bishop:

> In the devotional products of the first period [the end of the seventh century and the eighth], ... the Celt (that is, the Irishman) and the Roman are pouring their respective pieties into this devoted isle, and we absorb both kinds; but the English mind and religious sense assert themselves in the process of fusion and contribute to the resultant a quality and measure possessed by neither Celt nor Roman alone; the Celt brings 'all heart' and much fluency with little mind; the Roman brings all mind and – I was going to say 'no', but had better perhaps prefer 'small' – heart. The one commonly by excess of words and sometimes by extravagance of form brings us easily and soon within the verge of unreality; the other has the right sense, the right mind, but leaves us cold as marble.[12]

It is no longer fashionable to attribute stylistic distinctions such as these to supposed differences of racial character or national temperament.[13] The Irish palaeographer Leonard Boyle, for example, points out that Lowe 'simply applied to the past some commonly accepted versions of "typical" Irish and English "national characteristics"'.[14] Moreover, historians such as H. R. Loyn and James Campbell have lately cautioned that the contrast between the Roman

[10] *The Book of Cerne*, ed. Kuypers, p. xix (emphasis in the original).

[11] *Ibid.*, p. xxix.

[12] *Liturgica Historica*, p. 385. On Bishop's attitude towards the Irish, see N. Abercrombie, *The Life and Work of Edmund Bishop* (London, 1959), pp. 287 and 363.

[13] The stereotypical contrasts between Celt and Saxon have a complex history tainted by racism and nationalism on the one hand, and Romanticism on the other. See H. A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (Hanover, NH, 1982), pp. 97–101, and Sims-Williams, 'The Visionary Celt'.

[14] 'Saints, Scholars and Others, 500–800 A. D.', in *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature*, ed. J. Ronsley (Waterloo, Ontario, 1977), pp. 17–28, at 18.

and Irish missions has been too sharply drawn, and that Roman and Irish strands of influence are often inextricably intertwined.[15] No one denies, however, that significant differences did exist, and many scholars still find that the qualities contrasted by Lowe and Kuypers do, after all, correspond to real differences in literary style and devotional expression manifested in Anglo-Saxon culture. 'Racially the theories are so much nonsense', Loyn concedes, referring to the stereotypical contrast between 'simple German and tortuous Celt'; but he goes on to suggest that, 'From the point of view of educational theory ... the contrast does acquire some significance in any attempt to analyse the two main elements of the Northumbrian Renaissance, the Celtic and the Roman.'[16] Another historian, Henry Mayr-Harting, follows Kuypers and Bishop in contrasting Irish and Roman elements in Anglo-Saxon prayer and worship, although he would now qualify the contrast in other areas.[17] Thomas D. Hill discriminates between the three Old English *Christ* poems by drawing attention to various parallels with Irish eschatological writings for *Christ III*, in contrast with the mainstream patristic sources of *Christ I* and *Christ II*. Hill concludes:

> To turn from Bede to the vernacular or Latin Irish saints' lives or to the *Evernew Tongue* is to move from 'Roman' caution, sobriety, and intellectual restraint to an exotic, Insular, imaginative thought-world which is fervently Christian but clearly reflects the imaginative exuberance of the deeply traditional barbarian world in which it existed ... *Christ I* and *Christ II* are themselves quite different from the *Christ III* poem in that these poems are based upon Latin sources of a specific kind, texts firmly situated in the great tradition of orthodox Christian Latin literature from Augustine to Bede and Alcuin. By contrast, the *Christ III* poet derives much of his lore from apocryphal Insular sources, a very different literary tradition indeed.[18]

[15] Loyn, 'The Conversion of the English', pp. 5–6; J. Campbell, 'The First Century of Christianity in England', *The Ampleforth Journal* 76 (1971), 12–29, at 26–7. See also Sims-Williams, *Religion and Literature*, p. 114.

[16] *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (London, 1962), p. 272. The comment is unchanged in the 2nd ed. (Harlow, Essex, 1991), p. 282. Compare his remarks in 'The Conversion of the English', p. 6. See also Campbell, 'The Debt of the Early English Church to Ireland'.

[17] *The Coming of Christianity*, pp. 182–90. In the Preface to the third edition Mayr-Harting states that 'My emphasis has been too much on the Roman/Irish antithesis, even though at various points I have tried to make it not so' (p. 6).

[18] 'Literary History and Old English Poetry', pp. 18–19.

Hill places the word 'Roman' in quotation marks, marking it as a term of convenience rather than an absolute historical essence, and employs the broader term 'Insular' to avoid suggesting that the contrary qualities are wholly the result of Irish influence on a passive and non-creative Anglo-Saxon culture. Although Hill supports these characterizations by detailed comparative source analysis, his distinctions between 'Roman' and 'Insular' traditions in Old English poetry echo those of Lowe and Kuypers.

Allen J. Frantzen makes a similar but more explicitly qualified use of the traditional distinctions between Roman and Irish piety and stylistic expression as applied to penitential and confessional texts:

> Amid the lucidity of England's Roman heritage, and the simplicity of its Germanic culture, the enigmatic and the recherché, we are invited to assume, is Irish. The racial assumptions behind such categorization may be 'nonsense', an oversimplified division of English piety into 'Roman' and 'Celtic' strains. But the implied tensions are useful in illuminating the process of adaptation through which Irish customs were assimilated by the English church.[19]

Frantzen alludes to Kuypers's characterization of the differences between prayers of Roman and Irish inspiration, with a cautious appraisal of their value:

> 'Sobriety and restraint' might well be said to characterize English adaptations of both disciplinary and devotional materials from the Irish tradition. Because the Irish penitentials and prayers have been seen as more exotic than they really are, their differences from English disciplinary and devotional materials are easily exaggerated. But it would be difficult to deny that these differences exist.[20]

Finally, after offering some impressionistic judgements of his own, Frantzen concludes:

> Inviting though such contrasts are, they are also admittedly superficial. Nonetheless, they offer a useful if limited way to gain a perspective on 'English' as opposed to 'Irish' qualities in both prayers and penitentials. English texts are less varied and colorful than the Irish for several reasons. It may be that the English were, after all, soberer and more restrained. But it is also obvious that they were working with materials foreign to their own culture and seeking to adapt them to administrative purposes and pastoral conditions which, if not entirely new, were at least substantially different from those of the early Irish mission.[21]

[19] *The Literature of Penance*, pp. 61–2. [20] *Ibid.*, p. 90. [21] *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Like these scholars, I believe that the traditional contrast between 'Roman' and 'Irish' piety and stylistic expression can still be useful, so long as it is not exaggerated or hypostatized. We may fairly question whether the English temperament was inherently more congenial to either 'Irish' or 'Roman' influences, since the Anglo-Saxons were receptive to both, and we should probably abandon such impressionistic criteria as 'sobriety' and 'imagination' as tests of national origin; but we need not abandon all distinctions between Irish and Roman influences in Anglo-Saxon culture and literature. Our understanding of these differences should, however, be tested and exemplified by careful source and stylistic analysis – as Kathleen Hughes and Allen J. Frantzen have done for English private prayer and penitential literature,[22] and as Thomas D. Hill and Frederick Biggs have done for the Old English *Christ III*.[23] One aim of such analysis should be to establish, as far as possible, a reliable thematic and stylistic inventory of Irish influences in Anglo-Saxon literary texts. The present book attempts a preliminary and limited stock-taking by focusing on Irish influences on Old English homiletic literature, especially in Vercelli Homily IX and its remarkable exemplum, 'The Devil's Account of the Next World'.[24] Vercelli IX and other Old English homilies that draw on Irish sources differ, I shall argue, in definable ways from those that depend exclusively on patristic and continental sources, including the homilies of Ælfric and Wulfstan.

Studies of Irish influence on Old English literature have traditionally concentrated on the poetry, especially on possible connections between Celtic folklore and *Beowulf*, or between Celtic lyric and gnomic poetry and the Old English elegies. The papers in a recent collection entitled *Connections between Old English and Medieval Celtic Literature*,[25] including one on *Beowulf* and two on the elegies, reflect the focus of most modern research.[26] Studies of specifically Christian influences have generally

[22] Hughes, 'Some Aspects of Irish Influence'; Frantzen, *The Literature of Penance*.

[23] See Hill, 'Literary History and Old English Poetry'; Biggs, *The Sources of Christ III*; *idem*, 'The Fourfold Division of Souls: the Old English "Christ III" and the Insular Homiletic Tradition', *Traditio* 45 (1989–90), 35–51.

[24] See the Appendix, below, pp. 273–91, for the text and translation of the entire homily and exemplum.

[25] Ed. Ford and Borst.

[26] The few monographs devoted to the subject share the same focus. Puhvel's *Beowulf and Celtic Tradition* seeks to identify Irish folk motifs behind many of the 'marvelous elements' in *Beowulf*. Henry's *The Early English and Celtic Lyric* mounts a detailed

dealt with the same group of poems. Charles Donahue and James Carney, for example, have detected an Irish background to the *Beowulf*-poet's account of the descent of monsters from Cain and apparent confusion of Cain and Cham.[27] Donahue's bold and speculative approach to the poem finds Irish Christianity a subtle and pervasive influence, especially on the poet's depiction of virtuous pagan heroes who lived according to natural law.[28] Dorothy Whitelock's interpretation of *The Seafarer* as an expression of the ideal of spiritual pilgrimage cultivated by Irish monks has been particularly influential.[29] R. F. Leslie has suggested that certain themes and stylistic features in *The Wanderer* reflect the influence of Irish and Hiberno-Latin writings.[30] There have also been scattered attempts, with varying degrees of success, to relate other Old English religious poems to Irish models or sources.[31]

argument for the indebtedness of the Old English elegies to Celtic models, both Irish and Welsh. Dunleavy's *Colum's Other Island*, a study of the Irish cultural presence at Lindisfarne, detects Irish influence in poems as diverse as *The Wife's Lament* and *The Ruin*.

[27] Donahue, 'Grendel and the *Clanna Cain*', *JCS* 1 (1950), 167–75; Carney, 'The Irish Elements in *Beowulf*', in his *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, pp. 77–128, at 102–14. Cross, 'Identification', pp. 82–3, has drawn attention to a lengthy exposition of the origin of monsters in the Hiberno-Latin 'Reference Bible' (*BCLL*, no. 762; Wright, 'Hiberno-Latin', no. 1).

[28] 'Beowulf, Ireland and the Natural Good'; see also Donahue's later article, '*Beowulf* and Christian Tradition: a Reconsideration from a Celtic Stance', *Traditio* 21 (1965), 55–116. J. R. R. Tolkien had already suggested that this aspect of the poem might be influenced by the 'inquisitive and less severe Celtic learning' ('*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics', *PBA* 22 (1936), 245–95, at 266). See also M. Pepperdene, 'Irish Christianity and *Beowulf*: Basis for a New Interpretation of the Christian Elements' (unpubl. PhD dissertation, Vanderbilt Univ., 1953); J. Travis, 'Hiberno-Saxon Christianity and the Survival of *Beowulf*', *Lochlann: a Review of Celtic Studies* 4 (1969), 226–34; Dumville, '"Beowulf" and the Celtic World'.

[29] 'The Interpretation of *The Seafarer*', in *The Early Cultures of North-West Europe*, ed. C. Fox and B. Dickins (Cambridge, 1950), pp. 259–72. See also the recent study by C. Ireland, 'Some Analogues of the OE *Seafarer* from Hiberno-Latin Sources', *NM* 92 (1991), 1–14.

[30] *The Wanderer*, ed. R. F. Leslie (Manchester, 1966), pp. 27–30 and 34–7.

[31] J. Hennig, 'The Irish Counterparts of the Anglo-Saxon *Menologium*', *MS* 14 (1952), 98–106; E. McLoughlin, 'OE *Exodus* and the *Antiphonary of Bangor*', *NM* 70 (1969), 658–67; T. D. Hill, 'An Irish-Latin Analogue for the Blessing of the Sods in the Old English *Æcer-bot* Charm', *NQ* 213 (1968), 362–3; A. R. Duckert, '*Erce* and Other Possibly Keltic Elements in the Old English Charm for Unfruitful Land', *Names* 20