PATRICK SIMS-WILLIAMS

The Iron House in Ireland

Hector Munro Chadwick (1870–1947) was Elrington and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon in the University of Cambridge from 1912 to 1941. Through the immense range of his scholarly publications, and through the vigorous enthusiasm which he brought to all aspects of Anglo-Saxon studies — philological and literary, historical and archaeological — he helped to define the field and to give it the interdisciplinary orientation which characterizes it still. The Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic, which owes its existence and its own interdisciplinary outlook to H.M. Chadwick, has wished to commemorate his enduring contribution to Anglo-Saxon and kindred studies by establishing an annual series of lectures in his name.

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This is a lecture about a subject that already fascinated me when I was an undergraduate in the Department in 1970 and that occupied me, on and off, during the twenty years when I was teaching here: the extent of Irish influence on medieval Welsh literature. The medieval Irish and Welsh did not regard themselves as fellow Celts and while there are deep similarities between the Irish and Welsh literatures, there only occasional hints that one influenced the other. A few names from Irish sagas appear in Welsh texts, and some Welsh authors knew more than the bare names of some of them, notably Cú Roí, Finn, and Deirdre. But all told, provable influence from Irish vernacular literature is slight compared to that from Latin literature (including Hiberno-Latin) and from French in the later period.[1] My interest is in trying to pinpoint exactly what influence there was and how it came about. Today's theme will take us into most of the areas covered in the Anglo-Saxon, Norse, and Celtic Tripos. I am sure I would not be in a position to tackle it, if H. M. Chadwick had not had the vision to

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[1] On other aspects of this topic see: 'The Evidence for Vernacular Irish Literary Influence on Early Mediaeval Welsh Literature', in *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe: Studies in memory of Kathleen Hughes*, ed. Dorothy Whitelock and others (Cambridge, 1982), pp. 235–57; 'The Significance of the Irish Personal Names in Culhwch ac Olwen', *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 29 (1980-82), 600–20; 'Fionn and Deirdre in Late Medieval Wales', *Éigse*, 23 (1989), 1–15; 'The Irish Geography of *Culhwch and Olwen*', in *Sages, Saints and Storytellers: Celtic Studies in honour of James Carney*, ed. Donnchadh Ó Corráin and others (Maynooth, 1989), pp. 412–26; 'Cú Chulainn in Wales: Welsh Sources for Irish Onomastics', *Celtica,* 21 (1990), 620–33; 'Irish Elements in Late Medieval Welsh Literature: The Problem of Cuhelyn and *Nyf', in *Celtic Linguistics/Ieithyddiaeth Geltaidd: Readings in the Brythonic Languages, Festschrift for T. Arwyn Watkins*, ed. Martin J. Ball and others (Amsterdam, 1990), pp. 277–95; and 'Person-Switching in Celtic Panegyric: Figure or Fault?', in *Heroic Poets and Poetic Heroes in Celtic Tradition: A Festschrift for Patrick K. Ford*, ed. Joseph Falaky Nagy and Leslie Ellen Jones, *CSANA Year-Book*, 3/4 (Dublin, 2005), pp. 315–26.

create 'Section B', the forerunner of 'ASNaC', as a separate field of study. I join previous lecturers in the series in paying tribute to him.

So far as I am aware, there is only one Welsh manuscript copy of a vernacular Irish composition, and this may be the exception that proves the rule.[2] It is a Middle Irish poem preserved in a Latin context in British Library, Cotton Vespasian A.xiv, a collection of Latin saints' Lives, probably copied at Monmouth at the end of the twelfth century and based, according to Kathleen Hughes, on an earlier collection of mostly Welsh hagiography brought to Gloucester from Llanbadarn Fawr (near Aberystwyth) earlier in the century.[3] One of these Latin Lives is the earliest known *Vita* of St Máedóc (or *Aidus* or *Aidanus*) of Ferns in Leinster. This *Vita* is believed to have been composed at Ferns in the mid-eleventh century; the use of Latin rather than Irish at this date, when Latin was only just starting to recover in Ireland, suggests that it was directed at a foreign audience, perhaps a Welsh one.[4] Close relations with St David's are implied by the cameo role that St David plays in the Irish *Vita* and this is reciprocated in Wales by the guest appearance of St Máedóc (*Aidanus*) in the late-eleventh-century *Life* of St David by Rhygyfarch. Here Ferns (*Ferna* in Irish) even has a plausible Welsh name, *Guernin* (§36).[5] We know from the poems edited by Michael Lapidge that Rhygyfarch's father, Bishop Sulien, who was based at Llanbadarn and St David's, had studied in Ireland in the mid-eleventh century,[6] and that is a plausible

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[2] Sims-Williams, 'Evidence', p. 236.

[3] Kathleen Hughes, *Celtic Britain in the Early Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1980), pp. 53–66.

[4] *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Charles Plummer, 2 vols (Oxford, 1910), II, 295–311. See Charles Doherty, 'The Irish Hagiographer: Resources, Aims, Results', *Historical Studies*, 16 (1987), 10–22; idem, 'The Transmission of the Cult of St Máedhóg', in *Ireland and Europe in the Early Middle Ages: Texts and Transmission*, ed. Próinséas Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (Dublin, 2002), pp. 268–83. On the revival of Latin see Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 19–26.

[5] I return to this at the end of the lecture.

[6] 'The Welsh-Latin Poetry of Sulien's Family', *Studia Celtica*, 8/9 (1973–74), 68–106. Cf. Nancy Edwards, '11th-Century Welsh Illuminated Manuscripts: The Nature of the Irish Connection', in *From the Isles of the North: Early Medieval Art in Ireland and Britain*, ed. Cormac Bourke (Belfast, 1995), pp. 147–55.

context for the *Vita* of St Máedóc to have got to Llanbadarn in the first place. The significant point now is that right at the end of the Vespasian *Vita* the language changes from Latin to Irish. Mo Ling, one of St Máedóc's successors, presumes to sleep on the saint's bed at Ferns and is duly struck down. Mo Ling only recovers by reciting three quatrains in Irish. Presumably the Irish quatrains were left in the vernacular for metrical reasons or because their efficacy was supposed to depend on their exact wording, like the Irish phrases in the Old English leechbooks.[7] In the Vespasian manuscript, however, the Irish is badly miscopied, which raises the unanswerable question whether it had ever been understood in Wales. The most negative possibility is that Irish was always a closed book to the Welsh. The most positive view is that the garbling is just due to the Monmouth scribe, or even that the *Vita* had been translated into Latin by a Welshman like Sulien, who must surely have learnt some Irish during his ten years in Ireland, even if his studies there were in Latin.

In this uncertain frame of mind we can approach the main topic of this lecture, the Middle Welsh story of *Branwen*, the second of the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi.* That fine scholar, the late Proinsias Mac Cana, once suggested that Rhygyfarch could have been the author,[8] but that question and the exact date of the text remain matters for speculation. My own feeling is that the *Four Branches* are roughly twelfth-century and draw on literary material that had been cultivated in the old *clas* churches, especially Clynnog on the north-west coast. This is because places connected with that church and its saint, St Beuno, are prominent in the *Four Branches*, for example, *Bedd Branwen* in Anglesey where the heroine Branwen is buried. Another locality in *Branwen* is Bryn Saith Marchog to which I'll return. It is

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[7] Howard Meroney, 'Irish in the Old English Charms', *Speculum*, 20 (1945), 172–82. Another *Life* in the Vespasian collection, the *Vita Prima* of the Cardiganshire saint Carannog (*Carantocus*), preserves part of a Hiberno-Latin hymn to a Leinster saint, Cernach: James Carney, *Studies in Irish Literature and History* (Dublin, 1955), pp. 407–12.

[8] *Branwen Daughter of Llŷr: A Study of the Irish Affinities and of the Composition of the Second Branch of the Mabinogi* (Cardiff, 1958), p. 187.

only two miles north of Gwyddelwern where St Beuno was supposed to have resurrected an Irishman from the dead. Clearly the name *Gwyddelwern* ('thicket-swamp') was imagined to refer to a *Gwyddel*, a 'Goidel' or 'Irishman', plus an element *gwern*. I suspect that it is more than a coincidence that Branwen's son by an Irish king is called *Gwern* and that he is connected with the theme of resurrection, as you will hear. He may have been invented in order to 'explain' the name *Gwyddelwern*.[9]

The search for Irish influence on Welsh literature has always focussed on *Branwen*, for the good reason that this is the Welsh story in which Ireland plays the largest part.[10] *Branwen* is an ever topical story about a doomed attempt to create peace between Britain and Ireland. The king of Ireland comes to Wales to seek the hand of Branwen ('white raven'), the sister of the king of Britain, called Bendigeidfran ('blessed raven'), or Brân ('raven') for short. All goes well until Branwen's half-brother Efnisien insults the Irish visitor. Brân makes amends with gifts, including a magical Cauldron of Rebirth, and the married couple leave for Ireland. There the insult still rankles with the Irish, who mistreat their British queen. Brân and the Britons invade Ireland and a seeming peace is concluded. Some of the Irish hatch a plot, however, concealing two hundred warriors in flour bags hanging in the hall that is built to welcome Brân. Efnisien feels the bags and crushes them one by one. He then provokes a battle by throwing Gwern, the son of Branwen and the Irish king, into the fire. The Irish win by resurrecting their dead in the Cauldron of Rebirth, until Efnisien expiates his crimes by breaking the Cauldron, killing himself

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[9] This would be a secular counterpart to the story involving Beuno. See Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Clas Beuno and the Four Branches of the Mabinogi', in *150 Jahre 'Mabinogion': Deutsch-walische Kulturbeziehungen*, ed. Bernhard Maier and others (Tübingen, 2001), pp. 111–27.

[10] On other aspects see 'Riddling Treatment of the "Watchman Device" in *Branwen* and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*', *Studia Celtica*, 12/13 (1977–78), 83–117, and 'The Submission of Irish Kings in Fact and Fiction: Henry II, Bendigeidfran, and the Dating of *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 22 (Winter 1991), 31–61.

in the process. Only five pregnant women in a cave are left alive to re-people the five provinces of Ireland. Brân orders his followers to chop off his head and take it back to Britain. It will remain incorrupt and 'pleasant company' for eighty-seven years; apparently Brân will be able to speak but not move, unlike the zombies resurrected by the Cauldron who could move but not speak. The surviving Britons return to Britain with Brân's head and Branwen and find that Caswallawn (Cassivellaunus) has usurped the crown; in other words, the Roman invasion of Britain is on the horizon. At first sight the story may seem fantastic, even absurd. But once you understand the 'grammar' of the narrative, it is one of the most powerful of all medieval stories.

The episode I want to discuss is the conversation between the Irish and British kings when Brân first gives the Cauldron of Rebirth to Matholwch. Bendigeidfran tells his Irish visitor, Matholwch, that he had been given the cauldron by Llasar Llaes Gyfnewid, who had escaped with his wife Cymydai Cymeinfoll 'from the iron house in Ireland when it was made white-hot around them'. 'And I would be surprised if you knew nothing about that', says Bendigeidfran. As an Irishman, Matholwch does, of course know, and recounts the Irish end of the story, starting with his first encounter with Llasar:

> 'I was hunting in Ireland one day, on top of a mound overlooking a lake that was in Ireland, and it was called the Lake of the Cauldron. And I beheld a big man with yellow-red hair coming from the lake with a cauldron on his back. Moreover he was a monstrous man, big and the evil look of a brigand about him, and a woman following after him. And if he was big, twice as big as he was the woman; and they came towards me and greeted me. "Why", said I, "how fares it with you?" "This is how it fares with us, lord", said he; "this woman", said he, "at the end of a month and a fortnight will conceive, and the son who will then be born of that wombful at the end of a month and a fortnight will be a fighting man full armed". I took them to me to maintain them, and they were with me for a year. For that year I had them with me without grudging; from then on they were begrudged me, and before the end of the fourth month they were of their own part making themselves hated and unwelcome in the

land, committing outrage, and molesting and harassing gentles and ladies. From then on my people rose against me to bid me part with them, and they gave me the choice, my dominions or them. I referred to the council of my country what should be done concerning them: they would not go of their own free will, nor was there need for them to go against their will, because of their fighting power. And then, in this strait, they decided to make a chamber all of iron. And when the chamber was ready, every smith that was in Ireland was summoned there, each and every possessor of tongs and hammer. And they caused charcoal to be piled as high as the top of the chamber, and they had the woman and her husband and her offspring served with ample meat and drink. And when it was known that they were drunk, they began to set fire to the charcoal against the chamber, and to blow the bellows which had been placed around the house with a man to each pair of bellows, and they began to blow the bellows till the house was white-hot around them. Then they held a council there in the middle of the chamber floor. And he waited till the iron was white, and by reason of the exceeding great heat he charged the wall with his shoulder and broke it out before him, and his wife after him. And none escaped thence, save him and his wife. And it was then, I suppose, lord', said Matholwch to Bendigeidfran, 'that he came over to thee'. 'Faith', said he, 'it was then he came here and gave me the cauldron.' 'In what manner, lord, didst thou receive them?' 'I quartered them everywhere in my domain, and they are numerous and prosper everywhere, and fortify whatever place they happen to be in with men and arms, the best that any one has seen.'[11]

There has been much comment on this episode and there is no time to mention every discussion. For example, there is the naive theory that because an Irish king knows the story about 'the Iron House' (also translatable as 'this Iron House', i.e. 'a certain Iron House'), the story has to be an independent story borrowed from Ireland. Then there is the view that it is pointless to have a cauldron brought from Ireland only to be sent back there; that may be true at the level of plot, but overlooks the way in which the digression enriches the whole story

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[11] *The Mabinogion*, translated by Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London, 1949), pp. 30–31. The Welsh text is edited by Ifor Williams, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi*, second edition (Cardiff, 1951), p. 35, l.11-p. 36, l.29 and Derick S. Thomson, *Branwen Uerch Lyr, the Second of the Four Branches of the Mabinogi* (Dublin, 1961) ll. 156–96.

thematically and, at the same time, opens a window on the world of ancient gift exchange when vessels like the Vix Krater and the Gundestrup Cauldron travelled immense distances.[12] I must also leave aside the scholarship discriminating between different types of cauldrons—inexhaustible cauldrons, healing cauldrons, sacrificial cauldrons, cauldrons of resurrection—observing only that within Welsh tradition the distinction between such functions is quite fluid.[13]

Llasar brings the cauldron from the direction of a lake, and perhaps actually *out* of the lake (translators disagree). Apart from the fact that the story is set in Ireland, the whole scenario makes good sense in a medieval Welsh context: the hunting, the mound, and the water typically herald supernatural encounters.[14] In the legends of Taliesin we hear of underwater cauldrons containing inspiration or gold and lakes named *Pyllbair* ('Cauldron pit/pool') or *Llyn (y) pair* ('Lake of (the) cauldron') after them.[15] Such stories may be attempts to explain originally mundane place-names, or may be due to rediscoveries (or memories?) of the Bronze and Iron Age cauldrons that were deposited in lakes like Llyn Fawr and Llyn Cerrig Bach. The giant who emerges from a lake (if that is what he does do) is paralleled not only in Irish literature,[16] but also in the Welsh folklore of Llyn Cwm-llwch: when a treasure-seeker attempted to drain this lake, 'a terrific form arose from

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[12] Miranda J. Green, 'Vessels of Death: Sacred Cauldrons in Archaeology and Myth', *Antiquaries' Journal*, 78 (1998), 63–84.

[13] Cf. Françoise Le Roux, 'Des chaudrons celtiques à l'arbre d'Esus: Lucain et les Scolies Bernoises', *Ogam*, 7 (1955), 33–58; Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Early Welsh Arthurian Poems', in *The Arthur of the Welsh*, ed. Rachel Bromwich (Cardiff, 1991), pp. 33–71 (pp. 54–57).

[14] As in *Manawydan*, the next Branch.

[15] *Ystoria Taliesin*, ed. Patrick K. Ford (Cardiff, 1992), lines 611–13; F. J. North, *Sunken Cities: Some Legends of the Coast and Lakes of Wales* (Cardiff, 1957), p. 177. Cf. 'Messur y Peir' in *Culhwch and Olwen*: Kenneth Jackson, 'Rhai Sylwadau ar "Kulhwch ac Olwen" ', *Ysgrifau Beirniadol*, 12 (1982), 12–23 (pp. 22–23).

[16] Mac Cana, *Branwen*, pp. 43–46; Tom Peete Cross, ' "The Psalter of the Pig", An Irish Legend', *Modern Philology*, 18 (1920-21), 443–55.

the midst of the lake, commanding him to desist, or otherwise he would drown the country'.[17]

If the story were not set in Ireland, we probably would not contemplate an Irish source. But as it is, it is only natural that scholars have looked for a 'Lake of the Cauldron' in medieval Irish literature. There seem to be only two candidates.[18] In a late copy of an early-eleventh-century poem listing the lakes of Slieve Aughty in Co. Galway the bare name of a *Loch Cori* ('Lake of a cauldron/ whirlpool') occurs, but this may be a scribal error for *Loch nGaire*. The better candidate is a *Loch nGúalai* at Devenish (Daim-Inis) on Lough Erne in Ulster. Whitley Stokes, who equated this *Loch nGúalai* with our 'Lake of the Cauldron' in *Branwen*, suggested that the second element was an Irish cognate of various derivatives of Indo-European **geulos* 'round vessel' such as Sanskrit *gōlā*, Greek *gaulós*, and Old English *ceól*.[19] That cannot be right, because the non-palatal *l* can only come from a cluster, not from an intervocalic *l*. It would be better to start from a Celtic **goglios* related to words like Armenian *gog* 'hollow, cavity' (IE **ghegh-*),[20] and presumably identical with Middle Irish *gúala* 'pit, abyss' which lacks an etymology. The name *Loch nGúalai*, then, means not 'Lake of the cauldron' but 'Lake of the abyss'. At this point Stokes's idea looks hopeless, but the position is more complicated. Middle Irish sagas tell us that in Conchobar's day the Ulster heroes' drink used to be served from a vast vessel called the *Iarngúalae* 'Iron Abyss' or *Ól nGualai* 'Measure of an Abyss':

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[17] Edward Davies, *The Mythology and Rites of the British Druids* (London, 1809), p. 157. I do not agree with North (*Sunken Cities*, pp. 130 and 239) that this was inspired by *Branwen*. Legends about Llyn Cwm-llwch are already mentioned by J.D. Rhys, *Cambrobrytannicae Cymraecaeve Linguae Institutiones et Rudimenta* (London, 1592), preface. Cf. John Rhys, *Celtic Folklore*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1901), II, 18–21.
[18] Williams, *Pedeir Keinc*, p. 181; Mac Cana, *Branwen*, p. 38, n. 1.
[19] *Urkeltischer Sprachschatz* (Göttingen, 1894), p. 105; cf. Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, I (Bern, 1959), pp. 396–97 (Irish word not included).
[20] Ibid., p. 424.

> A hundred measures of drink used to go into it every evening. That was the 'measure of an abyss'. It used to satisfy all the Ulstermen in a single sitting.

Conchobar had looted this vat from Connacht but 'today', according to sagas copied in the Book of Leinster, *c*. 1160, it is hidden in secret places in *Loch nGúalai* in Devenish, and gives it its name, 'lake of an abyss'.[21] Here, then, is a vast, eponymous vessel, hidden beneath an Irish lake. If the Lake of the Cauldron in *Branwen* was inspired by Irish literature, this is the best candidate. In fact I have found it difficult to find other examples of vessels under lakes in medieval Irish texts. Because cauldrons are associated with the Otherworld and the Otherworld is often sited under water, cauldrons under lakes ought to be quite common in medieval Irish. But they are not.[22]

I now move on to Llasar and his even larger wife. Some vaguely similar couples have been found in Irish as well as Welsh literature, none similar enough to be a convincing source. The couple have been interpreted mythologically as illustrating a matriarchal principle.[23] I have little sympathy for that approach. After all, descriptions of dominating wives occur in patriarchal societies where, like role reversal and grotesque humour, they tend to reinforce the status quo. For example, Ammianus Marcellinus tells us that Romans cannot cope with a Gaul in a fight, 'if he call in his wife, stronger than he by far and with flashing eyes; least of all when she swells her neck and

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[21] References in R. Thurneysen, 'ól n-gúala', *ZCP*, 8 (1910–12), 65-70, except for the passage in *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, III, ed. R. A. S. Macalister, Irish Texts Society, 39 (London, 1940), p. 66, which proves that it means 'measure of an abyss'.

[22] Note only a passing reference in 'The Adventure of Laeghaire mac Crimhthainn', ed. and transl. Kenneth Jackson, *Speculum*, 17 (1942), 377–89, lines 66 and 120. I do not count vessels in fairy mounds and wells. The analogue discussed by Mac Cana, *Branwen*, pp. 45–46, dates from *c*. 1800; see Máire Ní Mhaonaigh, *A New Introduction to Giolla an Fhiugha (The Lad of the Ferule) and Eachtra Cloinne Rígh na h-Ioruaidhe (Adventures of the Children of the King of Norway)*, Irish Texts Society, Subsidiary Series, 8 (London, 1998), p. 11. I thank her for a copy of this.

[23] Marie-Louise Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* (London, 1949), pp. 35–36. Cf. Roger Sherman Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (New York, 1926), pp. 118–19; John Carey, 'Notes on the Irish War-Goddess', *Éigse*, 19 (1982-83), 263–75.

gnashes her teeth, and poising her huge white arms, begins to rain blows mingled with kicks' (*Historiae*, 15.12.1). This is the stuff of xenophobia, and that, to put it bluntly, is a key to the episode in *Branwen* as well. Llasar and his wife Cymidai Cymeinfoll, whose name has overtones of warfare and bloatedness, are breeding like rabbits, and breeding fully armed fighters; these terrorize the decent natives of Ireland, who see no choice but to destroy or expel them. To get the point you do not have to be up in medieval origin legends—the *Daily Mail* will do—but some parallels help. Here is Bede:

> It was not long before hordes of these peoples eagerly crowded into the island and the numbers of foreigners began to increase to such an extent that they became a source of terror to the natives who had called them in. (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, I.15)

Bede is talking about his own English ancestors terrorizing the Welsh. Again, in 902, some Vikings and their Irish followers were expelled from Ireland and came to Anglesey. The Welsh drove them out and they went to ask for land from Æthelflæd of the Mercians. She settled them in the Wirral, but they began to covet Chester, till they were exterminated, starting with a bogus peace-ceremony.[24] As late as 1603 George Owen reported that so many Irish were coming into Pembrokeshire that 'in short tyme they are like to match the other inhabitaunts in nomber'.[25] In fact they were absorbed into the Welsh population and, according to George Owen himself, brought the benefits of excellent cheap whisky.

It seems clear that the story of Llasar and his family being welcomed by Brân is an origin-legend explaining the arrival of the well-known Irish settlers of sub-Roman Britain, the settlers who were later to be

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[24] *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, ed. and transl. Joan Newlon Radner (Dublin, 1978), pp. 166–73 and 206–7. An early parallel in Celtic history is the extermination of the Aegosages in the third century B.C.; this 'gave a good lesson to the barbarians from Europe in future not to be over ready to cross to Asia' (Polybius, 5.111).
[25] *The Description of Penbrokshire by George Owen of Henllys*, ed. Henry Owen, 4 parts (London, 1892–1936), I, 40 (cf. pp. 283–84).

expelled from Wales by the sons of Cunedda. Of course, it is a fantastic and scurrilous origin-legend. Did people really believe that the Irish settlers were descended from two grotesque giants who had perhaps emerged from a lake in Ireland? It is hard to gauge the tone of stories written long ago about events still further back. In the nineteenth century, however, immigrant families in Wales were often said to have emerged from lakes. Sir John Rhys spoke of a tendency

> to believe, *or pretend to believe*, that the descendants of an Englishman or Scotsman, who settled among the old inhabitants, were of fairy origin, and that their history was somehow uncanny, which was all, of course, duly resented. . . . This association of the lake legends with intruders from without is what has, perhaps, in great measure served to rescue such legends from utter oblivion.[26]

Rhys was in a good position to know: his own mother was one of the 'exceedingly numerous' Mason family of north Cardiganshire, who were said to descend from fairies who had fallen out of a creel carried from Scotland. No doubt they did resent it.

In the long term, beyond the story's horizon, Brân may be misguided in allowing Llasar and his kindred to settle in Britain. The story itself is typically ambiguous.[27] In the short term they bring benefits in terms of improved armaments. One of Llasar's sons loyally guards the island in Brân's absence, at the place near Gwyddelwern which I mentioned earlier, *Bryn Saith Marchog* 'hill of the seven knights'. Then, in the next Branch of the *Mabinogi*, when Wales has become a Waste Land,

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[26] *Celtic Folklore*, I, 69 (my italics).

[27] For negative interpretations see Patrick Sims-Williams, 'Some Functions of Origin Stories in Early Medieval Wales', in *History and Heroic Tale: A Symposium*, ed. Tore Nyberg and others (Odense, 1985), pp. 97–131 [repr. in *Britain and Early Christian Europe: Studies in Early Medieval History and Culture* (Aldershot, 1995), ch. III] (p. 104); and Andrew Welsh, '*Branwen*, *Beowulf*, and the Tragic Peaceweaver Tale', *Viator*, 22 (1991), 1–13 (pp. 10-11 and n. 28). For positive interpretations see Patrick K. Ford, 'Branwen: A Study of the Celtic Affinities', *Studia Celtica*, 22/23 (1987–88), 29–41 (pp. 36–37); Sioned Davies, *Pedeir Keinc y Mabinogi* (Caernarfon, 1989), p. 64; and Helen Fulton, 'The *Mabinogi* and the Education of Princes in Medieval Wales', in *Medieval Celtic Literature and Society*, ed. Helen Fulton (Dublin, 2005), pp. 230–47 (p. 243).

Brân's brother, Manawydan, goes to Hereford to make a living decorating saddles and then shields with a technique named after Llasar himself:

> in the manner he had seen it done by Llasar Llaes Gygnwyd with lime of azure [*calch llassar*]; and [he] proceeded to make lime of azure even as that other had done. And for that reason it is still called *calch llasar*, because Llasar Llaes Gygnwyd made it.[28]

Here Llasar is credited with introducing an exotic craft into Britain, where it was named after him. According to the Welsh Laws, the most valuable shields were decorated with gilt (*eurgalch*) or *calch llassar*.[29]

This passage is crucial in understanding the origin of Llasar himself. In reality Welsh *llasar*, 'azure', earlier *llasart*, was *not* named from a person called Llasar but derived, like French and English *(l')azur(e)*, via Arabic from Persian *lāzhward* 'lapis lazuli'. If we suppose, as I think we should, that the character Llasar was invented in Wales in order to explain the term *calch llassar*, as 'Llasar's lime' or 'Llasar's chalk', much of his story will follow naturally. Since *calch llassar* was of exotic origin, so too was its eponym Llasar, a craftsman and arms-manufacturer, who must have come to Britain from elsewhere, and perhaps therefore from the Otherworld or its euhemerized equivalent Ireland. Already, Llasar becomes a suitable person to bring a magic, Otherworldly cauldron from Ireland to Wales.

Once it was supposed that Llasar's name gave rise to the common noun *Llasar's* rather than vice versa, the eponym Llasar itself would demand explanation; here the Irish personal name *Lassar/Lassair*

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[28] Adapted from *Mabinogion*, translated by Jones and Jones, pp. 43–44. *Calch* is commonly mistranslated 'enamel', but this is rightly questioned already by Whitley Stokes, *Togail Troi* (Calcutta, 1881), p. vi. The same applies to Irish *cailc*, referring to shields. I am indebted to a former 'ASNaC', Malcolm Jones for raising the question 'what incontrovertible evidence there is in fact for W. *calch* denoting enamel, as opposed to some lime-based (or, indeed, copper-based) wash or paint?', and also for the suggestion that Llasar might be a 'lazar' (letter 11 May 1981).

[29] *The Law of Hywel Dda: Law Texts from Medieval Wales*, translated by Dafydd Jenkins (Llandysul, 1986), p. 194.

would come to mind and settle the question of Llassar's origin in favour of Ireland. Unlike its Welsh cognate *Llachar*, which was masculine, the name *Lassa(i)r* was normally confined to women in Irish, presumably because *lassar/lassair* 'flame' was a feminine noun. The Welsh may not have been aware of this, or may have known about the masculine derivatives such as *Laisre*, *Laisrén*, *Mac-Laisre*, *Mac-Laise*, and *Mo Laise*. In fact the copy of the tract on 'Aliases of the Irish Saints' in the late-fourteenth-century Book of Uí Mhaine gives *Lasair* rather than *Laisrén* as the full name of the male saint, Mo Laise of Devenish.[30] — You notice I am edging back to Devenish.

The importance of etymological speculation in medieval storytelling has been shown for Old English by Fred Robinson and for Irish by Rolf Baumgarten.[31] Welsh literature was no different. Welsh speculation on the Irish name *Lasa(i)r* may have inspired the rest of Llasar's story. Three possible etymologies spring to mind, and we do not need to choose between them, because 'multiple etymologies' were quite acceptable.

My first etymology is that *Llasar* indicated a leper, Medieval Latin *lazarus*. *Lasar* was the Welsh form of *Lazarus* (Welsh and Irish didn't have a /z/), and the Irish personal names *Lassar* and *Laisrén* were liable to be written as *Lazara* or *Lazarus* in Latin. If Llasar's name was etymologized as 'leper', it could have given rise to his pariah status in *Branwen*: he and his kin are shunned by all in Ireland and eventually driven away.

A second possible etymology is that *Llasar* was associated with *Lazarus* whom Jesus raised from the dead; despite the obvious differences between the two, both Lazarus and Llasar are associated

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[30] *Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Pádraig Ó Riain (Dublin, 1985), §703.17.

[31] Fred C. Robinson, 'The Significance of Names in Old English Literature', *Anglia*, 86 (1968), 14–58; Rolf Baumgarten, 'Creative Medieval Etymology and Irish Hagiography (Lasair, Columba, Senán)', *Ériu*, 54 (2004), 49–78.

with bodily resurrection. This equation may have attracted the 'cauldron of rebirth' to Llasar. From a modern perspective the raising of Lazarus appears unique, but medieval Welsh poets could place Christ's resurrection of 'Lasar' alongside the six multifarious resurrections effected by St Beuno.[32]

The third, and indeed the correct, etymology of the Irish name *Lasa(i)r* is that it meant 'flame' or 'fire' in Irish. This fact might be enough to bring a flaming house into Llasar's story. In the late Irish *Life* of St Lasair, the meaning of her name is 'verified through a tale *with an almost predictable plot*'—I'm quoting Baumgarten, who adds that 'While the present tale is late, a similar one could have been created at any period'. Before establishing her own church at Aghavea (Achadh Bethadh) nearby, St Lasair studies with St Mo Laise at his island-monastery at Devenish. The monastery is set on fire by the Cenél Conaill:

> And then came the spoilers and reavers unto the dwelling in which Lasair was, and set fire to every part thereof with torches, and all thought that the pious, innocent and noble virgin had been burned, and one came unto the house, and spoke thus: 'High are the flames (*lasracha*) that come above the maiden'. Then said Molaise: 'She shall have that name forever, Lasair'; so thence the maiden was named Lasair; and even thus they found her, seated in a cool light and airy garment on the side of her couch and high bed, undefiled and unhurt. . . . .[33]

Thinking along similar lines, the author of the *Branwen* story, if he knew that the name *Lasa(i)r* meant 'fire' in Irish, could have explained Llasar's name by supposing that *he* had escaped unhurt from a house that had been set on fire.

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[32] *Gwaith Lewys Môn*, ed. Eurys I. Rowlands (Cardiff, 1975), no. LXXVIII; *Galar y Beirdd: Marwnadau Plant/ Poets' Grief: Medieval Welsh Elegies for Children*, ed. and transl. Dafydd Johnston (Cardiff, 1993), pp. 102–3. Cf. Elissa R. Henken, *Traditions of the Welsh Saints* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 75–80.

[33] 'The Life of St. Lasair', ed. and transl. Lucius Gwynn, *Ériu*, 5 (1911), 73-109 (pp. 76–77).

There would be no great difficulty in a Welsh author knowing the meaning of the Irish name *Lasa(i)r*, since the meaning of names were often made explicit in Latin. To give two examples, the Middle Irish *Life* of St Colmán mac Lúachain explains the name of his mother *Lasar* in a mixture of Irish and Latin

> Lasar didiu, *ideo autem Lasar dicibatur* .i. ar lasamna a henig, nó ar na lasra nóema rogénetar úade, *uel propter pulchritudinem faciei suae . . . .*

> Lassar now, *but therefore Lassar is said*, viz. for the brilliancy of her liberality, or for the holy flames that sprang from her, *or on account of the beauty of her face . . . .*[34]

and the *Vita* of St Daig of Inishkeen, after telling how he was named *Daig* ('fire') because his house at Louth caught fire without harming him, adds 'Hoc enim nomen in scotica ling[u]a "magnam flammam" sonat' ('For this name means "great flame" in the Irish language').[35] In the previous episode, by the way, Daig was studying with Mo Laise at Devenish.

As this latter example illustrates, unharmed saints in burning houses are common in Irish hagiography.[36] However, St Lasair and Mo Laise at Devenish seem to be unique in surviving a fire that was started deliberately.

I suggest, then, that the name of the Welsh character Llasar, the eponym of *calch llassar* 'lime of azure', was connected with the Irish name *Lasa(i)r,* normally a female name but found as a masculine name in connection with St Mo Laise of Devenish. Once this Irish equation was made, it would follow that Llasar himself would be supposed to have come from Ireland, as in *Branwen*, and the fact that

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[34] *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin: Life of Colmán son of Lúacháin*, ed. and transl. Kuno Meyer (Dublin, 1911), §6.
[35] *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex Codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi*, ed. W.W. Heist (Brussels, 1965), p. 389.
[36] Dorothy Ann Bray, *A List of Motifs in the Lives of the Early Irish Saints* (Helsinki, 1992), p. 93.

the name meant 'fire' in Irish would attract the explanation that he had survived arson, as in the story about St Lasair and Mo Laise surviving the arson by the Cenél Conaill at Devenish.

From the point of view of *Branwen*'s Irish sources, it is striking that the name *Llasar* leads us to Devenish, just as the search for the 'Lake of the Cauldron' did. Devenish was a prominent monastic centre throughout the Middle Ages, fiercely protective of the rights of its saint Mo Laise, and home of the magnificent early-eleventh-century bookshrine that bears his name (Soiscéal Molaise). The Lough Erne house-shaped Shrine (a real Iron House!) may also be from Devenish.[37] But what link could there be between Devenish and Wales?

In view of the eleventh-century connections between Wales and Ferns that I sketched earlier, the most likely possibility is the ecclesiastical network centred on the cult of St Máedóc of Ferns, for he was also the patron saint of Drumlane, twenty miles south of Devenish, and of other churches in that area.[38] According to his Lives, Máedóc was originally from the Lough Erne region, and in his youth aided his kinsfolk in their struggles against the Cenél Conaill of the northern Uí Néill and against their king Ainmere, king of Tara (d. 569). These are the people who set fire to Devenish in the legendary *Life* of St Lasair and, in the tenth century, really did plunder the islands of Lough Erne.[39] St Máedóc ends his days at the monastery of Ferns, which was the ecclesiastical power-base of the Uí Chennselaig dynasty of

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[37] C.A. Ralegh Radford, 'Devenish', *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*, third series, 33 (1970), 55–61; Paul Mullarkey, 'Some Observations on the Form and Date of the Soiscéal Molaise Book Shrine', in *Irish Art Historical Studies in honour of Peter Harbison*, ed. Colum Hourihane (Dublin, 2004), pp. 124–40.

[38] Charles Doherty, 'Saint Máedóc and Saint Molaisse', *Bréifne*, 6, Part 24 (1986), 363–74; idem, 'The Earliest Cult of Molaisse', in *History of the Diocese of Clogher*, ed. Henry A. Jefferies (Dublin, 2005), pp. 13–24. I am indebted to Mr Doherty for copies of his work.

[39] Tomás G. Ó Canann, 'A Poem on the Rights of the Coarb of Saint Molaisse', *Clogher Record*, 15/1 (1994), 7–24 (p. 8).

southern Leinster;[40] from Ferns he opposes Ainmere's son, Áed, king of Tara, and aids the great Uí Chennselaig king Brandub (d. 605/8) in his struggles against the Cenél Conaill, culminating in Brandub's famous defeat of Áed in 598 at the battle of Dún Bolg (to which we'll return). Politically, then, St Máedóc's alleged career expresses a clear community of interest between certain peoples of the north-west and the south-east who were threatened by the Uí Néill encroachments in the midlands in between.[41] Ecclesiastically, the Lives of Máedóc show an equal interest in northern and Leinster churches. They reflect the close relationship between Ferns and Máedóc's northern churches that existed in the mid-eleventh century, as evidenced by the 1059 obit of an erenagh (*airchinneach*) of Drumlane, which describes him as coarb (*comarba*) of Máedóc both in Connacht and in Leinster.[42] The connection between Máedóc and Mo Laise is even stronger in the mid-twelfth-century poems of Gilla Mo Dutu of Devenish; he describes himself as 'of the family of Mo Laise and Máedóc', says that he reads 'the book of Mo Laise and Máedóc', and ascribes equal authority to the two.[43] Not surprisingly, then, Devenish and its saint Mo Laise play a role in the Lives of Máedóc of Ferns.

The Vespasian *Vita* from Monmouth, with which we began, indicates the ecclesiastical context in which traditions about Devenish could have reached Wales via Ferns. St Máedóc (*Aidus*) and St Mo Laise (*Molassus*) are portrayed as great friends, one of whom goes north to *insula Boum* ('the island of oxen'), and the other to Leinster (§8). The tendency to translate Irish names (here *Daim-Inis* 'ox-island', Devenish) is noteworthy, and significant if the name *Lassa(i)r* came to Wales through some Latin text containing such translations.

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[40] Marie Therese Flanagan, *Irish Royal Charters: Texts and Contexts* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 89–90.

[41] I hope to show elsewhere that *Tochmarc Becfhola* has a similar background.

[42] Doherty, 'Irish Hagiographer', p. 20.

[43] Poems incorporated in the Second Irish Life of Máedóc, ed. and transl. Charles Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉrenn*, 2 vols (Oxford, 1919–22), I, 190–290, and II, 184-281, §§ 205, 220, and 224. See Kevin Murray, 'Gilla Mo Dutu Úa Caiside', in *Cín Chille Cúile: Texts, Saints and Places: Essays in honour of Pádraig Ó Riain*, ed. John Carey and others (Aberystwyth, 2004), pp. 150–62; Doherty, 'Transmission of the Cult of St Máedhóg', pp. 275–83.

The sort of ecclesiastical contacts which Sulien and Rhygyfarch exemplify suggest a way in which the traditions of Devenish, both about St Lassa(i)r, St Mo Laise, and the burning house and about *Loch nGúalai* and its hidden vessel, could have reached Wales via Ferns—perhaps in Latin—and could have set an imaginative Welsh author on the path towards the Iron House episode as we know it.

The closest parallels to the Iron House story are in Irish literature, but Joseph Harris has shown that some elements appear in Norse sagas and in Saxo Grammaticus. He suggested that some of these might be Irish-influenced, but the similarities are quite mundane. His best parallel is the story of Rognvald and Raud in the fourteenth-century *Greatest Saga of Olaf Tryggvason*. The Norwegian hero, wishing to avenge his father, employs foreign, Wendish craftsmen to build a great drinking hall, ostensibly to welcome his master home from his travels:

> Rognvald constructed the 'great drinking hall' with his revenge in mind, and the structure was carefully prepared for the use it would be put to: 'Rognvald had all the shavings and all the chips carefully stored up; and he fully supervised the craftsmen's work. But when the hall and the passageway around it were quite finished, he had the serfs bring in from the forest a great store of firewood and stack up piles as high as the walls on all sides of the hall'. Rognvald explains away this strange arrangement when Thorolf returns. '[Thorolf] asked Rognvald why he had such a huge heap of wood brought home. He answered, "Because there are always complaints in the winter about the lack of firewood since much is needed, and in the second place I did not want the sun to cause cracks in the new and lightly tarred wooden walls". Thorolf wasted no more thoughts on that.' At the feast the 'drink was extremely strong and served with zeal. Rognvald took very good care to provide the beer and bring it in. Those Wendish craftsmen also acted as cupbearers'. When Thorolf and his guests were thoroughly drunk, the Wends secured the door of the hall with stacks of wood and brought up the chips and shavings. 'Then they set

fire to it all, including the great stacks of firewood, and immediately all the hall began to blaze.' The men inside all perished.[44]

Our Iron House episode is fantastic by comparison, but both are rooted in early medieval reality. Burning your enemy's house was a fact of life, attested in the Irish Annals as elsewhere; nearly a hundred deaths by arson occur in early Icelandic literature.[45] Accidental conflagrations were inevitable, too, given the use of wood and wattle and open fires, and these occurred sometimes, perhaps particularly, in the great halls that were specially built for feasts to honour guests. It was a natural step to combine these two themes into stories in which such a special hall was erected for the purpose of the arson; though rare, such stories occur in Norse as well as Irish, as Harris shows. An obvious problem in such a story would be to explain why the guests should not be alarmed at the absence or withdrawal of their hosts; possible solutions would be to make the doomed house a separate guesthouse, or to stress the drunken stupor of the guests, or to have token relatives of the burners remain reassuringly within. Another problem would be that the victims would normally be able to break out through a wall, as happens in some Norse sagas and in Saxo Grammaticus (V.14.1–4). Once a storyteller had prevented the victims escaping by building his hall from hardwood or even iron, he would face the problem of convincingly setting fire to such a construction. The use of firewood and other combustibles was not uncommon in realistic Norse accounts of everyday arson, so, faced with the prospect of an iron house, the addition of charcoal and bellows, as with an oven or furnace, would be an obvious elaboration, and would lead to an Iron House story. Given that the purpose of having iron or similar materials was to impede escapers, it might seem logical to suppose

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[44]Joseph Harris, 'Folktale and Thattr: The Case of Rognvald and Raud', *Folklore Forum: A Communication for Students of Folklore*, 13 (1980), 158–98 (pp. 174 and 195, n. 44). I must thank Professor Harris for discussing this parallel with me at the time of publication and for sending me a copy of his article.

[45] Ibid., pp. 173–74; A.T. Lucas, 'The Plundering and Burning of Churches in Ireland 7th to 16th Century', in *North Munster Studies: Essays in commemoration of Monsignor Michael Moloney* (Limerick, 1967), pp. 172–229 (p. 194).

that stories like *Branwen* which involve an escape are secondary.[46] Storytellers, however, need their heroes to survive, and escapes are perhaps more the rule than the exception. Typically, the only guests who do not escape are the discardable victims of the hero's vengeance.

The most unrealistic element in *Branwen* and two of the Irish analogues is the use of iron. This is not peculiarly Celtic. Kenneth Jackson and Charles D. Wright respectively have noted that the motif of the Iron House appears both in a modern international folktale and in an Old English exemplum which is found in many manuscripts from the tenth century onwards, starting with the Vercelli Book. In the folktale, the hero is locked in an iron room by his prospective father-in-law, who heats it like an oven; the hero survives, thanks to a Helper who can create a freeze-up. Such Helpers are found in the Welsh *Culhwch and Olwen*, so Jackson's folktale may have been known in Wales.[47] The Old English, probably Mercian, exemplum, could also have been known in Wales, perhaps in Latin. Here is a late-eleventh-century version from Worcester, which shows signs of having been folded to make it pocket-sized, perhaps for an itinerant preacher. The Devil himself is evoking the terrors of Hell:

> 'Even if the Ocean were closed up from without with iron walls, and then filled with fire up to the roof of heaven, and then surrounded by smith's bellows so that each touched the other, and a man were placed at each bellows and each of those men had the strength of Samson . . . and an iron plate were then placed over the roof of the fire and it were all filled with men and each had a hammer in his hand, and then all together began to crash it, and blow the bellows and cause the fire to roar and beat the

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[46] Tomás Ó Concheanainn, 'The Manuscript Tradition of *Mesca Ulad*', *Celtica*, 19 (1987), 13–30 (p. 19).

[47] Kenneth Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition* (Cardiff, 1961), pp. 71–75 and 101.

hammers, none the less despite all this commotion the soul that was earlier in hell for a single night could not wake up.'[48]

If this is influenced by an Irish 'Iron House' story, it shows that the motif had already reached Britain by the tenth century. If it is not, it shows that the Iron House motif could recur independently.[49]

In deciding which if any of the Irish analogues for the Iron House are in fact sources, we should not simply tot up the relative similarities, because, on the one hand, mundane details can recur by chance and, on the other, the striking motif of *iron* circulated independently, as we have just seen.

There are three close analogues in Irish literature to the Welsh Iron House episode. The earliest is the ninth-century *Destruction of Dinn Ríg*. This saga is set in prehistoric times at the hillfort of Dinn Ríg in Leinster. It is a central part of the Leinstermen's origin legend, telling how they first threw off the oppression of the king of Tara. The hero invites him to a feast in a specially built hall:

> Very strong moreover was the house; of iron was the house made, wall, floor and doorvalves. The Laigin were making it for a whole year . . . . He [the hero, Labraid] had nine men on the floor of the house. They pull the chain which was out of the door behind them and put it on the pillar stone

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[48] Charles D. Wright, *The Irish Tradition in Old English Literature* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 273–74 and 285–87, from Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hatton 115, fols 140–47, on which see P.R. Robinson, 'Self-Contained Units in Composite Manuscripts of the Anglo-Saxon Period', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 7 (1978), 231-38 (pp. 231, 235, 238, and plate III). Cf. *The Vercelli Homilies and Related Texts*, ed. D.G. Scragg, Early English Text Society, ordinary series, 300 (London, 1992), pp. 151–57, 176–77, and 398-99 (the relevant page is missing from the Vercelli Book itself). A derivative version was edited by Fred C. Robinson, 'The Devil's Account of the Next World: An Anecdote from Old English Homiletic Literature', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 73 (1972), 362–71; a fellow 'ASNaC', Peter Kitson, kindly drew my attention to this Iron House analogue in 1980.

[49] For various opinions see reviews of Wright by John Carey, *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 29 (Summer 1995), 66–68, Colin Ireland, *Peritia*, 9 (1995), 446–54, and Patrick Sims-Williams, *Early Medieval Europe*, 4 (1995), 248–50. I suggest the possibility that *all* the Irish material analysed so well by Wright could have been brought over in the early ninth century by the men he discusses: the Irish deacon Níall and his follower Pehtred.

in front of the house, and their thrice-fifty smiths' bellows around the house were blown, with four warriors at each bellows, until it was hot for the host [inside].[50]

The main difference from *Branwen* is that no one escapes, this being a story of vengeance. Nevertheless, *The Destruction of Dinn Ríg* is obviously much closer to *Branwen* than any of the non-Irish analogues are.

The second Irish analogue is *Mesca Ulad*, a much more light-hearted tale, 'The Drunkenness of the Ulstermen'. There are Old and Middle Irish recensions.[51] The Old Irish version has a wooden rather than an iron house and no arson. The drunken Ulstermen, stumbling into enemy territory, are ushered into 'an oaken house . . . , having a door of yew three full feet thick'. The victims hold a council within, as in *Branwen*, and Cú Chulainn, like Llasar in *Branwen*, creates an aperture by brute force, though it is not big enough to get through. Eventually the Ulstermen escape by turning the whole house over; they then massacre their enemies in time-honoured fashion. In the Middle Irish version (basically eleventh century according to Mac Gearailt), the oaken house has become an iron house, probably under the influence of the *Destruction of Dinn Ríg*. This Iron House was prepared many years before as a result of a prophecy:

> 'The preparation is, a house of iron and two houses of boards about it and an earthen house below beneath it and a firm-set slab of iron thereupon; and all that could be found of faggots and firewood and coal has been gathered into the earthen house, so that it is quite full . . . . There are seven chains of fresh iron here under the legs of this bed as a preparation for binding and closing in; let them be made fast to the seven pillars that are outside upon this green.'

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[50] Translating from *Fingal Rónáin and Other Stories*, ed. David Greene (Dublin, 1955), lines 417–19 and 436–39. The best discussion is by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Oldest Story of the Laigin: Observations on *Orgain Denna Ríg*', *Éigse*, 33 (2002), 1–18.

[51] For both see *Mesca Ulad*, edited by J.C. Watson (Dublin, 1941), and translated by J.C. Watson, 'Mesca Ulad', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 5 (1938–42), 1–34. See also Uáitéar Mac Gearailt, 'The Edinburgh Text of *Mesca Ulad*', *Ériu*, 37 (1986), 133–79.

The Ulstermen are feasted in the house. Eventually the last servant withdraws and the house is chained down. Then:

> Thrice fifty smiths, with their smith's bellows, were brought to stimulate the fire. Three circles of them were set about the house. The fire was kindled from below and above into the house.

As in the Old Irish version the Ulstermen debate what to do, but here *two* warriors fail to break through the door and walls. As before, the Ulstermen overturn the house in the end (in the late Edinburgh manuscript anyway—the Book of Leinster is defective).

This Middle Irish analogue shares some more or less commonplace details with *Branwen* that are not in *The Destruction of Dinn Ríg*, such as the stacks of charcoal, the victims' council, and the final escape. These have made it the most favoured source for *Branwen* in modern scholarship. But Joseph Loth, who first noted the parallel, felt that the Middle Irish story was less primitive than *Branwen*, and not its source.[52] I agree with this. Unlike the Ulster heroes, Llasar and his family are oppressors, and the attempt to dispose of them is more akin to the grim origin-legend of *The Destruction of Dinn Ríg* than the humorous entertainment of *The Drunkenness of the Ulstermen.* It is difficult to imagine an author starting with the latter and transforming it into the *Branwen* story. It is easier to see *Branwen* as a transformation of *The Destruction of Dinn Ríg*, modified so that just two of the victims escape. The Welsh could have known this central Leinster origin-legend via the contacts with Ferns discussed earlier.

But there remains, finally, a third Irish analogue, which is even more promising as a source, even though its house is not an *iron* one in the

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[52] 'Rapprochement entre l'épopée irlandaise et les traditions galloises', *Revue celtique*, 11 (1890), 345–48.

extant text.[53] The eleventh-century *Bórama* or 'Cattle Tribute' saga is a Leinster origin-legend comparable with *The Destruction of Dinn Ríg*. Where the *Destruction* had recounted the Leinstermen's first attempt to throw off the oppression of the kings of Tara, the ancestors of the Uí Néill, the *Bórama* takes the story into the historical period. In the relevant episode, Áed son of Ainmere is king of Tara (d. 598). His son Cummascach makes a circuit of Ireland, sleeping with every king's wife. The king of Leinster, Brandub (d. 605/8), pretends to be in Britain, and Cummascach is received at his house in Baltinglass. Meanwhile, a saint Máedóc úa Dúnlainge appears and presents Brandub with a vast cauldron, and the king, disguised as a slave, serves Cummascach's satirist with meat from it. The satirist takes it into the house to Cummascach. Brandub and a helper follow with a barrow and tip out its contents before Cummascach:

> And they went forth outside and shut the great royal doorleaf of the palace behind them, for the strength of nine was in each of them. Thereafter four fires were put into the house, a fire on each side. And then Cummascach said: 'Who is attacking the house?' 'I', says Brandub. Then said Glásdam the satirist: 'Let no guile be wrought on me', saith he, 'for I have eaten thy food.' 'None shall be wrought', says Brandub. 'Climb up the house, and leap over the rooftree, and spring out over the top of the flame, and thou shalt be safe from us.'[54]

Cummascach changes clothes with the satirist and escapes. He is soon caught and his head is carried off to Brandub. That precipitates an invasion by his father, Áed son of Ainmere, leading to his historical defeat in 598 by Brandub at *Dún Bolg*—which means 'The fort of the bags'.

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[53] The *Bórama* parallel has been noted before, but without attaching such importance to it as here: Cecile O'Rahilly, *Ireland and Wales: Their Historical and Literary Relations* (London, 1924), p. 107; Mac Cana, *Branwen*, p. 22.

[54] 'The Boroma', ed. and transl. Whitley Stokes, *Revue celtique*, 13 (1892), 32–124 (pp. 60–61). The best discussion is by Morgan T. Davies, 'Kings and Clerics in Some Leinster Sagas', *Ériu*, 47 (1996), 45–66.

Although the *Bórama* house is not an iron one, the story follows *The Destruction of Dinn Ríg* in its general political context and in various detailed borrowings. Any author at all familiar with Leinster traditions might see the possibility of enhancing the *Bórama* arson story by introducing the *iron* and other attendant details from its ninth-century prototype, *The Destruction of Dinn Ríg*.

From the Welsh point of view the *Bórama* story has various intriguing details. The name of the hero, *Brandub* (generally shortened to *Bran* in the Book of Leinster), means 'black raven' both in Irish and in Old Welsh—a point of interest for a Welsh story about *Bendigeidfran* 'blessed raven' and *Branwen* 'white raven'. *Rathbran* near Baltinglass was supposed to be named from Brandub.[55] Moreover, like Brân in *Branwen*, Brandub in the *Bórama* is fighting against a High King of Ireland.[56] Then there is the central role of a vast cauldron in the *Bórama*, as in *Branwen*. The cauldron which St Máedóc úa Dunlainge presents to Brandub reappears at the battle of Dún Bolg, where, on the advice of a certain Bishop Áedán of Glendalough, Brandub conceals a huge torch under the cauldron: raising the cauldron is a signal for the Leinstermen hidden in food-hampers to emerge and rout the northerners. *Dún Bolg* ('the fort of the bags') is said to be named from the Leinstermen's food bags (§67). Like good folklorists, the northerners suspect a Trojan Horse, but when they feel the hampers they fail to feel the warriors beneath the food. The Leinstermen leap out and massacre the northerners, when the cauldron is raised from the torch. Now warriors hidden in bags are an international motif, from ancient Egypt to modern Scotland, but I would agree with Mac Cana

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[55] Liam Price, *The Place-Names of Co. Wicklow*, 7 vols (Dublin, 1945-67), III, 140–42, and VII, xiii-xiv.

[56] Brandub is not King of Britain, of course, but he is said to gather tribute in Britain (*Bórama*, §43), and it was claimed that his brother was Áedán mac Gabráin, king of Alba: Máire Herbert, 'Sea-Divided Gaels? Constructing Relationships Between Irish and Scots *c.* 800–1169', in *Britain and Ireland 900–1300*, ed. Brendan Smith (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 87–97 (pp. 93–94). In the *Vita* of Colmán Elo (*Vitae*, ed. Heist, pp. 221–22), Brandub is associated at Ferns with 'alius vir sanctus Brito' as well as with St Máedóc.

that it is more than a coincidence that Irish warriors hidden in flour sacks (MW *boly* < Old Welsh *bolg*) recur near the end of *Branwen.*[57]

The parallelism between the *Bórama* and *Branwen* can be summarized as follows:

Bórama	*Branwen*
1. St Máedóc úa Dúnlainge presents special cauldron to Bran(dub)	1. Llasar presents special cauldron to Brân
2. importunate enemies, tricked by hospitality, burning in house, hold council	2. [*flashback*] importunate enemies, tricked by hospitality, burning in Iron house, hold council
3. leader escapes through roof	3. [*flashback*] leader and wife escape through wall . . . .
4. war between Bran(dub) and High King of Ireland	4. war between Brân and High King of Ireland
5. warriors hidden in baskets/?bags	5. warriors hidden in bags
6. suspicious foreign warriors feel them	6. suspicious foreign warrior feels them
7. cauldron inaugurates denouément	7. cauldron inaugurates denouément

To sum up, I am suggesting that a version of the *Bórama* was a major inspiration for *Branwen.* We cannot, however, assume that the Welsh knew the extant version, nor even a version in Irish rather than Latin. The *Bórama* is a political text and its story must have been told with varying biases. The extant version is peculiar in minimising the role of Brandub's own dynasty, the Uí Chennselaig, and assigning no part to Ferns, where Brandub was buried, and to its saint Máedóc. As if to underline that St Máedóc of Ferns is not involved, the cauldron is said to have been presented by another saint of the same name, St Máedóc *úa Dúnlainge*; he was the patron of Ferns' rivals at Clonmore, a monastery further north, which was actually plundered in 1040 by the Uí Chennselaig, and belonged to the rival dynasty of Uí Dúnlainge. The mysterious 'Bishop Áedán of Glendalough', who helps Brandub in the battle of Dún Bolg, appears to be another deliberately disguised manifestation of Máedóc of Ferns. The extant *Bórama* assigns nearly

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[57] *Branwen*, pp. 64–71. Cf. Jackson, *International Popular Tale*, p. 102.

all the credit for Brandub's victory to various northern Leinster kindreds who were openly at war with the Uí Chennselaig in the mid-eleventh century, even sacking Ferns in 1041.[58]

Eleventh-century Ferns must have had its own take on the *Bórama* story. That take does not survive, but its existence can be inferred from the eleventh-century Vespasian *Vita* of Máedóc of Ferns with which I began this lecture. In the *Vita*, St Máedóc (Aidus) and King Brandub become friends for life after Máedóc rescues Brandub from hell;[59] Brandub gives Máedóc much land (§29) and admires his way of life (§36). In a summary account of Áed's invasion to avenge Cummascach's death (which was evidently well-known), Brandub's victory is due to the prayers and advice of Máedóc (*Aidus*) of Ferns (§54), not those of St Máedóc of Clonmore or Áedán of Glendalough. When Brandub is slain by an assassin (or 'treacherously by his own kindred' according to the *Annals of Ulster*)[60] he is both resurrected and buried by Máedóc at Ferns (§43). According to fuller accounts, Brandub was a whole year in the grave,[61] but arose with no visible wounds from his murder.[62] Here is the resurrection motif again. You will remember that after the final battle in *Branwen* Brân's head is cut off by his own people, remains incorrupt, keeping them good company during the 'Assembly of the Wondrous Head', and is eventually buried after eighty-seven years.

The 'Assembly of the Wondrous Head' has a well-known Middle Irish analogue in the tenth-century saga about the Battle of Allen in 722,

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[58] A.S. Mac Shamhráin, 'The Uí Muiredaig and the Abbacy of Glendalough in the Eleventh to Thirteenth Centuries', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 25 (Summer 1993), 55–75 (p. 65). On Bishop Áedán see idem, *Church and Polity in Pre-Norman Ireland: The Case of Glendalough* (Maynooth, 1996), pp. 117–19.

[59] Another version of this episode involves Colum Cille: Myles Dillon, *The Cycles of the Kings* (Oxford, 1946), p. 55.

[60] *The Annals of Ulster*, I, ed. and transl. Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (Dublin, 1983), s.a. 604 [605].

[61] 'The Monastery of Tallaght', ed. and transl. E.J. Gwynn and W.J. Purton, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 29, Section C (1911), 115-79 (pp. 133–34).

[62] *Vita* of Colmán Elo of Lynally, §§ 39–40, ed. Heist, *Vitae*, pp. 221–22.

first attested as part of the *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*.[63] Little is known for certain about the prehistory of this text, but its significance for *Branwen* becomes apparent when it is noted that the story is presented as a sequel to the *Bórama*, with which it shares an obvious Leinster bias.[64] The Uí Néill attempt to re-impose the *bórama* tribute on Leinster, and only persuade their allies to muster by enlisting the help of a certain Donn Bó, who is popular for his storytelling and other accomplishments. His safe return is guaranteed by prayers to Colum Cille. On the eve of the battle Donn Bó is unable to entertain the king, Fergal, but promises to do so the following night. Instead a jester depresses the northerners with tales of their past warfare with the Leinstermen from *The Destruction of Dinn Ríg* onwards. The following day, after twenty-one thousand of them are massacred, Donn Bó's severed head is heard entertaining Fergal's corpse with chanting 'sweeter than any music'. The head is happy to be brought to the Leinstermen and to be placed on a pillar to entertain them and their king, Murchad son of Bran (sometimes simply called 'son of Bran'), at their feast. The saga ends with the head being reunited with its body and Donn Bó returning north, as Colum Cille had guaranteed.

Although speaking heads, and enemies' heads displayed at feasts, occur elsewhere,[65] *Branwen* is closer to *The Battle of Allen* than any other text, and this can hardly be a coincidence in view of the other similarities with Leinster traditions.

An eleventh-century or later Welsh visitor to Ferns could easily have had access to such Leinster traditions, perhaps in Latin,[66] in written

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[63] *Fragmentary Annals of Ireland*, ed. and transl. Radner, pp. 66–81; *Cath Almaine*, ed. Pádraig Ó Riain (Dublin, 1978). Cf. Dillon, *Cycles of the Kings*, p. 99; Mac Cana, *Branwen*, pp. 93–95 and 143–45; Anne Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain* (London, 1967), pp. 119–21.

[64] See Davies, 'Kings and Clerics', pp. 45–54, with references.

[65] T.F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin, 1946), pp. 282–83; Ross, *Pagan Celtic Britain*, pp. 118–24; Ó Riain, *Cath Almaine*, pp. 47–48. I leave aside the Grail legends, which must derive in some way from the Welsh story of Brân.

[66] On the revival of Latin as a medium for Irish material see n. 4 above. In his edition of *The Writings of Bishop Patrick 1074–1084* (Dublin, 1955), pp. 12–13, Aubrey Gwynn draws attention to the

and/or oral form. This may be the key to *Branwen*. Ferns is the common denominator for the following ingredients of the story:

1. The eponymous connection between burning houses and Lassair and Mo Laise (traditions associated with Devenish, which was 'twinned' with Ferns).
2. The idea of the vast cauldron beneath the lake (another tradition associated with Devenish).
3. The story of the gift to King Bran(dub) of a cauldron by Máedóc (Máedóc of Ferns originally).
4. The story of Bran(dub) burning Cummascach's people in the guest house and the latter's escape.
5. The story of Bran(dub) concealing warriors in hampers (originally eponymous bags) at the battle of Dún Bolg ('Fort of the Bags'), and the use of a cauldron at the turning-point of the battle.
6. The kin-slaying, incorrupt resurrection, and burial of Bran(dub) at Ferns.
7. The severed head entertaining the Leinster troops at the feast of 'the son of Bran', following a great massacre.
8. Finally, it is tempting to connect the Welsh name *Guernin*, as Rhygyfarch in his *Life of St David* calls Máedóc's church at Ferns,[67] both with the name of Branwen's half-Irish son *Gwern* and with the name of St Beuno's church in Wales, *Gwyddelwern*, where St Beuno of Clynnog was supposed to have resurrected an Irishman (a *Gwyddel*) from the dead.[68]

The conclusion to which I am edging is that while there was no massive or pervasive Irish influence on Welsh medieval literature, there were quite specific literary and ecclesiastical contacts with Ireland at one or two coastal centres of eleventh-century learning such as Clynnog, St David's, and of course Llanbadarn (now better known as the University of Wales, Aberystwyth). This suits the precise evidence better that the old hypothesis that Irish and Welsh warriors 'must have fraternised beside the camp fires and whiled away the

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bilingualism of Máel Ísu úa Brolcháin (d. 1086) as well as to Patrick's *De Mirabilibus Hiberniae*. The latter shows an awareness of the potential audience for Irish material presented in Latin. See also Denis Bethell, 'English Monks and Irish Reform in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries', *Historical Studies*, 8 (1971), 111–35.

[67] *Vitae Sanctorum Britanniae et Genealogiae*, ed. A.W. Wade-Evans (Cardiff, 1944), p. 160; *Rhigyfarch's Life of St. David*, ed. J.W. James (Cardiff, 1967), §36.

[68] See above.

watches with interchange of song and story', or the newer one that the author of *Branwen* 'possessed a very considerable knowledge of [vernacular] Irish literature, probably in written form, or else had constantly by him those who did'.[69] If the author did have texts from Ireland on his desk, we should probably think of him perusing little Latin compilations like the *Vita* of St Máedóc rather than vast vernacular compilations like the Book of the Dun Cow.[70]

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[69] O'Rahilly, *Ireland and Wales*, p. 113; Mac Cana, *Branwen*, p. 182.

A map of places mentioned in the text
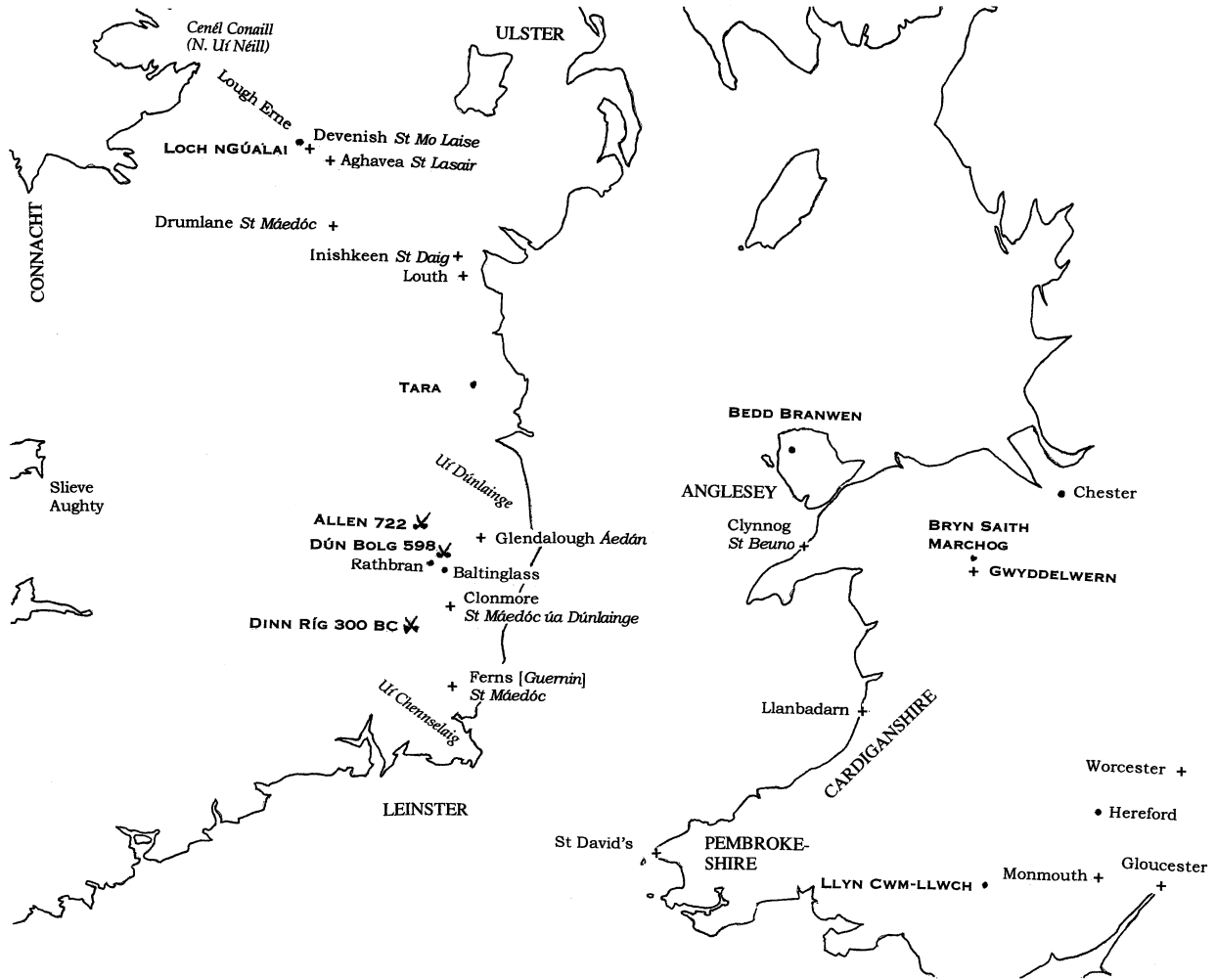
Key to symbols:

+ = ecclesiastical sites
✗ = battlefield sites

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