CONALL'S WELCOME TO CET IN THE OLD IRISH *SCÉLA MUCCE MEIC DATHÓ*[*]

William Sayers

One of the best known dramatic sequences in Old Irish Literature is set in the banquet hall of Mac Dathó, where a succession of warriors lays claim to the champion's portion, only to be bested verbally by Cet mac Magach of Connaught, who calls up dishonouring incidents from their and their families' pasts.[1] But when Conall Cernach of Ulster arrives, the taunting tone changes to one of respect, albeit an ambivalent ironic respect, heavy with aggression. Cet greets Conall with a series of binary epithets extolling his harsh valour. Conall replies in kind, and continues: "'Bid menn innar n-imchromruc-ni ón,' ol Conall,'ocus bid menn inar n-imscarad; bid airscéla la fer mbrot, bid fíadnaise la fer manath; ar ar·cichset airg loman londgliaid na da err eblait écht ar écht, regaid fer dar fer is'taig-seo innocht'."[2]

The notes and glossary of Thurneysen's edition, from which the passage is cited, would allow the following translation, based on the preferred readings of a number of disputed words in a "rhetorical section" which the editor says "includes the most difficult passages of the text": "'That will be clear at our meeting,' said Conall, 'and it will be clear at our separation. It will be a famous tale with the man of goads, it will be a testimony with the man of awls. For prominent warriors will step forward to the encounter, an angry fight of spear-staffs. The two chariot fighters, they will perform violent deed for violent deed, man will go over man in this house tonight'." The most recent printing of the text, as annotated reading passages in R.P.M. and W.P.

Lehmann's *Introduction to Old Irish*, brings no fresh light to bear on the problems of Conall's speech.[3]

This note takes as point of departure the references to "airscéla la fer mbrot . . . fíadnaise la fer manath" ("famous tale with the man of goads . . . testimony with the man of awls"), and Thurneysen's not too forcefully advanced interpretation: "Probably the meaning is that even the lower people will remember the fight" (27). With *brot* translated as "goad," the first representative of those who will remember the encounter of Conall and Cet is identified by Thurneysen as "the driver of oxen," "the ploughman" or "the charioteer." But three such bearers of goads were not members of a single social class. It is inconsistent with the ethos of the aristocratic heroic society portrayed in the Ulster cycle to suggest that a warrior like Conall would be concerned that his fame live on in other than his own noble class. The charioteer, however, was socially and functionally closer to the warrior than were drovers and ploughmen. Witness the relationship between Cú Chulainn and Láeg. The charioteer also appears as a symbolic "man of goads," as when Cú Chulainn asks Láeg to satirize him if he should falter in his combat with Fer Diad.[4] To take this idea one step farther, "man of goads" may be a kenning for the poet, capable of both eulogy and satire.

Given the pairing in the opening lines of the key words *imchromruc* "meeting" and *imscarad* "parting" -- two suitably abstract terms that frame the still hypothetical but expected combat between the two heroes -- we may expect in *fer manath* some kind of complement to *fer mbrot*. Manuscript variants are *man(n)ach, menach* and, possibly, *monach* "skilled, dexterous."[5] The first of these variants is explained as influenced by the tribal name *Fir Manach*. Thurneysen, in adopting the reading *menath / menad* "awl" for *manath*, follows Pokorny,[6] albeit reluctantly: "But so common a word as *menath, menad* is scarcely likely to have been miswritten" (27). "Man of awls" would have been the "shoemaker" or "worker in leather." Although not suggested by earlier commentators, the tasks of making harness and the leather aprons worn by warriors[7] would bring *fer menath* closer in station to a charioteering *fer mbrot*. But, contrary to Thurneysen's assumption, it happens that *menath* "awl" was at times misused in the sense that it was substituted for *menoc* "peg, pin," a term with much weightier associations.

"Then before he [Cú Chulainn] went, he twisted a withe into a ring and wrote an *ogham* inscription on its peg [*menoc*], and cast it over the top of a pillar stone."[8] For the *menoc* of the LU and LL *TBC*, and the *menacc* of the

YBL *TBC,* the Stowe recension has *meanad.*[9]   The withe has been cut, bent in a circle, presumably pierced, and fitted with a peg, all with a single hand (in LL, with one hand, with one eye closed and standing on one foot). This ritual feat of magic and dexterity, plus the secret *ogham* inscription, later recognized by Fergus and more fully interpreted by a druid (LU *TBC,* lines 268 ff., LL *TBC,* lines 473 ff.), is an injunction against the Connaught host, to prevent it from advancing.   The verse spoken in the episode by Fergus and the druid does not quite accurately reflect their respective comprehension of the withe and inscription as given in the prior passage in prose. But in suggesting Fergus' less sure knowledge of the origin and message of the withe, the verse may be viewed as circumstantial evidence for the antiquity of the episode.   In the substitution of *menad* "awl" for *menoc* "peg," we have not only the phonetic resemblance, but a kind of synecdoche where the tool is associated with the object fitted in the hole it makes.   Given the MS variants *menath, menach* and *man(n)ach, menoc* seems as justified an emendation, on phonetic and scribal grounds, as *manath.*

Fíadnise la fer menoc: "testimony with the man of pegs." How does this reading advance our understanding? Cú Chulainn's action with the hoop-shaped withe and its *ogham*-inscribed peg was designed to have a constraining effect on the future actions of his opponents.[10]   It is constraint (*lánaingces,* LU *TBC,* line 282), not restraint, since the host is not simply halted, but defied. Only by cutting, bending, and pinning a similar withe can the Connaught forces dare to advance without calling down supernatural retribution. The significance of *menoc* does then complement that of *brot;* the possibly satirical incitation symbolized by the goad is followed by the ambivalent check and challenge of the inscribed peg.

A second approach to *fíadnaise la fer menoc* may also be considered. Returning to *imchromruc* and *imscarad,* and associating *fer mbrot* with the prelude to some possible future meeting of champions, one may question whether the matching *fer menoc* may point to a stage when the outcome of the encounter has been decided.   This raises the issue of whether *ogham* inscriptions were ever used -- or thought to have been used -- as a vehicle of record. Evidence suggests that druidical learning was transmitted orally, and the *ogham* alphabet was scarcely practically suited for any lengthy text.   The examples of *ogham* that are preserved may well have had a more essential, i.e., magical, function than simply identifying the persons to whose memory the memorial stones were raised.   At best, they signal only status and say nothing of career.   Yet in *The First Battle of Mag Tured,* the poets of the Tuatha Dé Danann

stand with the sages on heights around the massed warriors in order to note and write down their exploits.[11] What kind of record would have been suggested to the story's audience, which associated the invention of *ogham* with the Tuatha Dé Danann? In the *Acallamh na Senórach*, admittedly a literary strain quite distinct from the mythological and Ulster cycles, Patrick's angels enjoin him to have Cailte's stories and accompanying ballads "written on the tabular staves of poets and in ollaves' words."[12] We cannot think that in the first case a full description nor in the second the entire tale would be so recorded. This suggests a belief -- and it may have been no more than this -- in a system of literary annotation based on markings on wooden staves or other material. It is not possible to say just how far removed this is from Cú Chulainn's *ogham* inscription on the edges of a squared wooden peg. More relevant to present considerations, could *fer menoc* also be a kenning for poet?

Whether the emphasis in *fer menoc* lay in a stimulus to action through a reference to its record or, more likely, in a challenging injunction, it seems evident that Conall is referring not to a popular story of his meeting with Cet that would live on among the lower classes, but to an exemplary account that would consciously be used by warriors, poets, and those near them to incite and compel others to action. With the textual emendation *menoc,* the passage may be recast as follows, although an original stanzaic form seems unlikely.[13]

1. "Bid menn innar n-imchromruc-ni ón," ol Conall,

2. "ocus bid menn inar n-imscarad.

3. Bid airscéla la fer mbrot,

4. bid fiadnaise la fer menoc.

5. Ar ar·cichset airg -- loman londgliaid -- na da err.

6. Eblait écht ar écht, regaid fer dar fer,

7. is'taig-seo innocht."

The entire passage is marked by alliteration, repetition, and parallel constructions and is put in the future tense, with pairs of lines providing different temporal framings. The action of line 1 will precede the fight, that of line 2 will follow it. Line 3 refers to incitations that would precede similar encounters in the future, line 4 possibly to the record of their completion. Complementing this binary linking -- temporal and causative -- is the reciprocal future action (indicated by the proclitic *imb-* and the 1st pl. poss. adj. construction *innar* + *-ni*). After the pivotal, intensifying con-

junction *ar* at the head of line 5, the coming battle is outlined. In the read-
ing proposed below, *na da err* (an objective reference by Conall to reinforce
the duality motif) is taken as subject of *ar.èiahset,* a verb of motion fol-
lowed by the acc. *airg* "difficulty" (the reading *airg* "prominent warriors"
is rejected). The doubly binary construction *loman londgliaid* "harsh fight
of (spear)staffs" is in apposition to *airg* (or is an absolute dative, "through
the harsh fight . . ."). The gen. pl. *loman* "stripped branches," hence
"(spear)staffs," may be a reference to the warriors themselves. As a heighten-
ing effect, line 6 is more specific than the foregoing and the exchange of
"violent deeds" leads to the outcome of the contest and to a shift to a sg.
verb as the victor steps across his fallen opponent. The final words bring
us back from these tension-filled, paired references to reciprocal future
action to the single, specific present: "in this house, this night." The
translation might then read:

> "That [the right to the champion's portion] will become clear
> at our meeting," said Conall, "and it will be clear at our
> parting. It will be a famous tale for the man of goads, it
> will be a testimony for the man of (incised) pegs. The two
> chariot fighters will advance to difficulty, harsh battle
> of (spear)staffs [spear-bearing warriors]. They will perform
> violent deed for violent deed, man will go over man, in this
> house tonight."

Postscript. The Book of Leinster compiler qualified the *ogham* inscrip-
tion on the peg as "barbaric" (l. 473), i.e. unintelligible to all but Fergus
and the druid. To a twelfth-century public the term was no doubt also sug-
gestive of paganism. This provides a clue to understanding a passage from
the early part of St. Bernard's *Life of St. Malachy:*

> [Malachy] was once roused by the reputation of a certain teacher
> who was famous in those studies which are called liberal, and he
> went to him desiring to learn. For he was now grasping after the
> lost opportunities of his boyhood, and was longing eagerly for such
> learning. But when he went into the house, he saw the man playing
> with an awl, and making furrows in the wall with rapid strokes, in
> some strange fashion. Shocked at this sight because it smacked of
> levity, the serious boy dashed away and was never willing even to see
> him from that time forward.[14]

If we assume that the episode as given here is Bernard's Gallic, ecclesi-
astical interpretation of a story told by Malachy's disciples at Clairvaux
or by the saint himself, the "awl" in question may have been a scriber and
the "furrows" *ogham* inscriptions. The "liberal studies" would have been tradi-
tional Irish learning and / or ritual magic. Despite the term "levity," the
significance of the scene may, in truth, have been quite serious for the fu-
ture reformer Malachy.[15]

Council of Ontario Universities

NOTES

[1] The essentials of this note figured in a longer paper on "Mediaeval
Pleasures" entitled "Intimidation and Entertainment: Martial Feats and Rhet-
oric in the Old Irish Ulster Cycle," presented at the Sixth International
Colloquium on Mediaeval Civilization held at Scarborough College in the Univ-
ersity of Toronto, January 1983. The first half of the paper, dealing with
martial feats (OIr. *cles)*, will appear in more fully documented form in *The
Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*.

[2] *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó,* ed. Rudolf Thurneysen, Mediaeval and Modern
Irish Series 8 (Dublin 1935) par. 15, lines 16-20, and n. 28, p. 27.

[3] Introduction to Old Irish (New York 1975) 107-9.

[4] "Asbert Cú Chulaind íarom fria araid ara ngresad an tan ba ráen fair
et ara molad in tan ba ráen riam og comracc fri Fer Diad," *Táin Bó Cúailnge:
Recension I,* ed. Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin 1976) lines 3082-83; trans. as
"Then Cú Chulainn asked his charioteer to urge him on when he was overcome
and to praise him when he was victorious fighting against his opponent." Not
surprisingly, Láeg starts with a series of derogatory domestic similes, whose
non-aristocratic nature was doubtless more provocative than the suggestion
that Cú Chulainn was temporarily being bested by his opponent.

[5] The Lehmanns (at n. 3) 109 cite the variant *monach* "skilled, dexterous,"
but give no source. In *Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language*
(1942-76), s. v. *menoc,* it is suggested that this may be the correct reading

in the recension of the tale found in MS Rawl. B 512.

[6] Julius Pokorny, "Miszellen. 1. Zum *Scél mucce Maicc Dathó*," *ZCP* 17 (1928) 304-5.

[7] See the description of leather armour in the "Breslech Maige Murthemne" episode of *Táin Bó Cúailnge from the Book of Leinster*, ed. C. O'Rahilly (Dublin 1967) lines 2235-38.

[8] "Dogní id n-erchomail íarom ría techt & scríbais ogum inna menoc, & focheird im úachtar in chorthe," *TBC: Recension I*, lines 225-26. For the corresponding but more exaggerated description in the LL *Táin*, see lines 456-60. This action is accompanied by Cú Chulainn allowing his horses to graze the turf down to bedrock -- a complementary injunction symbolized by a kind of scorched earth tactic? Unyoking horses was otherwise a recognized means of laying claim to land. The reason for the withe is that Cú Chulainn plans to leave his sentinel's post for an erotic tryst with the handmaiden of Feidelm Noichride, an act he later regrets. This temporary descent in status from warrior to sexual partner may be compared to the warrior's sins against the three functional modes in Indo-European mythology; see Georges Dumézil, *Heur et malheur du guerrier* (Paris 1969) 53 ff.

[9] *The Stowe Version of Táin Bó Cúailnge*, ed. Cecile O'Rahilly (Dublin 1961) lines 473, 491. For additional examples, see *Contributions* (at n. 5) s. v. *menoc*, and n. 10 *infra*.

[10] See O. Bergin, "The Magic Withe in *Táin Bó Cúailnge*," *Ériu* 9 (1921-23) 159; this interpretation has been adopted by C. O'Rahilly. In the *"Macgnímratha"* section of the *Táin*, Cú Chulainn accepts the challenge of such a withe placed over a stone, and the sons of Nechta Scéne are bound by tabu to respond (Lu *TBC*, lines 714 ff.). Note the act of bravura undertaken by Nera at Ailill's and Medb's instigation when he tries to secure a withe on the feet of a hanged corpse. The need to put a "proper peg" (*menod*, var. *menuth, taccuir*; cf. the legal term *tacra* "pleading", "disputing") through the withe, which repeatedly comes undone, suggests that *ogham* letters were needed here too: *The Adventures of Nera* [*Echtra Nerai*], ed. Kuno Meyer, *RC* 10 (1889) 214, lines 16-19. As a term, *menoc* appears reserved for this specific use, which may in part explain its substitution by *menad* and its later disappearance. Similarly, *id* may have been the semantically marked alternative to *gat* "withe, osier, halter," although the latter was used in both concrete and figurative senses. Note the resemblance of *id* to *ida(d)*, the name of the vowel *i* and also of a tree, possibly a kind of yew *(Contrib.)*, although the

branches of the equally supple bird-cherry may be preferred. Id is used as
the personal name of Conall Cernach's charioteer (Id mac Riangabra, in *Fled
Bricrend: The Feast of Bricriu,* ed. and trans. George Henderson, ITS 2 [London
1899] par. 14). Somewhat later in the *Táin* the scene with the withe and peg
is repeated on a larger scale when enemy heads are impaled on an *ogham*-in-
scribed oaken stake, again cut and thrown with one hand, intended to block
a ford against the chariots of the Connaughtmen (LU *TBC,* lines 331 ff.). For
more general considerations, see Françoise Le Roux, "Le Dieu celtique aux
liens: de l'Ogmios de Lucien à l'Ogmios de Dürer, " *Ogam* 20 (1960) 209-34; see
229 f. for a brief discussion of the withe episode of the *Táin*. Note the par-
allels in the Norse belief in a god-given alphabet and the use of runic in-
scriptions to protect burial sites against desecration -- or possibly against
the grave's ghost rising (Sven B. F. Jansson, *Runinskrifter i Sverige* [Stock-
holm 1963] 9-15), and Odin's ring (cf. the fabricated circle of the withe),
which bound some warriors while freeing others to fight. Varuṇa in Indian
mythology is also a god who binds, not in the legalistic, contractual sense
of his complement Mitra, but, like Odin, through magic; see Dumézil (at n. 8)
55, n. 1. Pins of hazel and quicken lime ("bera cuill & cairthind?) are put
by the Philistines through the napes of the necks of their opponents, the
Athenians, whom the Tuatha Dé Danann resuscitated each night, *Lebor Gabála
Érenn,* ed. R. A. Stewart Macalister, Irish Texts Society 41 (Dublin 1941) par.
321. As a last example of the symbolic fitting and fixing of pins and pegs
and the attendant (ritual) concern expressed through an attention to (tech-
nical) detail, note the appearance to Cú Chulainn of the Morrigú, the war-
goddess, disguised as a female satirist. She drives a chariot drawn by a
single one-legged horse, with the pole passing through its body and out through
its forehead, where it is fixed by a wooden wedge *(genn); Táin Bó Regamna* in
"Vier kleine Tain . . . ," ed. and trans. Ernst Windisch, *Irische Texte* 2, Ser.
II (Leipzig 1887) 242, par.2.

[11] "The First Battle of Moytura," ed. J. Fraser, *Ériu* 8 (1915) 42. Le
Roux (at n. 10) 226 f., interprets the entire scene as under the sign of Ogmios/
Ogma with the host of fighters physically bound to one another.

[12] Trans. Standish H. O'Grady in *Silva Gadelica,* 2 vols. (London and
Edinburgh 1892) I, 108; re-ed. by Whitely Stokes as "ocus scríbhthar letsa
i támlorguibh filed & i mbriathraibh ollaman, "*Acallamh na Senorach, Irische
Texte,* 4 ser. 1 (Leipzig 1900) 1. 299 f. Some appreciation of the shape of
tamlorg can be gained from the fact that they were on occasion mistaken for
swords, *Book of Armagh* 19[a]. The prophesied names of the descendants of Conn

are recorded by a druid on staves of yew; see A. Rees and B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (London 1961) 312.

[13] But compare the "short lines" of compliments which immediately precede this passage, as edited by Calvert Watkins in "Indo-European Metrics and Archaic Irish Verse," *Celtica* 6 (1963) 194-249, here 239. For the magical power of satiric verse, the opposite of these encomia, see Donald Ward, "On the Poets and Poetry of the Indo-Europeans," *The Journal of Indo-European Studies* 1 (1973) 127-44. For an amalgam of a number of the practices discussed here, consider the magically maleficent Norse *skaldstǫng* or *niðstǫng,* a pole engraved with satirical verse against a chosen victim.

[14] H. J. Lawlor, *St. Bernard of Clairvaux's Life of St. Malachy of Armagh* (London and New York 1920) 9. The key sentence reads: "Inirans vero domum, vidit virum ludentem subula, crebrisque sulcantem tractibus nescio quo notabili modo parietem," PL 182.1076.

[15] Such an interpretation implies the survival of an active, as opposed to antiquarian, knowledge of *ogham* into the twelfth century -- clearly a debatable point.