



Ó Síocháin, T.: *Caoilte sa Luath-Fhiannaíocht*. Dublin: Coiscéim. 2021. xiii + 307 pp. ISBN: 6660012210329. €20 (Hardback), €10 (Paperback).

Caoilte is one of the central members of the Fianna of Fionn mac Cumhaill but can we think of him as a coherent character with distinct personality traits? How can we account for the varying and often seemingly paradoxical depictions we find of him in different texts? Can theoretical models drawn from other disciplines help us in understanding his nature? These are some of the questions posed in this study, based on the author's PhD thesis, of Caoilte in the early Finn Cycle.

The main sources consulted are Finn Cycle texts dating from the eighth century to c. 1400 as well as other texts of that time that contain references to Fionn and his Fianna; texts and traditions belonging to the later Finn Cycle are occasionally alluded to. It is no surprise that *Agallamh na Seanórach* (AS) is a major focus given Caoilte's prominence in that work. The first chapter considers the background to the late twelfth or early thirteenth-century AS, looking at the effects of twelfth-century church reform on intellectual life in Ireland and outlining the development of the cult of Saint Patrick in the centuries preceding the writing of AS. Ó Síocháin argues that Patrick in AS resembles the Patrick of the Lives of Muirchú and Tírechán more than the Patrick of the *Confessio*, and that Patrick in AS is closer in spirit to the Old Testament than the New. Ó Síocháin rejects the idea of a simplistic binary between Patrick and characters from the pagan past, finding similarities between the saint and the mysterious Derg Corra who appears to Fionn in the tale 'Finn and the Man in the Tree'. Patrick of the Lives, Ó Síocháin concludes, emerges as a multifaceted character who is eminently suited to his role in AS of bringing past and present into harmony.

Fundamental to chapter 2 and to the premise of this book is Ó Síocháin's engagement with Dáithí Ó hÓgáin's assertion that except for Fionn, the heroes of the Fianna are not individualised to a significant degree. Ó Síocháin concedes that many of Caoilte's traits are indeed shared with other members of the Fianna and that he bears a particular resemblance to Fionn. Where Caoilte comes into his own is as one who passes between different worlds with ease: his experience with moving in and out of the Otherworld facilitates his entry into the time of Patrick in AS. Caoilte and Patrick come to mirror one another in AS: an example is the depiction of Caoilte as a protector of the Fianna, of Ireland and of the Tuatha Dé Danann, which is paralleled by Patrick's position as defender of the Christian faith. Another distinguishing feature of Caoilte is that he rarely displays the pettiness sometimes indulged in by other members of the Fianna and he is in fact subtly critical of those of their values that are contrary to Patrick's teaching. While Caoilte had a high status in the Fianna, Ó Síocháin posits that he gains

even greater distinction in AS by helping Patrick acclimatize to life in Ireland. More might have been said here of the role of Oisín in AS, which serves as an interesting comparandum, but certainly a strong case is made in this chapter for the uniqueness of Caoilte.

Chapter 3 examines Caoilte as a revenant who provides access to a forgotten past: in this role, he may appear as a sage, a poet, a judge, a witness, a mediator, a magician, a prophet and a musician. Ó Siocháin argues that the wide range of erudition displayed by Caoilte in AS represents a unified system of belief that is contrasted with Patrick's Christianity. The latter is depicted as superior but, intriguingly, the two systems of belief may occasionally merge and there even is a degree of role reversal in the actions of Caoilte and Patrick. At the end of this chapter, the discussion turns to the lay 'Caoilte's Urn' (*Duanaire Finn* §xvii) that tells the tale of a situla once owned by Caoilte. Ó Siocháin reads the ekphrastic description of the situla as corresponding to the character of Caoilte as he is in AS; this interpretation is elucidated further by reference to the 'Caldron of Poesy', a text that does not belong to the Finn Cycle but that draws on a similar metaphor, that of the cauldron, to meditate on elements of the poetic craft.

We return to the theme of the Otherworld in chapter 4 where the discussion is based on four texts: the lays 'Find and the Phantoms', 'The Headless Phantoms' (*Duanaire Finn* §xiii), 'The Lay of the Smithy' (*Duanaire Finn* §xxxvi) and a prose version of the narrative recounted in the first two of these lays. Ó Siocháin reads these texts as shamanic voyages, drawing on anthropological studies by Mircea Eliade, Guy Moréchand, Victor Turner, Arnold van Gennep and I. M. Lewis. Most of these works date to the mid-twentieth century and the work of van Gennep is even earlier so they do not represent the cutting-edge of anthropological thought and furthermore, knowing that some of these scholars have been criticised for overgeneralisation in their quest to identify human universals, one might be wary of their utility in the context of the present study. Ó Siocháin treads carefully, however: he stops short of proclaiming that Caoilte is a shaman; instead, he shows that anthropological theory can be used as a tool to explore the texts and uncover deeper meaning and coherence. He demonstrates that although Caoilte is not alone in the narratives under discussion, he is singled out and is thus distinguished from the other men of the Fianna.

Caoilte is looked at from a different angle in chapter 5 where texts in which he appears both as trickster and liberator are identified. Ó Siocháin draws on works such as Paul Radin's study of the trickster in Native American mythology (1956) and Alan Harrison's *The Irish Trickster* (1989) in examining this seemingly paradoxical combination of roles. The Finn Cycle texts discussed here include 'The Battle of the Sheaves' (*Duanaire Finn* §xxi) and 'Caoilte's Mischief-Making' (*Duanaire Finn* §vii). Other members of the Fianna such as Fionn, Diarmaid and Conán Maol also appear in the role of the trickster occasionally and Ó Siocháin concludes that trickery is a somewhat marginal aspect of Caoilte's personality but

that it is significant in that it grants him a degree of flexibility that is essential for survival in the liminal, ever-shifting world he inhabits.

In chapter 6, Ó Síocháin notes that in the Finn Cycle, speed and athleticism are linked with bravery, prowess in battle, superhuman achievements, intuition and poetic inspiration. These associations are applied to other literary characters within the Finn Cycle and elsewhere in Irish literature, but fleetness of foot is a characteristic trait of Caoilte from the earliest Finn Cycle texts to the most recent. Caoilte's speed is indeed how he carries out many of the roles associated with him: a crosser of boundaries, a rescuer, a trickster, and so on.

Chapter 7 looks more broadly at the characterisation of Caoilte in pre-Norman Finn Cycle texts. The earliest reference to Fionn is thought to be in a genealogical poem by Senchán Torpéist that may have been composed in seventh century: here, Caoilte appears beside Fionn, indicating his prominence within Fionn's warband at this early date. There is a particular focus on the Old Irish text *Scél asa mberar co mbad hé Find mac Cumaill Mongán* in which Ó Síocháin identifies traits of Caoilte and themes that also feature in AS. Some of the references to Caoilte discussed in this chapter are fragmentary or highly laconic but they hint at a widespread understanding of Caoilte as a character with distinctive traits and concerns. Caoilte is often presented as a supporter or helper in these early texts and references, mirroring his later role as aide to Patrick in AS.

The final chapter in this book looks at texts in the Book of Leinster to ascertain the Irish literati's view of the Finn Cycle and, more specifically, the portrayal of Caoilte, prior to the arrival of the Normans. Ó Síocháin finds that the Finn Cycle texts and references in this manuscript point to a well-developed tradition: he notes that the *dinnsenchas* texts are important sources for depictions of the Fianna in this manuscript. Some of the references to Caoilte in the various texts are so fleeting that speculation as to their fuller context might seem the only option but one can follow a more certain path by taking other material such as the texts analysed in chapter 7 into account; other more complete portrayals point once more to similarities with Caoilte of AS. The depiction of Caoilte and of the Finn Cycle in *Lebor na hUidre* and the Book of Glendalough is also considered but these are found to be less informative than the Book of Leinster.

Ó Síocháin concludes that the character of Caoilte can be said to show continuity in his traits and even more so in the functions that he fulfils; on the other hand, the Finn Cycle is characterised by multiformity and variety and Caoilte is no exception to this tendency. The first appendix gives a list of Finn Cycle texts and references to the Cycle in the Book of Leinster and the second one contains musings on the different meanings assigned to the name Caoilte.

Monographs in Irish on the Finn Cycle are a rarity: this is the first single-authored one to appear since Cormac Ó Cadhlaigh's *An Fhiannaidheacht* which was first published in 1936. This means that the conventions for writing about this topic in Irish are not as developed as they are for English. Dooley & Roe's

(1999) translation of AS is now the one most used in academic works, but it is slightly jarring to find it used in an Irish-language text. I suggest that it might have been more apt to use Pádraig de Barra's (1984–1986) Modern Irish version of AS, adapting it where necessary. Similarly, it is strange to find the lays of *Duanaire Finn* referred to by Eoin Mac Neill & Gerard Murphy's (1908–1953) English titles: it seems more natural, in an Irish-language book, to refer, for example, to 'The Battle of the Sheaves' as 'Cath na bPunann'. These are just minor quibbles, however. This is a well-written book and the standard of copywriting is high. Dr Ó Síocháin is to be congratulated for producing a thought-provoking study that brings the character of Caoilte to life. This is recommended reading for anyone with an interest in the Finn Cycle.

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