



Carey, J. (ed.): *Táin Bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster. Reassessments*. Dublin: Irish Texts Society. Subsidiary Series 32. 2021. 158 pp. ISBN: 978-1-9998047-8-7. Price: €21.

This volume is the thirty-second installment of the Subsidiary Series published by the Irish Texts Society, a reassessment of Cecile O’Rahilly’s *Táin bó Cúalnge from the Book of Leinster* (hereafter *TBC-LL*). O’Rahilly’s edition and translation has a peculiar publishing history, as it was first released by the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies in 1967, and then re-issued by the Irish Texts Society in 1969 (see Ó Catháin’s discussion, pp. 14–17). This volume’s publication is also peculiar in that it was not launched in-person in 2020 due to the ongoing pandemic, and the editor, John Carey, comments on these unfortunate circumstances by quoting two marginal notes from TCD MS H 2.15A (1316) in the foreword (p. xi). In spite of this, the proceedings were published as usual a year after the seminar, held in November 2019 in University College Cork, and the editor, contributors and all other people involved in the making of this book should be commended for their hard work throughout what was undoubtedly a very difficult year.

As is now expected of the well-known and respected Subsidiary Series, this volume contains five insightful articles on various aspects of O’Rahilly’s *TBC-LL*, from the life of its author and context of publication (Ó Catháin) to a discussion of modern rewritings of the tale in Irish (Ó Scoláir), and including of course an important comparative study of Recensions I and II (Dooley), a rereading of the narrative using the ending and beginning, focussed on the character of Medb (Toner), and a survey of all critical signs and notes indicating engagement with *TBC* in the Book of Leinster (Cleary).

The volume begins with Brian Ó Catháin’s ‘Cecile O’Rahilly: Editor of *Táin Bó Cúalnge*’ (pp. 1–44), which is bookended by two pictures of Cecile O’Rahilly: at the beginning, the famous photograph of her in the background behind four men at the First International Congress of Celtic Studies (Dublin, 1959), and at the end, a portrait photograph in which she looks right at the camera (and the reader of this book). Ó Catháin addresses three main points: ‘(i) Who was Cecile O’Rahilly? (ii) What was her contribution to scholarship? (iii) What position did female scholars hold historically in the field of Celtic Studies?’ (p. 2). A graduate of University College Dublin and the University of Wales (Bangor), Cecile O’Rahilly (1894–1980) taught French in Wales until she was appointed Assistant Professor at the School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, aged fifty-one years old. Ó Catháin gives a nuanced account of O’Rahilly’s career, painting the picture of an established and talented scholar who published wide-ranging studies listed in a useful appendix (pp. 41–44), though she is now mostly known for her work on *Táin Bó Cúalnge*. There are countless nuggets of information which will

jump out to a reader unfamiliar with O’Rahilly’s life and career; for example, the lost manuscript of her study of the development of *TBC* (p. 10). Ó Catháin’s discussion of academic relationships in the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (and further afield) during O’Rahilly’s career are insightful. Importantly, he notes that ‘she was the first female scholar to be appointed to a permanent supervisory academic position at the School of Celtic Studies’ (p. 5), and ten years later, in 1956, she was promoted to the grade of Professor, ‘the only female scholar to date to achieve this rank at the School of Celtic Studies’ (p. 8)! One can only hope that this statement will not hold true for much longer. Ó Catháin’s article is an informative and well-researched piece of work about one of the most important scholars of the twentieth century. The long footnotes, which refer to various archival documents and give important additional details, effectively increase one’s interest in Cecile O’Rahilly’s life and that of her contemporaries, and one is left with substantial further reading about other women and Celticists in the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries (pp. 38–39).<sup>1</sup>

In ‘A Hero for Our Time: *Táin* Recensions I and II Reconsidered’ (pp. 45–68), Ann Dooley begins her reflection with the idea of the construction of a hero in Recensions I and II of *TBC*, asking ‘if that hero is in each case largely the creation of an elite collective such as a monastic centre and its patrons, how does that idea of the textual hero disperse and mutate textually? Why the need for new *Táins*?’ (p. 47). Dooley’s analysis rests on the argument of classical influence on the text. She focusses on two episodes, namely the rising of the waters and the fight with Fer Diad, which are compared in Recension I (cited from O’Rahilly’s 1976 edition) and Recension II (*TBC-LL*). In the case of the fight with Fer Diad, which is missing from *Lebor na hUidre*, Dooley uses mainly the Yellow Book of Lecan (YBL) text, but it is unfortunate that the manuscript is cited using the facsimile page numbers rather than the system of columnation in the manuscript, which is more commonly used (YBL p. 39 is col. 618; Irish Script on Screen follows the column numbers). Dooley’s analysis of the style of both Recensions is precise, with many quotes from both texts to illustrate her arguments, though some short citations are not translated and the reader may need to refer to O’Rahilly’s translations (e.g. pp. 52, 56, 59). Nevertheless, Dooley’s detailed comparison of Recensions I and II will be useful both for scholars of *TBC* itself and for those interested in the processes of textual adaptation and rewriting in medieval Ireland. Dooley concludes her article by returning to the ‘imagined cultural community’ of *TBC-LL* (p. 64). She acknowledges recent gender and queer studies of Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn’s relationship, but prefers to read *TBC-LL* in the ‘contemporary European context of chivalry of the second half of the twelfth century’ (p. 65), pointing out evidence for brotherhoods outside of Ireland. She thus sees *TBC-LL*, and Fer Diad and Cú Chulainn’s relationship, as belonging to the ‘realm of angry

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1 We can now add to this list the recent contribution by Eoin Mac Cárthaigh (2023).

men who feel betrayed and trapped by what their culture forces them to call their nature' (p. 68).

The second literary analysis of *TBC-LL* in this volume is Greg Toner's 'Reading the *Táin* from Back to Front' (pp. 69–90), which he begins by stating that 'every literary investigation is a retelling of a story and a reordering of its elements with the aim of creating a new way of reading it' (p. 69). This is what the redactor of *TBC-LL* did in his rewriting of the ending and the beginning of the text, and Toner sets out to analyse the ending and the beginning in this order. In his analysis, Toner compares some passages to Recension I of *TBC* and focusses on the character of Medb. He argues that Medb's capacity as a leader is undermined by her portrayal in the ending of *TBC-LL*, in which her menstruation is presented as incompatible with warfare and Fergus famously criticises her as an ill-advised leader. As for the beginning of the tale, Toner shows that it sets the tone and themes for the rest of the narrative, to which the ending responds. For example, the brown bull rejects Medb on account of her femininity, a foreshadowing of the ending of the tale. Toner analyses the pillow-talk as an episode with strong legal subtext, namely the enacting of contracts and the equality of king and queen. He argues that Medb's proposal to Dáire to acquire the brown bull is a ruse in which she foresees that Dáire will breach the contract they made, and thus open the road for a cattle-raid in which Ailill has to be involved. Thus, Toner shows that the redactor of *TBC-LL* was fully aware of the importance of the beginning and ending of the narrative as key structural moments in the text to transmit his ideas, and his analysis complements Dooley's comparison of Recensions I and II. Toner leaves the reader with the mirrored and contrasted image of the privacy of Medb and Ailill's bedroom at the start of *TBC-LL*, and the very public hill of Crúachu from which the men of Ireland observe the destructive fight between the two bulls at the end.

Christina Cleary's 'Critical Notes and Signs in the Book of Leinster *Táin Bó Cúailnge*' (pp. 90–121) is a comprehensive and detailed survey of critical signs, defined as 'symbols that highlight passages in the text and sometimes accompany emendations, additions and marginal notes', in the Book of Leinster version of *TBC* (p. 90). Her article is helpfully organised under headings, from 1.1 to 1.15 focussing on deletions, corrections and additions, from 2.1 to 2.4 on critical signs, and from 3.1 to 3.4 on glosses. Two appendices (pp. 120–1) include images of the *phi*-sign (discussed in 2.1 and 2.2) and the paragraph mark (discussed in 2.3 and 2.4) in the Book of Leinster and other manuscripts, but readers will get the best out of this article if they refer to the manuscript (available on Irish Script on Screen) throughout. The minute recording of all these signs evidences the amount of work that Cleary put in this research, which is also obvious from the consistent (and extremely useful) referencing of the manuscript page, line in the diplomatic edition of the manuscript and line in O'Rahilly's edition for all marks and signs mentioned. This detailed catalogue may thus not read as easily as the other contributions in this volume, but there is no doubt that it will become a work of reference in the field

of Irish palaeography and in the study of medieval Irish texts in their manuscript context. Indeed, Cleary's conclusions offer grounds for further research, as she states that these signs were part of an 'inventory that was used by the Irish scribal community' in pre- and post-Norman times, and that 'there is consistency within a single manuscript and, in the case of the *phi*-symbol, across several manuscripts' (p. 119). Cleary's contribution takes a significant step forward in our understanding of the textual history of *TBC*, and indeed of Irish palaeography, and it is hoped that more studies of the kind will come to light in the near future.

The final contribution in this volume is Darach Ó Scolaí's 'The *Táin*: From Old Irish to Modern Irish' (pp. 122–136). As author – or, as he calls himself, scribe – of a modern Irish rendition of *TBC*, Ó Scolaí brings a fresh and different outlook to this collection. His discussion allows the reader to see *TBC* through the eyes of a writer, and indeed, a re-writer or a scribe, and thus echoes Dooley and Toner's discussions of the medieval redactors and scribes involved in changing *TBC*: 'why a new rendering?' (Ó Scolaí, p. 124), 'Why the need for new *Táins*?' (Dooley, p. 47). Ó Scolaí provides his rationale for his 2018 *TBC* while also discussing previously published modern Irish renditions of the same by Ó Cathasaigh (extracts, *Ar Aghaidh*, 1930–40s), Ó Cadhlaigh (*An Rúraíocht*, 1956) and Ó Loinsigh (*An Táin*, 1980). Ó Scolaí's process is incredibly interesting, as he defines himself as a scribe 'searching for the familiar that links the past to the present and seeks to re-invigorate present-day culture with his furtherings' (p. 126). Though he explicitly says that his attempt had an artistic aim, that of a writer rather than a scholar, his words echo Máire Herbert's famous statement that 'the public of early narrative did not seek to discover the unique worldview of a particular author, but rather, sought recognition of familiar codes and conventions shared from one work to another' (Herbert 1989: 75). As such, Ó Scolaí shows that the art of re-writing follows similar patterns today to those in medieval times, and thus restores the broken link in the textual tradition of *TBC* (p. 123). His description of his re-writing includes discussions of his use of Recensions I and II and presents a reader accustomed to scholarly discussions of *TBC* with new ways of thinking about this text as literature, as a lively and dramatic narrative, 'a great read' (p. 135). His conclusion is worth quoting and bearing in mind: 'I believe the most fruitful approach to this piece of art is to examine it on its own merits, on its own inner notes and rhythms' (p. 136).

These reassessments of *TBC-LL* are thus timely and fascinating. The book is wide-ranging in scope, and each contributor presents the reader with a different way of seeing *TBC*.

## List of References

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*Nina Cnockaert-Guillou*  
*Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies*