

Kirja-arvosteluja – Book reviews

A Lost Book and a Discovered Origin

John Carey: *Ireland and the Grail*. Celtic Studies Publications XI. Aberystwyth: Ox-bow Books 2007. 419 pages. Price £19.95; \$29.95. ISBN 13-978-1-891271-15-1.

Few medieval symbols have been as enduring and enigmatic as the Holy Grail. As a shadowy, mystical object it has inspired Western civilization for the past 800 years, and judging by modern popular interpretations of it (I am thinking here, of course, of Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and the subsequent movie adaptation and marketing blitz that has followed), the Grail's power to grip our collective imagination is as strong as ever.

Dan Brown's bogus theories aside, scholarship surrounding the provenance of the Grail has generally fallen into two camps: those who favour a Celtic origin of the object, and those who favour a Christian, ecclesiastical origin. Many scholars from the Celticist point of view have thrown up their hands in despair at ever untangling the vast, labyrinthine corpus of early Celtic literature to find the kernel(s) of the Grail legend underneath. Many others favouring a Celtic origin for the Grail have simply been unable to mine this literature for Grail bits because

they had insufficient knowledge of Old Irish or Middle Welsh.

Enter John Carey's *Ireland and the Grail*. The author makes the first sober, academic argument for a Celtic provenance for the Grail in decades. He is correct in his introduction when he says that he is the first scholar with the requisite linguistic skills to exhaustively analyze all of the relevant pieces of Celtic literature (Welsh and Irish) in their original languages. And he reminds us, perhaps not explicitly, but certainly implicitly, that the Grail is a literary creation, invented by Chrétien de Troyes at the close of the twelfth century. Its origin need not be sought in ancient, hidden bloodlines or in secretive medieval orders of knights. Chrétien's interest was, above all, literary, and it is in literary ground that scholars must dig to find the Grail's roots.

Carey begins with Chrétien's *Le Conte del Graal*, and works backward and westward, examining how aspects of Chrétien's Grail scene can be traced to earlier Irish originals, often through intermediary texts in Welsh. He breaks down the central elements (severed heads, bleeding lances, disastrous raids on the otherworld, etc.) and central characters (virgin guardians, mute knights, kings wounded in the groin) in Chrétien and some other early Grail texts to show the characters and elements which were present

previous to the twelfth century in an extant Celtic story.

Carey's central premise is that nearly all of the main Grail elements and characters can be ultimately followed back to an eighth-century lost Irish manuscript known as *Cín Dromma Snechtai*, 'the little book of the snowy ridge,' which took its name from the monastery in which it was produced, the monastery of Druimm Snechtai, or Drumsnat in modern-day County Monaghan. Though lost, the book's contents were often copied (we have no way of knowing exactly how faithfully) into manuscripts that do survive, and many of these manuscripts contain statements that their contents were copied from this lost tome. So it is possible to reconstruct a large portion of the contents of *Cín Dromma Snechtai*. Based on linguistic evidence and mentions in other texts, scholars have determined that this manuscript was produced no later than the eighth century – early enough for its contents to have made their way to Wales and to have inspired certain portions of the Middle Welsh Four Branches of the *Mabinogi* and various cryptic Middle Welsh poems scattered throughout medieval manuscripts. And certainly early enough to have inspired twelfth-century French troubadours, who learned these tales or adaptations of them through contacts with Welshmen.

Whether the reader ultimately agrees or disagrees with Carey is immaterial to the book's value. The paperback, priced at just under £20 and just under \$30, is the first to bring together a wide range of disparate, often difficult to find sources. Additionally, many of these primary texts are impenetrable or unlocatable to the non-specialist. For instance, Celtic scholars from the wes-

tern side of the Irish sea can easily obtain good translations and editions of most of the Druimm Snechtai texts, but might not know where to find the best editions and translations of the obscure poems (*Golycha-fi Gulwyd* and *Preiddeu Annwn*, for example) that Carey translates from the Book of Taliesin. Similarly, Welsh Celtic scholars would have no problem with the Taliesin material, but might not know exactly where to find translations of obscure Irish tales such as the Mongán stories. And both may be lost in locating good versions of, say, the three redactions of the anonymous First Continuation of Chrétien's poem. French scholars, of course, may find themselves completely lost when it comes to most of the Celtic material. *Ireland and the Grail's* footnotes and bibliography can direct scholars from any background – as well as the lay reader – to the best works currently available.

Literary analysis aside, the question arises of exactly how these eighth-century Irish stories made their way from Ulster to Wales and then on to France. In general, the answer is simple: all medieval scholars know of the propensity of Irish monks to cross to Britain and then to wander the Continent, especially during the Viking era (ninth and tenth centuries). It would have been simple enough for the author to assign the transmission of the *Cín Dromma Snechtai* tales to this milieu as such a process is easily imaginable. However, he goes one step further: he identifies the man responsible for bringing certain portions of the contents of the Book of Druimm Snechtai and the Welsh materials dependent on it to southern France in the early to mid twelfth century (see chapter 17, 'The Wanderings of Bleddri'). Carey himself states that

this identification is tentative; nonetheless, his attempt to affix a specific ‘who, when, where, how and why’ to the transmission of the material is admirable.

The one criticism of *Ireland and the Grail*—already acknowledged by the author—is the obvious one: we do not have *Cín Dromma Snechtai*. This eighth-century manuscript has been lost for centuries, and is likely to remain lost. The exact extent of its contents must by definition remain unknown.

How, then, is Carey to hold firm in the face of scholarly criticism when he says that this ‘imagined book’ inspired one of the most enduring and powerful symbols of the Western world? The answer is that enough of *The Book of Druimm Snechtai*’s contents are known to justify an analysis of how its tales, characters and elements may have given birth to the Grail legend. It would be foolish to say that Dr Carey has answered, once and for all, the question of the Grail’s origins. But certainly he has elucidated, for the first time in one book, the best possible argument for a Celtic provenance for this mysterious object.

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Subterfuge and Evasion in the Irish Folklore Commission?

Mícheál Briody: *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970: History, Ideology, Methodology*. Helsinki: Studia Fennica Folkloristica 2007. 535 pages. Price €32. ISBN 978-951-746-947-0.

It is interesting to note that the Finnish Literature Society, publishers of Mícheál Briody’s capacious *The Irish Folklore Commission 1935-1970* have been publishing a since before the establishment of the Irish Folklore Commission itself. The author must be congratulated as well as the Society and the forerunners of the discipline of folklore and ethnology in Europe. This weighty book is a milestone in the history of folklore, comprising of over five hundred pages in total it is a veritable handbook of the Irish folklore commission. The table of contents itself amounts to some six pages. The Irish Folklore Commission gathered together what the renowned director, Séamus Ó Duilearga or James Hamilton Delargy, liked to boast was ‘one of the largest folklore collections in the world.’ The Finnish Literature Society might have reason to dispute this as they can also lay claim to having ‘the largest folklore archive in the world’ (20). Apart from the rhetorical echoes the Commission is a national treasure in many ways. Briody’s book is a monument to a very human ethnographic endeavour that will itself forever commemorate the collaboration between Scandinavia and Ireland. The Commission’s folklore archive emerges out of the chill shadow of war and death that fell across Europe. It stands as

testament to the triumph of intelligence and humanity over horror and brutality.

There is a stunning amount of detail in this book and the expert navigation across a vast sea of information is admirable. Briody's comment that historians are not aware of the work of the Commission is worth re-iterating. The lifetime of the Commission, 1935-1970, and we are continually reminded of this, comprises the first chapter on 'Modern Ireland' (22) in twentieth-century historiography. Of course this is not an absolute or universal truth at all just an argument. It is always curious to observe how the old and the new hold centre stage at the same time like two characters in a Beckett play. If the archive is reflective of the ethnographic realities of Ireland in the early twentieth century, and we all agree that this is, more or less, the case, then this lack of knowledge is not merely a lacuna in the history but a black hole. It is not just historians who have lost sight of what is a source, a resource and a rationale all rolled into one.

Drawing heavily on government files deposited in the National Archives, this book will hopefully be a starting point for those who have never considered the ethnological perspective. It may not be the final word, the author had no access to the files of the Irish Folklore Commission nor to the papers of the director Séamus Ó Duilearga, of whom a new book *The Formation of a Folklorist* has been published this year by Séamas Ó Catháin. Correspondence of some of the staff of the commission and various papers left by academics provide much of the extremely minute detail. The field of official discourse, institutional record or state ethnography comes to mind. The irony of a government

that simultaneously collects folklore while it bans old practices is not lost on the author. The Public Dance Hall Act of 1935 made dancing at crossroads illegal (53). Both Emyr Estyn Evans and Séamus Ó Duilearga agreed that Ireland 'was a veritable storehouse of ancient survivals' (68). This is a profoundly nineteenth-century antiquarian view of folklore and it is something of a survival itself. Carl Wilhelm von Sydow claimed that some of the Irish stories 'go back before the birth of Christ' (88). There is much to debate in this work and the fact the Head of the Commission was reluctant to speak Irish to his students in UCD seems strange to say the least. He does, however, seem to have been a font of ideas recommending gramophone or film recordings. The most controversial aspect of the work will be the revelation of the management style of Ó Duilearga. It appears that there was an excessive degree of control exercised over the staff and the archive alike. Briody speaks of 'subterfuge and evasion' and the fact that the archivist could not openly refer to material from the archive in his publications is baffling and in some ways disappointing to learn.

It cannot be ignored that the official state ideology in early twentieth century is inherently ambivalent. This can be sensed to a certain degree from the work of the commission itself although not too much is made of it here. The reception of the collectors varied somewhat (i) some collectors were suspected of being spies (ii) some were refused information (iii) some were welcomed (iv) most were treated with affection (v) Michael J. Murphy was known in the Mourne mountains as 'the Man Who Was Following the Fairies'. In this there are surely some impli-

cations for the popular interpretation of the work of the commission. The part-time collector Pádraig Ó Milléadha for example was also a poet and he gives an insightful treatment of folklore from an inside perspective. That the work was arduous and demanding is underlined by the fact that one collector, Tadhg Ó Murchú, shared his informants bed for a night (239). Seán Ó hEochaidh married the daughter of one of his informants.

Many will be interested in the section on one of the foremost Irish folklorists and ethnologists Caoimhín Ó Danachair. He was perhaps the most prolific of the commission's staff and was the author of numerous popular and informative books on folklore. The suggestion that his scholarship suffered from this popular style of writing is a matter for debate. It could be argued that folklore was greatly popularised by Ó Danachair over the years. To mark this fact, and the fact he had an advisory role in the introduction of the subject there, *Roinn an Bhéaloidis: the Department of Folklore and Ethnology* in University College Cork began an annual

public lecture in 2006 in his honour. More significantly perhaps Henry Glassie acknowledges the influence of Ó Danachair on his own work. If historians or anthropologists or Irish language scholars are unaware of the Commission it was certainly not a fault of Ó Danachair. Folklore needs to be more interesting, to contribute more to the ongoing broader intellectual discourses. Finally, it is curious how the history of the Commission almost becomes a history of technology, for so long understood as folklore's adversary. Changing from ediphone to gramophone, switching around 1954 to Vortexion tape recorder, minifon recorder in 1957 and Philips tape recorder in 1960. Is it not ironic that as technology improved folklore was understood to be gone? Yet the archive stands in its permanent silent eloquence, memory before the byte.

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