

Séamus Mac Mathona, 'Paganism and Society in Early Ireland', in *Irish Writers and Religion*, ed. Robert Welch (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe 1992), pp.1-14.

In Memory of Heinrich Wagner

It came to pass in that year that on the same night as the Holy Patrick was celebrating Easter, there was an idolatrous ceremony which the gentiles were accustomed to celebrate with manifold incantations and magical contrivances and with other idolatrous superstitions, when the kings, satraps, chieftains, princes and great ones of the people had assembled, and when the druids, singers, prophets, and the inventors and practitioners of every art and of every gift had been summoned to Loigaire, as once to king Nabcodonossor, at Tara, their Babylon. [1]

By the time that Muirchú wrote these words in his seventh century life of Saint Patrick, the druid had been ousted from his position of power in society by the cleric and the Church had defeated organised paganism. The Church's triumph is celebrated in a number of religious works of the eighth and ninth centuries. In *Fiacc's Hymn*, which was composed c.800 A.D., a summary account is given of Patrick's life. As a result of his mission, the old pagan sites of Emain Macha and Tara are desolate, while Armagh and Downpatrick flourish; the true Godhead has replaced the pagan idols and life has triumphed over iniquitous heathendom. [2] The same sentiments are expressed in the *Féilire Oengusso*, 'the Calendar of Oengus', which was written at about the same time. The great heroes of the past are recalled, only to be rejected in favour of Patrick, Brigit, Ciarán and other saints of the Christian church. 'The situation could not be clearer', says David Greene; 'it is to substitute a set of Christian heroes for the pagan ones, to form an Irish literature which will be exclusively Christian in subject.' [3]

Fiacc's Hymn is prefaced by a short prose passage which relates that, during the reign of Loígaire at Tara, Patrick visited the chief-poet of Ireland, Dubthach maccu Lugair, in order to seek a candidate for the bishopric of Leinster. According to other sources, Dubthach was an early convert to Christianity, and the story which they tell of his acceptance of Saint Patrick seems to be a myth which was propounded in order to explain the accommodation which was reached between the Church and the native learned classes of *filid* 'poets' and *brithemain* 'lawyers'. [4] In contrast to the druids and seers, who rejected Patrick and who are enemies of the Church, the poets and lawyers accepted him and have clerical approval.

The accommodation which was reached between the intelligentsia of the native oral tradition and the clerical *literati* was one of unusual sensitivity and mutual sympathetic understanding. Indeed, it has been suggested recently that, long before the surviving texts of the Old Irish period were written, these two streams had merged to form 'a single mandarin caste'. [5] As far as written literature is concerned, this suggestion seems to be well-founded: Old Irish literature is the product of monastic scriptoria and it was written by Christian authors and scribes. While it is proper, therefore, to reaffirm the influence of Christian Latin ecclesiastical culture, it must also be emphasised that it is not a univocal literature, and that, in general, it represents a compromise between the Christian and native traditions. The Christian authors and scribes are clearly in tune with the traditions of secular society; they are creatures of their own environment, [6] reflecting in their writings the realities and tensions of contemporary society. Moreover, it is certain that an oral culture of prestige continued to flourish alongside the written literature of the monasteries. [7]

Church documentation indicates that, in the sixth century, Christians were believers in the midst of pagan practices. *Fiacc's Hymn* makes the important observation that before Patrick's mission these customs included the worship of the *síde*:

*For túaith Hérenn báí temel; túatha adortais síde:
ní creitset in firdeacht inns Trindóte fíre*

On the folk of Ireland there was darkness; the people used to worship the *síde*: they did not believe the true Godhead of the true Trinity. [8]

These lines support the view that *síd*-religion was the essential form of grassroots paganism. The *síde*, or the *áes síde*, ‘the people of the *síd*’, were the gods and spirits of Ireland. A man of the *síd* is called a *fer síde*, a woman of the *síd*, a *ben síde*—the banshee of folk belief who keens the dead. *Síd* (which is cognate with Latin *sedes* ‘seat’), is the word for the dwelling place of these supernatural beings. [9] They live in different places—in heights and in mounds, in caverns, on islands in the sea, and under lakes. They are also called the Túatha Dé Danann, ‘the tribes of the goddess Danu’, and they have their own place in the pseudo-historical traditions of early Ireland.

According to these traditions, having spent a period of time in the northern islands of the world learning the arts of druidry and magic, they invaded Ireland in dark clouds, doing battle in the first instance with the Fir Bolg, and later with the Fomoiré. Eventually, they were themselves defeated by the Sons of Míl (the Gaels) at the Battle of Tailtiu, and the country was divided into two halves—an upper half and a lower one. The Túatha Dé Danann were assigned to the half below the earth’s surface, and the Dagda, their chief-god, distributed the fairy mounds among their leaders. The Dagda is a *día talman*, ‘a god of the earth’, and the *síde* in general are referred to in the *Book of Armagh* as ‘gods in the earth’ (*side aut deorum terrenorum*).

It is appropriate that they should be known as earth gods, for they are spirits of growth and fertility—gods of agriculture. This conclusion emerges from a study of early literary sources and of modern folk belief. After their defeat at the Battle of Tailtiu, they destroyed the wheat and milk of their conquerors, the Sons of Míl. They were still in possession of the secrets of agriculture, however, and it was not until a treaty was concluded with the Dagda that the Sons of Míl were able to harvest their corn and milk their cows. The *síde* had then to be propitiated with sacrifices of various kinds in order to ensure continued health and welfare. Modern fairy belief, for example, entailed the custom of pouring libations of milk for the fairies and of making offerings of food to them. The *Dindshenchas of Mag Slecht* gives the following account of ritual sacrifice in pagan times:

It was there that the king idol of Ireland was, namely the Crom Cróich, and round him twelve idols made of stone; but he was of gold. Until Patrick’s arrival, he was the god of every people who colonized Ireland. To him they used to offer the firstlings of every issue and the chief scions of every class. It is to him that the king of Ireland, Tigernmas, son of Follach, went at Samain (Hallowe’en), together with the men and women of Ireland, in order to adore him. And they all prostrated themselves before him ... and three-quarters of the men of Ireland perished at these prostrations; whence Mag S16cht ‘Plain of Prostrations’.
[11]

The metrical version of this prose text also says that ‘worship was paid to stones till the coming of noble Patrick to Armagh’. Stones were venerated and were believed to contain supernatural powers. The *Lia Fail* is the classic example of this: it was the magic stone which was brought to Ireland by the Túatha Dé Danann. As the inauguration stone of Tara, it screamed when the rightful king sat on it. Supernatural spirits were also contained in other things. Weapons, for example, had unseen powers. In *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Cú Chulainn’s earthly father, Sualtaim, perished by his own sword because he had spoken before the druid. [12]

Since pagan Irish religion was animistic in nature, it is not surprising to find that there were strong cults of sacred animals, and of rivers, lakes and wells. These latter were deemed to be either gods or goddesses, or to contain a sacred presence. The Boyne river (*Boand* in Irish), for

example, is derivable from *bou-vindá*, which means ‘cow-white (goddess)’. Boand plays an important role in mythological tales. She is the mate of Nechtan, (or Nuadu Necht), who is identical with the fisher god Nodens of early Britain. Nechtan may also be compared with the Roman water-god Neptunus. As Mircea Eliade has pointed out, cults of rivers, lakes and wells are based ultimately on the sacredness of water. Water gives life and strength; it aids fertility, it purifies, it cures illness, and it continually renews itself. [13] Little wonder that it was considered to be the manifestation of the sacred. Here is an example from the *Vita Tripartite*, ‘the Tripartite Life (of Saint Patrick)’:

Patrick went to the well of Findmag. Slán is its name. They told Patrick that the heathen honoured the well as if it were a god ... the magi, i.e., the wizards and druids used to reverence the well Sian and offer gifts to it as if it were a god. [14]

Another well—that of Segais—was the source of all wisdom and occult knowledge. It was located in the otherworld, and ‘around it were hazel-trees, the fruit of which dropped into the well and caused bubbles of mystic inspiration’ (*na bolcca immais*) to form on streams which issued from the well. The nuts of the trees passed into the river Boyne, and those who drank the *imbas* from them became accomplished poets. [15] Cults of holy wells were so strong that they were carried over into Christian times, with many of the ancient pagan rites associated with them intact. [16]

In circumstances in which the forces of life have to be propitiated and kept under control, the magician and soothsayer play a central role, for it is they who are capable of communicating with the gods and spirits by means of spell, rite, charm and incantation. In early Ireland, magico-religious beliefs and practices permeated every aspect of individual, social and political life.

Organised paganism had its caste of established holy men—the druids of pre-Christian Ireland. Originally they had a high status, comparable to that of their counterparts in Gaul and Britain. Julius Caesar remarks that the whole Gaulish people were much given to religious matters (*patio est omnis Gallorum admodum dedita religionibus*), [17] a comment which echoes that of Livius who says that they were not a *negligens gens* in this regard. [18] According to Caesar, the druids were the sacerdotal class who officiated at sacrifices, made prophecies, enforced legal decisions and conducted the system of education. References to the druids in Irish sagas and saints’ lives suggest that the same was true of pagan Ireland. ‘The druid (Old Irish *druí*) was priest, prophet, astrologer, and teacher of the sons of nobles. According to the sixth century First Synod of Saint Patrick oaths were sworn in his presence. [19] With the advance of Christianity, however, he lost a number of his functions, and by the time the law-texts were written, he is more akin to a sorcerer or witch-doctor than to a priest of an organised religious institution. Nevertheless, he was sufficiently prominent to be included in the list of *dhernemid* (dependent privileged class) in *Uraicecht Becc*, a law-text dealing with rank in early Irish society . [20]

Rank was crucial in society. In a classic statement on the distinguishing characteristics of early and modern Irish society, D. A. Binchy defined the early period as ‘tribal, rural, hierarchical, and familiar (using this word in its oldest sense to mean a society in which the family, not the individual, is the unit)—a complete contrast to the unitary, urbanized, egalitarian and individualist society of our time’. [21] While this definition is not beyond controversy—there are problems with the interpretation of the term ‘tribal’ and the assumed egalitarian nature of modern society may be more a wish than a reality—the statement nonetheless highlights in fairly accurate and succinct wording the central differences between the two types of society.

The *túath* (pl. *túatha*), petty kingdom, was the basic political and territorial unit: it designates both the people and the territory ruled by a king (*rí*). According to F. J. Byrne, there were about 150 *túatha* in the country at any given time between the fifth and the twelfth centuries. [22] It is stated in one law-text that no *tuath* was properly constituted unless it had an ecclesiastical scholar, a cleric, a poet and a king. [23] Society was tribal in that the king of the tuath (*rí túaithe*) was the ‘true’ king, and that people, with the exception of the learned classes, had no legal standing outside their own *túath*; it was not tribal in the sense that this infers distinct religious and cultural differences between *túatha*. As regards the hierarchical or stratified nature of society, it was divided into three classes corresponding roughly to king, lords and commons—in Irish, *rí*, *flatha* and *bó-airig*. This tripartite division is found in other Indo-European societies. It corresponds to Caesar’s division of Gaulish society into *druides*, *equites* and *plebs*, and to the Indian classification into *brahmans* (priests), *ksatriyas* (warriors) and *vaishyas* (farmers). Classical accounts of Gaulish society, most of which are based on that of the Stoic ethnographer Posidonius of Apamea, make a further tripartite division of the learned classes into *Vates* (seers/poets), *bardoi* (bards) and *druides* (druids). *Vates* corresponds etymologically to Ir. *fáith* (pl. *fátha*), *bardoi* to Ir. *bard* (pl. *baird*), and *druides* to Ir. *druí* (pl. *druíd*). By the time the Old Irish laws were written, the *fili* (pl. *filid*) ‘poet, seer’, is the dominant member of the learned classes, having taken over many of the functions of the others.

The law-texts of the seventh and eighth centuries which deal with rank in society distinguish between those people who are nemed ‘privileged’ and those who are not nemed, and between those who are *slier* ‘free’ and those who are *doer* ‘unfree’. The basic meaning of the word *nemed* is ‘sacred, holy’, and it is cognate with the Gaulish word *nemeton* which is used of sacred places. As Fergus Kelly says, this suggests ‘that the privileges of rank were originally sustained by religious feeling as well as respect for wealth and power’ . [24] The main categories of *nemed* were kings, lords, clerics, and poets (*filid*).

One of the main functions of the *filid* was to praise and to satirise. They also had the power of prophecy, and they were originally the guardians of the traditions (*senchas*) of the *túath*. They derived their status from the pagan practices of *imbas forosna*, ‘encompassing knowledge which illuminates’, *teinm láeda*, ‘breaking of marrow(?)’ and *díchetal di chennaib*, ‘chanting from heads’. According to the account of the ninth century bishop-king Cormac mac Cuilennáin, St. Patrick banned the first two of these customs because of their pagan associations . [25]

The *filid* worked for the status quo, for the maintenance of their own status and that of the king. They protected the king against sorcery and they were tightly bound to him in a form of mutual obligation and support. The Irish word for king, *rí*, is cognate with Sanscrit *raj*, Latin *rex*, Gaulish *rīx*. The king was a sacred personage, capable of tracing his descent to an ancestral deity. Many of the founders of early Irish dynasties—such as Conn, Lug and Nuada—are euhemerised divinities. The right of the king to rule—to stretch, extend, protect (cf. Old Irish *rigid*, the verb with which the root noun ‘*reg-s* king’ is associated) depended on *fír flaithemon*, ‘prince’s justice (or truth)’ . [26] *Fír flaithemon* encompasses the concepts of cosmic and ethical truth and justice. The cosmic order, and consequently the well-being of his kingdom, depended on the king’s justice. He was the representative of the gods on earth, a *dia talmaide* ‘an earthly god’. The opposite of *fír flaithemon* is *gáu (gó) flaithemon*, ‘prince’s injustice (or falsehood)’; it causes severe hardship and disadvantage for the king and his *tóath*; it leads to the overthrow of the king, and often to his death.

Few themes are as pervasive in Irish literature and mythology as that pertaining to kingship and to the relationship of the king with the forces of the otherworld. It is in those texts containing the

theme that we approach an understanding of the religiously sacred nature of Irish political institutions. One of the most important works on the subject is the *Audacht Morainn*, ‘the Testament of Morann’, a wisdom-text dating from the late seventh century. [27] According to this text, the king’s justice brings about fertility of man, woman, beast, land, and river. The weather is good and the king’s reign prosperous; his injustice, on the other hand, produces the opposite effects.

This theme, along with the allied one of the *hieras gamos*, the symbolic mating of the king with the Earth goddess, echoes down the centuries—from the ideal kingship of Cormac mac Airt, during whose reign Ireland is reputed to have become a land of promise, to the Jacobite poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which view Ireland as a wasteland in consequence of her rightful spouse being overseas. The ceremony which marks the inauguration of the king is a religious fertility rite: he ‘sleeps with’ or ‘marries’ (Ir. *feis*, *ban-feis*) the Earth goddess. The most celebrated of these rites in early Ireland were associated with the royal sites of Tara, Cnuachu and Emain Macha.

Many texts of the early Irish period demonstrate that the cosmos was viewed as an interlocking system of relationships in which animate and inanimate matter were merged together in mutual sympathy and support. This delicately balanced universe was held together by the proper functioning of its respective parts, and the king, who more than anyone else embodied the hidden forces of nature on account of his kinship with the gods, was the one who was accepted by the community to ensure that things were kept ‘in proper order’. He did this through the exercise of his *fír flaithemon*, by adhering strictly to its principles. Irish kingship is similar in this respect to kingship in many primitive societies, and Heinrich Wagner has demonstrated that *fír flaithemon* bears remarkable resemblances to Vedic *Rta*, ‘cosmic and ethical truth’, and to Egyptian *Ma-a-t*, the goddess of cosmic and ethical truth. [28]

Kings and heroes were hedged about with taboos: these are prohibitions of a religious nature, called *geisi* (sg. *geis*), which forbid the performance of certain acts. The basis of taboo is to insulate the sacred personage against the malign forces of the otherworld and to ensure that he maintains harmony between the two worlds. The druids and seers, who acted as intermediaries between the natural and supernatural realms, were capable of divining what was favourable and unfavourable for the king to do. If he broke his taboos, whether wittingly or unwittingly, it led to disaster and probable doom.

The breaking of taboos is the subject of the tragic story of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, ‘The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel’. The tragedy is set against the background of a Golden Age of peace and plenty in the mythical past when the young hero-king, Conaire Mór mac Etarscélae, ruled at Tara. Faced with the dilemma of choice between the love of his foster-brothers who had begun thieving in the land and his duty as a king of cosmic and ethical truth, Conaire fails to act swiftly and justly with the effect that he violates one of his taboos. This starts a chain of events over which he has no control and which leads to the breaking of his other taboos and to his death in Da Derga’s hostel.

The saga of Conaire Mór presents us with an example of the myth of the semi-divine hero—his conception, birth, life and death. In treating of the relationship between man and the gods, myth embodies the essence of religion and reflects the ideology of a given culture. The central theme of early Irish literature and mythology is precisely this intercourse and link between the world of men and the world of the gods: it is a theme which occupied not only the aristocrats of learning

throughout the ages of Gaelic civilisation, but also, until recent times, the ordinary people themselves.

The otherworld of Irish belief and poetic imagination is a place of wonders (*Tír Ingnad*), a pleasant or great plain (*Mag Mell / Mag Mar*), a land of the Ever-living (*Tír inna mBéo*); it is also a land of beautiful women and young maidens (*Tír inna mBan*). In its benevolent aspect, it is a land of peace and harmony. The words of peace (*síth*) and the otherworld (*síd*) are homonymous in Old Irish, something which did not go amiss on the early *litterateurs*. [19] The peace of the natural world under the rule of the true prince is a reflection of that found in the otherworld, which is its source. The supernatural world defies rational definitions of time and space: it may be reached at almost any time and in any place, and many of the finest Early Irish compositions treat of journeys to and sojourns in it.

Nowhere in Early Irish literature is the theme of the otherworld expressed so poetically, or with such creative and intellectual sensitivity, as in *Immram Brain*, ‘The Voyage of Bran’. This work consists of two poems, each containing twenty-eight quatrains, together with short introductory, linking and final prose passages. The success of the composition lies in the author’s superb lyricism, and in his artistic blending and harmonising of ecclesiastical and native elements to produce a work with a clear Christian message. In the following stanzas, Manannán mac Lir, the god of the sea and the happy otherworld, addresses Bran, who has started on his voyage across the sea to see if he might reach the Land of Women (*Tír inna mBan*):

Bran thinks it is a wondrous beauty
in his coracle over the clear sea;
as for me, in my chariot from afar,
it is a flowery plain around which he drives

What is clear sea,
for the prowed ship in which Bran is,
is a pleasant plain with abundance of flowers
for me in a two-wheeled chariot

Bran sees many waves
breaking over the clear sea;
I myself see in Mag Mon
red-topped flowers without flaw

Sea-horses glisten in summer
as far as Bran has stretched the glances of his eye;
flowers pour forth a stream of honey
in the land of Manannán mac Lir [30]

Here we have reciprocity and juxtaposition of opposites as the poet unfolds the theme of the relativity of matter. The force permeating both these stanzas and the entire composition is that of the *coincidentia oppositorum*: all the islands which are described mirror one another, yet they are also finely differentiated. The woman at the beginning of the tale is a *ben síde*, but she is also Eve; Bran is Adam; Manannán is God; Mongin is Jesus. This interlocking, linking and resembling could be carried on to infinity. But some measure of order is necessary in order to establish firm ground. Firmness, certainty and finitude are sought in the infinite, in Him who made all these islands, the earth and the sea, the sea-horses and the flowers, the pleasant plain and paradise. It is He—the Christian God—who has the key to the similarities and differences. And so the circle can be closed: the sea and the plain, the fish and the calves, the woman and Eve, Bran and Adam, Manannán and God, this world and the otherworld.

Having sifted the evidence relating to pagan Irish religion, one arrives at the conclusion that the Celts brought their gods with them when they came to Ireland. By the time of our written sources, these gods are ‘faded deities’ in mortalised form. Moreover, they were probably superimposed upon a vibrant animistic religion. One of the most important sources of information on the gods, and on Early Irish mythology in general, is the tale of *Cath Maige Tuired*, ‘The (Second) Battle of Mag Tuired’. It preserves an independent literary account of the battle between the Túatha Dé Danann and the Fomoiré. It is a long and quite complex tale which has been interpreted in various ways by different scholars. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh sees three main parts in it: the first deals with the kingship of Ireland, the second with the battle, and the third with the fertility of the land. The Túatha Dé Danann get the kingship, they prove their superiority in battle, and they finally succeed in wresting from the Fomoiré the secrets concerning the fertility of the land. [31]

Ó Cathasaigh’s analysis of the tale in terms of exemplary myth, with a direct bearing upon contemporary society, has the added merit of incorporating the powerful theory of Georges Dumézil, who views it as a reflex of an old Indo-European myth in which the gods of the first and second functions unite against the third. Dumézil has argued convincingly that there was in Indo-European ideology a functional tripartite classification of the natural and supernatural worlds: Ireland and India, for example, manifested this classification in their stratification of classes and castes. The first function is concerned with magico-religious aspects of life (represented by *druids* and *brahmins*) and with law and government (kings), the second with physical force (*flatha* and *ksatriyas*), and the third with fertility (*bó-airig* and *vaishjas*). This division of functions is also found in the Indian pantheon of gods: Varuna and Mitra represent the respective aspects of the first function, Indra that of the second function, and the Ashvins, the third. While such a hierarchy of functions is not clear in the case of Irish deities, Dumézil nevertheless argues that, notwithstanding the complexities involved, the Túatha Dé Danann may be taken to represent the first and second functions while the Fomoiré embody the third; thus Bres, the leader of the Fomoiré, who has the secrets of fertility which the Túatha Dé Danann lack, supplies the latter with the necessary information: he tells them when and how to plough, to sow and to reap. [32]

In our appraisal of such tales as *Cath Maige Tuired*, and indeed of Irish mythology in general, we must not lose sight of the fact that the ‘religious’ content relates in the first instance in many cases to the value system of society. Thus another scholar, who has recently edited *Cath Maige Tuired*, points out that the victory of the Túatha Dé Danann is ‘a symbolic recognition of the fact that the strength of a society depends upon balanced relations between king and subject, upon the bonds of both maternal and paternal kinship, and upon co-operative relations among affinal groups’; [33] Pádraig Ó Riain is undoubtedly correct in stressing that ‘the implication surely is that the connexions with Greek, Scandinavian or more remote Indo-European themes, the role as a “myth of Samain” or the expression of an alliance between representatives of the two higher functions of the Indo-European range of divinities against the third (Dumézil’s interpretation, sections of which are expertly accommodated by Ó Cathasaigh to his view of the tale’s social function), reflect less the narrative’s underlying meaning than the conservatism of the society it portrays’. [34]

The hero of *Cath Maige Tuired* is Lugh, who, according to other sources, belonged to the *áes síde* and dwelt at Brugh na Bóinne (Newgrange), from whence he came to beget Cú Chulainn, the great hero of the Ulster cycle: he is therefore Cú Chulainn’s divine father. Many Irish families and dynasties claimed descent from Lug, and Eoin MacNeill takes this to have been the claim of all the Irish at one time. [35] Pádraig Ó Riain draws attention to the Dál Modula, an

historical east Limerick family, who traced their descent back to Daul—probably a cover-name for Lug—‘through a sequence of no less than five synonyms of Lug, beginning with Find and continuing with Lugaid Lámluath, Lug Lethderg, Luchta and Láimthech in that order’. [36] Moreover, the same scholar’s researches into Irish hagiography show that it was to some degree a mirror-image of its pagan precursor and that the pagan deity Lug has been recycled as a Christian saint in many instances. Examples include Lugaid of the Dál Modula, Molua of the Uí Fidgeinte (founder of the monastery of Killaloe), Molacca of the Fir Maige Féene and Bishop Lugach of the Luigne ‘Lug’s people’. [37]

That the cult of Lug was widespread in the Celtic world is clear from Gaulish inscriptions, and from placenames, such as Lyon, Laon and Leyden (from Lugudunum, ‘Lug’s Fort’), or Luguvalium (from Luguvalos, ‘strong like (or in) Lug’), the Romano-British name of Carlisle in Northern England. The Festival of Lughnasa (from Lug-nasad, ‘Lug’s feast’) occurred on 1 August and traditionally lasted a month, fifteen days before and fifteen days after 1 August. Two of the greatest Irish assemblies were held at this time—the Oenach Tailten and Oenach Carmain, both of which were associated with important goddesses. *Lughnasa* was an agrarian festival, one of the four great festivals of the Irish and Celtic year, the others being Imbolg which was celebrated on 1 February, Beltaine on 1 May, and Samain on 1 November. Samain was the most important of these from a religious point of view, for it was at this time that there was unhindered access between this world and the otherworld. As Máire MacNeill has demonstrated in her great work on the subject, Lughnasa was celebrated throughout all parts of Ireland and was intimately connected with hill-tops. [38] We may note also here that Crom. Crích—the pagan idol whom we mentioned earlier—is associated with the festival in folk tradition under the name of Crom Dubh. He is also connected with it in the earlier dindshenchas sources.

In *Cath Maige Tuired*, Lug is the *Samaildánach*, the master of all arts and crafts, who ousts the old king of Tara, *Nuada Argatlám*, ‘Nuada of the Silver Hand’, and defeats his own maternal grandfather, Balar of the baleful eye. He is also ‘the divine prototype of human kingship’, the exemplary model to be followed by the kings of this world. All this tends to confirm the view that he is identical with Mercury, whom Caesar says the Gauls regarded as the inventor of all arts, and who was the one to whom they paid the greatest worship.

It appears that the divine order was modelled, to some extent not yet fully clear, upon tribal hierarchy and organisation. Thus, it has been argued by some scholars that each tribe had a distinct god just as it had a distinct king—a multifunctional deity who was the ancestor of his people. Like the king, he was responsible for the well-being of the tuath and its people. [39] A common oath in the Ulster cycle of stories is the invocation of the god of the tribe—*tongu so día da toinges mo thúath* (or *toingte Úlaid*), ‘I swear to the god by whom my tribe (or ‘the Ulaid’) swears’; and many Gaulish names of deities appear only once and have purely local reference. T. F. O’Rahilly, on the other hand, held that there was only one polyvalent deity who appears under different names and guises. While it is true that different gods frequently perform similar functions, certain gods have quite distinct and specific functions. [40] Examples of the latter are Goibniu, the smith god; Dian Céecht, the leech; and Donn, ‘the brown one’, the lord of the dead to whose home (*Tech Duinn*) all of the Irish will come after death.

In a country in which fertility played such a prominent role, earth or mother goddesses were particularly important: they were Paganism and Society in Early Ireland chiefly concerned with fertility of land and beast, with sexuality, and, in defence of their territory, with war. Thus we have Anu, the goddess of plenty, whose maternal function is indicated by the name of the Paps mountains in Co. Kerry with which she is closely associated; Medb ‘the intoxicated one’ (or ‘the

one who intoxicates'), to whom so many kings were mated; and the Morrigan, the raven war-goddess who appears in triple form, and who also has a sexual function. The female deity in triadic form is a common Celtic phenomenon: in Ireland there is the Morrigan / Badb / Nemain complex, the three Machas, and the three Brigits.

According to Cormac mac Cuillenáin, Brigit was the goddess whom the *filid* adored. An expert in poetry and traditional lore, she was the daughter of the Dagda 'the good god'—the Great Father (Eochaidh Ollathair), and the god of knowledge and druidry (Rúad Rófhessa, 'The Mighty One of Great Knowledge'). The importance of Brigit is underlined by the fact that, according to Cormac, the general name for a goddess was Brigit. Her functions were taken over by the Christian St. Brigit whose feast-day fell on 1 February, the date of the old pagan spring festival of *Imbolg*. In her Christian guise, Brigit is connected with fertility, healing and craftsmanship.

For a variety of reasons, many of the gods and goddesses referred to in this essay failed to make a lasting impression on folk memory. Some probably never made the transition from heroic society to peasant culture. Paganism, however, did not come to an end with the demise of the druid. At grassroots level, the peasant continued to cherish the ruder prototypes of the gods whom the druids and poets had glorified: belief in the *síde* survived. And certain gods and heroes continued to hold a fascination for the imagination. Fertility goddesses, in particular, held a special place in folk belief. Among these was the Caillech Berri, or 'The Hag of Beare'. She has a cosmogonic function: she moves islands, drops cairns from her aprons, builds mountains, and has a close association with megalithic monuments, particularly with that of Knowth in Co. Meath. Her names include Dige, Digde and Duinech, and as Buí (or Boí), she is said to be wife of Lug and thus the goddess of sovereignty and fertility. The divine ancestress of many people, she is a woman of tremendous longevity who has lived through seven cycles of youth: 'she passed into seven periods of youth, so that every husband used to pass from her to death of old age, so that her grandchildren and great-grandchildren were peoples and races.' [41]

In our discussion of *Immram Brain* above, attention was drawn to the sensitivity with which the author treated the theme of the relationship between pagan and Christian beliefs. At approximately the same time as the author of this work was engaged at his composition, another writer took up a similar theme and produced what seems to many to be the greatest of all Irish poems—'The Lament of the Old Woman of Beare'. In this poem the Caillech Berri contrasts her earlier years of youth, love and companionship on the rich plain of Feven with her present solitary state of withering old age on the bleak island of Beare. The image which is sustained throughout the poem is the ebb and flow of life, an image capable of encompassing many rich veins of interpretations. Perhaps the final ebb of the hag is to be equated with the end of the pagan past, but, if it is, this author knew, as did the author of *Immram Brain*, that tradition in Ireland withers and ebbs neither slowly nor serenely:

The ebbing that has come to me
is not the ebbing of the sea.
What knows the sea of grief or pain?
Happy tide will flood again.

I am the hag of Bui and Beare —
the richest cloth I used to wear,
Now with meanness and with thrift
I even lack a change of shrift ...

Those whom we loved, the plains
we ride today bear their names;
gaily they feasted with laughter
nor boasted thereafter ...

These arms you see,
these bony scrawny things,
had once more loving craft
embracing kings ...

When Maytime comes
the girls out there are glad,
and I, old hag, old bones,
alone am sad ...

But for Fevens plain
I envy nothing old;
I have a shroud of aged skin,
Feven's crop of gold ...

Great wave of flood
and wave of ebb and lack!
What flooding tide brings in
the ebbing tide brings back ...

Blessed the islands of the great sea
with happy ebb and happy flood.
For me, for me alone, no hope:
the ebbing is for good. [42]

[END]

Notes

1. For the original Latin text, see *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, ed. Whitley Stokes, 2 vols. [Rolls Series] (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1887), Vol. 2, p.278. Translation by Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings* (B. T. Batsford Ltd., London, 1973), p.65. See also Ludwig Bieler, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies 1979). Muirchú is almost certainly referring here to the Feast of Tara. For further comment, see articles by Kim McCone referred to in note 4 below.
2. See *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, eds. Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, 2 vols. (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, rep. 1975), Vol. 1, pp.307-21.
3. David Greene, 'The Religious Epic', *Early Irish Poetry*, ed. James Carney (Mercier Press, Cork, 1965), p.78.
4. See Kim McCone, 'Dan agus tallann', *Lóachtaí Cholm Cille*, xvi (An Sagart, Ma Nuad, 1986), pp.9-53; esp.28 ff.; 'Dubthach maccu Lugair and a matter of life and death in the pseudo-historical prologue to the Senchas Mar', *Peritia 5* (Journal of the Medieval Academy of Ireland, Dublin, 1988), pp.1-35.
5. Donnchadh Ó Lorrain 'Legend as critic', *The Writer as Witness: Literature as Historical Evidence*, ed. T. Dunne (Cork University Press, 1987), pp.23-38, p.26.
6. Proinsias MacCana, 'Conservation and innovation in Early Celtic literature', *Etudes Celtiques* xiii (Société d'Édition 'Les Belles Lettres', Paris, 1972), pp.61-119, p.86.
7. See Proinsias MacCana, Review of *History and Heroic Tale: A Symposium*, ed. T. Nyberg et al. (Universitetsforlag, Odense, 1985), *Celtics* 18 (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1986), p.214. See also Máire Herbert, 'The world, the text, and the critic of Early Irish Heroic narrative', *Irish Studies*, eds. D. Cairns and S. Richards, Text and Context, No. 3 (Department of Humanities, Staffordshire Polytechnic, Beaconside, Stafford, 1988), pp.1-9, p.5.

8. Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, *op.cit.*, p.317.
9. For further comment on the etymology of *sid*, see Heinrich Wagner, *Studies in the Origins of the Celts and the Early Celtic Civilisation* (Max Niemeyer, Belfast/Tubingen, 1971), pp.245-46.
10. Whitley Stokes and John Strachan, *op.cit.*, p.265.
11. Whitley Stokes, 'Rennes Dindshenchas', *Revue Celtique*, xvi, pp.35-36.
12. See *Táin Bó Cualnge from the Book of Leinster*, ed. C. O'Rahilly (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin, 1967), p.247.
13. See Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Sheed and Ward, London/Sydney, 1958), p.193 ff.
14. See *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, *op.cit.*, pp.123-323.
15. See T. F. O'Rahilly, *Early Irish History and Mythology* (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin, 1946), pp.322-23.
16. See Patrick Logan, *The Holy Wells of Ireland* (Colin Smythe Ltd., Gerrards Cross, 1980).
17. J. Caesar, *De Bello Gallico VI*, p.14. See J. J. Tierney, 'The Celtic Ethnography of Posidonius', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, ix, C5 (Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, 1900), pp.189-275.
18. *Ab urbe condita*, V 46, 3. See Tierney, *op.cit.*
19. Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin, 1988), p.60.
20. See *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, ed. D. A. Binchy (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, Dublin, 1978), 1612.8. See also Fergus Kelly, *op.cit.*, p.233.
21. D. A. Binchy, 'Secular Institutions', *Early Irish Society*, ed. Myles Dillon (Cultural Relations Committee, Dublin, 1954), pp.52-65.
22. Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, *op.cit.*, p.7.
23. See Fergus Kelly, *op.cit.*, p.9.
24. *Ibid.*, p.9.
25. *Ibid.*, pp.44-45.
26. See D. A. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon Kingship* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970), p.3 ff.
27. See *Audacht Morainn*, ed. Fergus Kelly (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1976).
28. See Heinrich Wagner, *op.cit.*, p.6 ff.
29. See Tomas Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Semantics of "síd"', *Eigse 17* (The National University of Ireland, Dublin, 1978), pp.137-55.
30. *Immram Brain: Bran's Journey to the Land of the Women*, ed. Seamus MacMathúna (Niemeyer, Tubingen, 1985), pp.39, 52; see also, 'Myth, metaphor and merging in Early Irish literature and society', *Irish Studies*, *op.cit.*, pp.29-38, esp.pp.32-34.
31. P. de Brún, et al. (Cork University Press, Cork, 1983), pp.1-19.
32. See Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology* (Hamlyn, London, 1970), pp.60-61; A. and B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1961), p.112 ff.
33. E. A. Gray, 'Cash Maige Tuired: Myth and Structure (24-120)', *Eigse*, 19, p.4.
34. Pádraig Ó Riain, 'Celtic Mythology and Religion', *Geschichte and Kultur der Kelten*, ed. K. H. Schmidt (Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1986), p.248.
35. Eoin MacNeill, *Celtic Ireland* (Martin Lester, Dublin, 1921), pp.56-57.
36. Pádraig Ó Riain, *op.cit.*, p.249.
37. *Ibid.*, p.250.
38. Máire MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasa*, 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1962), Vol. I, pp.99-221.
39. See Anne Ross, *The Pagan Celts* (B. T. Batsford Ltd., London, 1986), pp.124-25.
40. See T. F. O'Rahilly, *op.cit.*, p.318 ff.; Proinsias MacCana, *Celtic Mythology*, *op.cit.*, p.24.

41. See Proinsias MacCana, *ibid.*, p.24; Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High-Kings*, *op.cit.*, pp.166-68.
42. Translation by James Carney, *Early Irish Poetry*, *op.cit.*, p.21 ff.