



# ORAL TRADITION

## Festschrift for John Miles Foley

**This article belongs to a special issue of *Oral Tradition* published in honor of John Miles Foley's 65<sup>th</sup> birthday and 2011 retirement. The surprise Festschrift, guest-edited by Lori and Scott Garner entirely without his knowledge, celebrates John's tremendous impact on studies in oral tradition through a series of essays contributed by his students from the University of Missouri-Columbia (1979-present) and from NEH Summer Seminars that he has directed (1987-1996).**

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## Juxtaposing *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* with *Orkneyinga saga*

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It is probably fair to say that following the argument of a comparativist scholar increases in difficulty in direct proportion to the number of cultures invoked or examined. If such is the case, then it can also be said that *constructing* a comparative argument increases in difficulty exponentially with each new case or example.<sup>1</sup> Yet some scholars, notably John Miles Foley and his teacher Albert Lord and his teacher's teacher Milman Parry, made careers built on the work of comparison. The scholarship of Foley, for instance, challenges the Classicist skilled and sensitive to the subtleties of the aorist and the past contrafactual to look for parallels to Homeric epic in the singing of Bosnian villagers from Interwar Yugoslavia. He challenges the Anglo-Saxonist, learned in the monastic culture of late first-millennium England, and potentially quite amenable to imagining the conviviality and orality of a Bosnian village, to contemplate the complexities of Homeric Greece thousands of years in the past. It is perhaps not surprising, given the challenges of such research, that scholars of the latter half of the twentieth century increasingly abandoned comparative perspectives in many fields of the humanities. Not only did comparative research lose appeal for scholars and readers, but comparativist scholars themselves became suspected of disciplinary transgressions, accused of lacking rigor or commitment, like roving men: one foot in sea and one on shore, to one thing constant never. As approaches to single cultures became the norm, comparative findings became marginalized, dismissed at times as superficial, spurious, or insignificant. And even as the humanities contracts throughout North American and European academia today, the scholarly commitment to monoculture remains strong in American research universities.

My intent in the following paper is to make a case for the usefulness of comparative analysis in a narrower and more specific context, that is, in examining two fascinating but often marginalized medieval works: the Irish *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* (modern Irish *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* ["The Battle of the Gaels and the Foreigners"]) and the Icelandic/Orcadian *Orkneyinga saga* ("The Saga of the Orcadians"). The Irish text relates the travails of Irish

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 2011 annual meeting of the Society for the Advancement of Scandinavian Study, held in Chicago, Illinois, April 29-30, 2011. Quotations from *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* in both Irish and English are taken from Todd's 1867 edition. Quotations from *Orkneyinga saga* in Old Norse are from Finnbogi Guðmundsson's 1965 edition. English texts of passages from *Orkneyinga saga* are from the translation of Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (1978). I am particularly grateful to Terry Gunnell for comments that helped me strengthen and clarify my argument.

kingdoms in withstanding the depredations of Viking invaders over the course of several centuries, leading to the emergence of the Dál gCais Bóruma dynasty of Munster, the rise of its greatest son Brian Bóruma (Boru) to the lofty title of High King of Ireland (a rank seldom held by the kings of Munster), and his subsequent fall and death in an insurrection led by revolting Irish and Scandinavian populations in the fateful Good Friday Battle of Cluain Tarbh (Clontarf) on April 23, 1014. The Old Norse text relates the settlement of Norse colonists in Orkney and the establishment of a jarldom/earldom at first independent, but gradually brought under the contending influence of both Scotland and Norway. The saga follows the ups and downs of the islands' tumultuous dynastic history, focusing attention on particularly famous earls, such as the Earl Sigurðr, who lost his life fighting against Brian Boru's forces in the Battle of Clontarf of 1014. Where *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* ends with that fateful battle, *Orkneyinga saga* continues its narrative long after 1014, but features the battle as a very important moment in the earldom's history. Both texts, then, narrate a period of extensive intercultural contact between Norse (Norwegians, Danes, Orcadians, and Icelanders) and Celts (specifically, Irish and Scots) over a number of centuries.

I posit that comparison between these two works and the remarkable vernacular prose traditions they reflect reveals complex, apparently shared processes of cultural characterization and contrast, an "immanent" (Foley 1991; Sigurðsson 2004) narrative account of a cultural meeting that transformed both the Celtic and Viking worlds. Within this shared narrative that proclaims inexorable difference between Norse and Celt, we can also recognize surprising rapprochement, the product of long histories of contact, trade, and intermarriage. I hope to suggest that examining the disjunction between a rhetoric of cultural opposition and a reality of cultural merger can shed valuable light on contact situations in general and serve as a much needed balance to the celebration of monoculture implicit in many individual works of medieval literature. That narratives of intercultural contact, albeit individually partisan and biased to one side or another of a conflict, nonetheless become shared between purported adversaries is a lesson readily demonstrated in modern folklore studies, be it in the examination of Anglo and Mexican cultures along the Texas-Mexico border (Paredes 1970; Bauman and Abrahams 1981), Jewish and Christian cultures in the late Antique Mediterranean (Hasan-Rokem 2003), Catholic and Protestant cultures in twentieth-century Northern Ireland (Cashman 2008), or any number of other historically significant and fraught intercultural encounters. Folklorists have a particular role to play in the examination of such intercultural common ground, the development of an immanent narrative of cultural confrontation and its reflection in individual narratives (oral or written) that rely upon or respond to details of the implicit account. Comparing the two medieval works at the center of this study offers new ways of contributing to the fields of Scandinavian Studies and Celtic Studies, ways that restore some of the once extensive comparative research that declined in the era of monocultural focus and that is undergoing renewed attention in current research (Sigurðsson 2000). At the same time, such an examination, because it focuses on texts that can be described as "voices of the past" (Foley 2010), sheds useful light on the intimate and complex relations between medieval oral tradition and textual production within medieval Britain, Ireland, and Scandinavia, relations that have also received renewed and substantive examination in recent scholarship (Ni Mhaonaigh 2002; Hudson 2002; Sigurðsson 2004; Amodio 2005; Melve 2010).

## Manuscripts and Texts

A first basis of comparison of any medieval works lies in manuscript histories and the material production of the texts that have resulted in the works as we have them. In the cases of *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga*, both works illustrate well the value of noting where and how a work that we think about as a “text” came about, and what manuscripts our modern textual reconstructions are built upon. Both also illustrate the interesting histories that such works can have in the post-medieval period, as they become identified and used as symbols of national or local identity.

Máire Ní Mhaonaigh (1996) summarizes the textual history of *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*. The work survives in three main manuscripts. The earliest of these occurs in the celebrated Book of Leinster, a crucial surviving medieval manuscript that preserves for us such other works of importance to modern Celtic studies as the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, various tales and poems of the Ulster Cycle, and the metrical *Dindsenchas*. The Book of Leinster was produced in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century by various hands, probably under the supervision of abbot Áed Ua Crimthainn, a well-connected cleric stationed at the prominent Tipperary monastery of Tír-Dá-Glas. *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* is the final item in this long and valuable compilation and is fragmentary due to the loss of the final section of the book. Trinity College Dublin Manuscript 1319 preserves a second, also fragmentary account, differing markedly from the version contained in the earlier manuscript. It has been dated to the fourteenth century. Finally, the seventeenth-century friar Micheál Ó Cléirigh produced the third manuscript (Brussels Manuscript 2562-72), a fair copy of a transcription of a now lost medieval manuscript known as *Leabhar Chonn Chonnacht Uí Dhálaigh*, a work produced or owned by a prominent Westmeath bard Cuconnacht Ó Dálaigh who died in 1139 (Todd 1867:xv). Ó Cléirigh’s version resembles the Dublin manuscript closely but has some added poems not found in the earlier work (Ní Mhaonaigh 1996:101). James Henthorn Todd produced the first (and to date only) modern edition of the work in 1867. Todd’s edition, accompanied by an extensive introduction, detailed textual notes, and facing-page Middle Irish/Modern English texts, appeared in a British series entitled “*Rerum Britannicarum Medii Ævi Scriptores or Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages.*” Published as part of a royal project to assemble “materials for the History of this Country from the Invasion of the Romans to the Reign of Henry VIII,” (1867:2), the work was thus subsumed into a Victorian project to depict England and Ireland as a single entity, now happily united under a single crown. Despite this underlying political agenda, Todd’s edition has generally been judged thorough and balanced, and has served as the main means of access for scholars wishing to study the text ever since.

Scholars beginning with Todd have theorized about the possible creator of the *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* itself and have surmised from language, textual references, and the work’s panegyric tone that it was composed in the court of Brian’s great grandson Muirchertach Ua Briain, himself a king of Munster and sometime high king of Ireland, who died c. 1119. As such, the medieval text has its own political agenda, particularly an intention to demonstrate the valor of the Dál gCais dynasty and its natural claim to the high kingship, an honor more often commanded by kings of Leinster or Ulster. It is also likely that prominent members of the text’s original audience were considered direct descendants of the heroic Brian and his contemporaries.

Judith Jesch (2010) summarizes the textual history of *Orkneyinga saga*. Like *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, *Orkneyinga saga*'s claim to undisputed age lies in the survival of some manuscript fragments from the early fourteenth century. The text as we know it in modern editions derives from three main manuscripts. The first of these in age is AM 325 I 4to (Copenhagen, Den Arnamagnæanske Samling), a fragmentary manuscript dated to c. 1300. The much later Holm papp 39 (Stockholm, Kungliga bibliotek) is a seventeenth-century copy of a sixteenth-century translation of the text into Danish, based on a now lost Codex Academicus, that perished in a fire of 1728. Scholars have regarded this version as particularly valuable, although it is also fragmentary and survives only in translated form. The youngest and most complete version appears in the magnificent late medieval tome *Flateyjarbók*, a work compiled by two Icelandic priests working in succession: Jón Þórðarson and Magnús Þórhallsson, the latter of whom seems to have finished his work by 1395 (DuBois 2004:2). Both priests took a hand in incorporating portions of *Orkneyinga saga* into their overall work, dividing what must have been an original complete manuscript into sections and incorporating these as excurses in broader sagas devoted to the life and times of King Ólafr Tryggvason and King Ólafr Haraldsson the Saint. In a fascinating and complex recent study, Elizabeth Ashton Rowe has examined *Flateyjarbók* for signs of its compilers' political agendas, locating its emphases and silences in the relations of Iceland and Norway during the late fourteenth century (Rowe 2005). Because *Orkneyinga saga* deals repeatedly with the uneasy relations between the Orkney earldom and the Norwegian crown, Rowe has characterized it as a "colonial saga." In a series of important articles focused more exclusively on *Orkneyinga saga*, Judith Jesch (1992, 1993, 2010) has examined the alterations that Jón and Magnús seem to make to the text as can be gleaned through comparison of their work with earlier fragmentary texts that survive. Jesch's stylistic and narratological analyses of the saga stand out as particularly valuable examinations. Two modern editions of *Orkneyinga saga* have been produced: one by Sigurður Nordal (1913-16) and a later one by Finnbogi Guðmundsson (1965). Jesch (2010) has provided a careful critique of both editions, pointing out the scholarly predilections and tendencies of the two scholars, particularly with regard to a then hotly debated dispute regarding the literate or oral sources of extant sagas.

Because other Icelandic sagas and saga writers seem to use *Orkneyinga saga* as a source (Hudson 2002:248), and judging from the intimacy of detail in the saga's final portion—where it seems likely that the writer may have known some of the figures in the text personally (Foote 1989)—scholars have suggested a dating of c. 1200 for the original text. Scholars have debated whether it was written originally in Orkney or composed in Iceland by someone with access to written and oral information regarding the history of the islands. Tommy Danielsson (2002), in surveying the theories that have arisen over time, suggests it is likely that a Latin *vita* of the life and works of Earl St. Magnús Erlendsson (1075-1117) served as a major source for at least part of the text. The *vita* would have appeared around the time of Magnús's canonization and has been dated to c. 1130. Attributed to a Master Robert, this Latin text apparently gave rise to a Norse *vita*, as well as possibly portions of *Orkneyinga saga* (Tomany 2008:131-33). Further source materials may have arisen in connection with the canonization of Rögnvaldr Káli (d. 1156) in 1192. The compiler/writer seems to have taken these and other materials and supplemented them with detailed knowledge of contemporary Orcadian politics and history, devoting particular attention to the figure of Sveinn Ásleifarson, who appears in fully a quarter of

all chapters of the saga, dominating its final section (Beuermann 2006, 2009). Hudson (2002:261) suggests that the composition of the saga may have occurred within a monastic setting, where access to Irish annals and Irish learning may have influenced the work. Icelandic scholars, in contrast, have theorized an Icelandic genesis for the compilation, occurring possibly at the estate of Oddi, which had close ties with the earls of Orkney over a number of generations. (For a summary, see Danielsson 2002:341-44.) In either case, as we shall see, such specific textual sources appear to have been grounded and interpreted within a broader, immanent understanding of Norse-Celtic relations as they occurred in the eighth through twelfth centuries.

As this summary indicates, both *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* can be seen as complex products of the learned historicizing enterprise of their time. Conflicts between Norse and Celts are depicted within narratives that celebrate rulers who were particularly adept at suppressing or overwhelming their opponents. Both works are retrospective and idealized, and although we can posit a specific time and place of authorship for each work, we also see that the texts as we have them reflect successive revisions over a number of centuries, during which the textual history of the works becomes inextricably bound to a wider cultural tradition regarding Norse-Celtic interrelations and their place in local and national histories.

### Questions of Genre

A second point of comparison concerning *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* revolves around questions of genre and theme. Both the disciplines of Irish studies and Old Norse studies have devoted great attention to questions of periodicity and genre. Such is understandable, since the texts that survive from the medieval era vary in content, language, and style, and yet are often preserved in the same omnibus folio compilations such as the Book of Leinster or *Flateyjarbók*. Scholars have wished to find ways to reconstruct the historical development of genres within their respective literary traditions and to relate these to social and cultural developments that took place over the centuries. Both *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* differ in details of form and content from what scholars identify as generic norms within each tradition. And yet, by their very departure from such broader norms, they seem to point to interesting clues into the ways in which genres developed in their source cultures. Accounting for the particularities of these texts reveals weaknesses in the theories advanced for more conventional exemplars of the literary tradition and hints at both a literary and an underlying oral context that was international and intercultural rather than purely national.

In largely dismissing any possibility of influence of Scandinavian works on Irish literature, Proinsias Mac Cana writes: “of all the suggested material borrowings by Celtic literature from Norse, scarcely none is universally, or even generally, accepted, so difficult is it to determine the direction of borrowing between the two literatures and to distinguish between Norse, continental Teutonic and common folklore prototypes as the source of the supposed Irish borrowings” (1983:78-79). According to Mac Cana, Irish literary traditions were too well established and normative by the time of Scandinavian contact to allow for any substantive influence, even if most of the manuscripts that have survived date from an era well after these contacts had begun. In general, the Irish literary canon has been divided into cycles depending on

the topics and era depicted, and in his classic survey (1948) Myles Dillon divides the corpus of “early Irish literature” into the Ulster Cycle, the Fenian Cycle, the Mythological Cycle, the Historical Cycle, the Adventures, the Voyages, the Visions, and discrete works of Irish poetry. Although Dillon mentions Brian Boru as the final topic of the Historical Cycle (73), he includes no discussion of *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* whatsoever in his volume, and it is clear from his text that historical accounts of battles with Vikings are not seen as belonging to the topic of *early* Irish literature. Likewise, in their influential anthology *Ancient Irish Tales*, Tom Peete Cross and Clark Harris Slover (1936) include no piece or discussion of *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, although they do include a substantial section on “Tales of the Traditional Kings” (469-587), where a history of Brian Boru would logically be placed.

In the nineteenth century, scholars such as Timothy Lee could read *Cogadh* largely as a battle record rather than as a piece of literature, accepting it entirely as a valid and valuable historical source, to be confirmed through cross-referencing with the various annals that relate the same events (Lee 1889). Later scholars tempered these views somewhat, although remaining confident regarding the basic historical accuracy of the core events depicted in the text (Ryan 1938; Stacpoole 1964). In this context of source evaluation, Máire Ní Mhaonaigh has offered a valuable reassessment (1996) of the structure and probable textual antecedents of *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, demonstrating the extent to which the work draws on annalistic sources, probably in particular a now lost tenth-century source annal from which all the currently surviving annals derive (110). Ní Mhaonaigh regards both the overtly annalistic first section of the text and the more “saga-like” narrative that begins with the introduction of the Dál gCais dynasty (Chapter 41) as ultimately drawing from the same sources, albeit with a different degree of development and dramatization. More recent scholars have continued to look to the text as a key to understanding the rise of the Dál gCais dynasty from comparative obscurity to island-wide prominence in the late tenth century, though with greater hesitancy regarding its depiction of events (Mac Shamhráin 2005). Such scholars have increasingly regarded the work as an *imagined* history, one that tells us a great deal about how a scribe in the employ of the Dál gCais wished to see the past, particularly the rise of his sovereign’s grandfather to the high kingship of the island (Downham 2005; Clarke 1995). So although *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* has never been openly inducted into the esteemed category of early Irish literature, scholarly approaches to the work have grown to regard it more and more as a literary creation, but one constructed—like the annals and other historical works of Irish, Welsh, English, and Scandinavian traditions—with a central attention to questions of history.

If *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* is regarded as a late addendum to the centuries of literary activity preserved for us in twelfth-century manuscripts, *Orkneyinga saga* is often regarded as a strikingly early exemplar of a type of writing that would eventually become known as the sagas. Scholars have classified the various surviving sagas as belonging to broad categories according to theme and content. In an important bibliographic survey of Old Norse literature edited by Carol Clover and John Lindow (1985), the sagas are broken down into Kings’ Sagas (*Konungasögur*), Icelandic Family Sagas (*Íslendingasögur*), and Norse Romance (*Riddarasögur*). Mythological works such as *Völsunga saga* have in turn been seen as Mythological Sagas. In a recent study that updates and extends a career of attention to questions of the development of the saga genre, Theodore Andersson (2006:17) describes a category of



“regional or chronicle sagas,” including biographical works such as *Víga-Glums saga*, chronicles of Icelandic locales like *Laxdæla saga*, and broader North Atlantic chronicles including *Orkneyinga saga* and its Faroese counterpart *Færeyinga saga*. Melissa Berman (1985), emphasizing the focus of *Orkneyinga saga* on the relations between a semi-independent locale and the Norwegian crown, proposed the category of “political saga.” Recently, as noted above, Elizabeth Ashton Rowe (2005) treats many aspects of *Orkneyinga saga* within her wider examination of the representation of history and politics in *Flateyjarbók*, describing it as a “colonial saga.” What appears clear from all these discussions is that *Orkneyinga saga* doesn’t quite match up with the sagas that apparently postdate it, leading Judith Jesch (1993, 2010) to suggest that it represents perhaps an earlier stage in the formal evolution of the saga genre.

It is intriguing to note the extent to which both of these texts seem to offer evidence for tracing the evolution of literary genres within their respective traditions. *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* offers a glimpse of the further development of Irish historical discourse from what we find in works recognized as “early” Irish literature to works that come after. *Orkneyinga saga* seems to offer an indication of how the saga genre developed out of chronicle and annalistic literature and what sorts of narrative evolution the enterprise of historical storytelling underwent in the Icelandic context. Both works are, then, seeming snapshots of wider processes of genre development built upon persisting or emergent norms of narrative content, form, and representation operating within (and also possibly between) the cultures in question.

### **The Battle of Clontarf**

As noted above, the Battle of Clontarf directly links the Irish *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga*. The topic of Brian Boru’s final battle in fact finds repeated depiction in the Icelandic sagas, appearing not only in *Orkneyinga saga*, but also in the more famed and valued *Njáls saga*, as well as the fairly obscure *Þorsteins saga Síðuhallssonar* and the once-independent poem *Darraðarljóð*, incorporated into the prose text of *Njáls saga*. The Dutch scholar Albertus Goedheer (1938) took pains to produce a careful comparative study of these accounts already at a relatively early stage in the development of modern Celtic studies. Scandinavianists, starting with Sophus Bugge (1908) and later Éinarr Ó. Sveinsson (1954:xlx-xlix), postulated a lost *\*Brjáns saga*, a Norse work focusing on the life and times of Brian Boru and resembling in some details *Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaibh*. Later scholars have been less inclined to posit a complete saga, preferring instead to suggest the existence of various narratives regarding the battle that were taken up and adapted by saga writers in various ways (Lönnroth 1983:226-36). Questioning some of the logic behind the postulated *\*Brjáns saga*, Hudson (2002) takes up suggestions from earlier scholarship that the various Old Norse accounts of Clontarf could derive from a saga devoted not to the Irish king but to the Orcadian Earl Sigurðr. Such a theory makes *Orkneyinga saga* much more central to the story of Old Norse accounts of the Battle of Clontarf and reinforces the idea that the saga may have served as a source for other sagas, such as *Njáls saga*.

As the above summary of scholarship suggests, certain lacunae persist in our understandings of *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* and their relations to other

elements of their respective traditions. Although recent Celticist scholarship has largely embraced the Irish text as a work of literary aspiration and construction, and has increasingly taken interest in the relation of the text to Old Norse counterparts (see below), discussions have tended to limit themselves to comparisons with *Njáls saga* alone (Downham 2005; Preston-Matto 2010; Ní Mhaonaigh 1996). Such is unfortunate, since in many ways, as I hope to demonstrate here, *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* have much in common with each other both in terms of age and content. As we have seen, they were composed within about a century of each other and seem to rely at least in part on the same annalistic antecedents, reflective of a shared historical perception (but contrasting historical evaluation) of the events described. They each look back with a mixed sense of nostalgia and revulsion at the violence, volatility, and heroism of a time a century before, when figures larger than life strode the same halls and occupied the same seats that were by that later time presided over by more mundane and limited rulers. Together, the two texts suggest the potential for conceiving of the Irish Sea region as an area in which narrative models and themes spread across linguistic boundaries, perhaps, as Hudson suggests (2002:262), facilitated through a bridging Latinized culture and the frequent and productive linkages that united monastic houses of the region. Such a suggestion places the two texts discussed here no longer at the periphery of established national literatures, but at a productive crossroads between cultures, one reflective of the very antiquarian enthusiasm that led learned men of Ireland, Orkney, and Iceland to record or transcribe into new deluxe volumes other texts reflective of a heroic past, works that might have been abandoned, or never written down in the first place, had there not been such an intense interest in things of the past. It is this shared lore that Gísli Sigurðsson (2000, 2004) has explored so insightfully in his scholarship and that in many ways can be seen to undergird the processes of textual production, evolution, and transmission described above.

### Commonalities of Form

If *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* can be said to share some elements of manuscript history and genre, they also clearly share certain elements of form and content. Such formal similarities include a certain mode of narrative emphasis, a localization of plot to focus only on the world of the narrator and the society centrally described, a focalization of narration to allow the audience to “listen in” on the thoughts or perceptions of certain prime characters, and a particular set of norms regarding the use of interpolated poetry. Once we have established these overall formal commonalities, we can examine commonalities of content between the two texts, particularly in terms of brother partnerships or rivalry, images of empowered or goading women, images of significant banners, and depictions of heroic deaths steeped in hagiographic detail. Together, these formal and content-related features suggest a resemblance between *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* that goes much deeper than their seeming surface differences, one rooted, I believe, in an immanent understanding of the Norse-Celtic encounter shared by Irish and Norse writers of the time.

One formal feature shared by both *Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* is a tendency toward increased detail in the portions of the text corresponding to the narrative’s most recent

events. Coverage is not even, in other words, but decidedly skewed toward the narrator's present. As Judith Jesch (1992:340) points out, scholars have tended to view this unevenness as a rather artless product of the author having had more material available regarding recent events than related to remote moments of the past. Such imbalance would certainly be expectable, and can be noted in virtually any modern history. Yet the degree of skewing in *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* is far more than one might expect if it were merely a reflection of differing access to information. Let us note the concrete details of the shifts in emphasis as we find them in the texts that come down to us.

*Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* begins in the ninth century, with a rapid, rather sketchy annalistic account of the first arrivals of the Norse and their various attacks on Irish churches, kingdoms, and populations. Some 35 chapters go by until we turn particularly to the situation in Mumhain (Munster), the kingdom of the Dál gCais. The Dál gCais themselves are introduced in Chapter 41, with Brian eventually taking the throne in Chapter 63. The text now slows considerably in pace. Over the course of 25 chapters, the text recounts Brian's rapid rise to complete control of Ireland and the development of an insurrection against his rule, led by his estranged brother-in-law in collaboration with the Norse of Dublin, a period extending over roughly forty years. The resulting Battle of Clontarf occupies the next 29 chapters, slowing the narrative to more than a full chapter for each hour of Brian's fateful final day and closing the text with a listing of the valiant dead whose lives ended in the conflict.

*Orkeyinga saga* begins in a mythic past of Norway, a prefatory history apparently added to the beginning of the saga only at a late phase. The dynastic history of the islands begins with Chapter 4 and the various sons of Earl Rögnvaldr, a supporter of King Haraldr Fairhair of the late ninth or early tenth century. In the course of six chapters, it covers three generations, slowing somewhat to focus on the reign of Earl Sigurðr and his death in the Battle of Clontarf (Chapters 11 and 12). A full eight chapters then chronicle the stormy relations of Sigurðr's various sons, followed by an additional ten focusing on one of these sons (Þorfinnr) and his relations with his nephew and rival Rögnvaldr. Chapters 31 and 32 close the story of Þorfinnr with the story of his pilgrimage to Rome and eventual death. Not surprisingly, the narrator states: "Er þat sannliga sagt, at hann hafí ríkastr verit allra Orkneyingajarla" (Ch. 32; 81) / "it is said on good authority that he was the most powerful of all the Earls of Orkney" (75). The pace now quickens somewhat, taking ten chapters to cover history and society during the reign of King Magnús of Norway (Chapters 33-43), slowing again to examine the holy life and martyrdom of Earl Magnús the saint (nine chapters), followed by a series of brief chapters devoted to Earl Hákon and his sons Páll and Haraldr (Chapters 53-56), followed by accounts of St. Magnús's attested miracles (Chapter 57) and the introduction of Káli Kolsson (Rögnvaldr Káli) (Chapter 58). Rögnvaldr Káli's detailed exploits occupy the next six chapters, which relate Rögnvaldr's rise to power and return to Orkney in an attempt to wrest control of the earldom away from his kinsman Earl Páll. The narrative now slows even further as it explores the intrigues and powerplays of various earls and chieftains in the struggle for supremacy, focusing particular attention on the crafty and warlike Sveinn Ásleifarson, the ongoing struggle of Rögnvaldr and Páll, and the eventual death of Páll (ten chapters). Chapter 77 relates the orchestrated rise of Earl Haraldr Maddaðarson as an underlord of Rögnvaldr, followed by more personal intrigues involving Svein Ásleifarson (a further seven chapters). Earl Rögnvaldr's grand

journey to Norway (85), Galicia (86), Gibraltar and Byzantium (87-88), and back to Norway (89) receives step-by-step coverage. Eighteen chapters then recount in close and leisurely detail the subsequent dealings of Rögnvaldr, Haraldr, and Sveinn Ásleifarson, leading to the murder of Rögnvaldr and the eventual death of Sveinn. Sveinn's death scene is one of the few times in the saga when we are actually taken into Ireland: Sveinn arrives in Dublin where he is quickly tricked into falling in a pit and is killed. His importance in the narrator's estimation is underscored at the close of Chapter 108, which states: "Nu er þar lokit frá Sveini at segja, ok er þat mál manna, at hann hafí mestr maðr verit fyrir sér í Vestrlöndum bæði at fornu ok nýju þeira manna, er eigi höfðu meira tignarjafn en hann" (Ch. 108; 288-89) / "That then, is the end of Sveinn's story, but people say that apart from those of higher rank than himself, he was the greatest man the western world has ever seen in ancient and modern times" (218). A scant four chapters close the saga, relating Haraldr's relatively peaceful reign after the death of Rögnvaldr and those of the heirs that inherit the earldom after him.

In neither *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* nor *Orkneyinga saga* are we dealing with artless imbalance. Instead, I suggest, we can see in these works a deliberate hierarchizing, in which the characters of greatest importance receive the most narrative attention. It becomes impossible to miss the narrative focus, a fact that is often underscored by the texts' overt announcements of prioritization of material. The above concept of rhetorical emphasis suggests that the material included in each of these texts expresses an author's, or a narrator's, or a *tradition's* judgments regarding relative importance. Whereas a modern academic history aims typically at a balance of coverage between various historical moments or events, the writers or compilers of the texts under examination here show no such concern. Instead, value is signaled by extent of coverage, and the resulting perspective is decidedly partisan. This fact can be seen as well when we look at the coverage of events happening within the narrative "insider" society as opposed to those taking place in the designated "outside" world. In *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, the narrative follows characters only during their time in Ireland, providing no details of where they go or what they do when they leave the island. In *Orkneyinga saga*, correspondingly, the narrative provides intimate details of characters' experiences in Orkney or in Norway, but limits description of their time in Ireland to a bare minimum. In other words, whereas both texts depict their characters traveling across the prime cultural boundaries of the region, neither narrator follows them outside of his own cultural sphere. Warriors and narratives may be mobile, but their medieval chroniclers or narrators appear much less so.

Some examples from *Orkneyinga saga* illustrate the process of selective attention. The chapters related to the Norwegian King Magnús's period of warfare in the islands describe the king's every movement in Orkney and Shetland. We hear of Hákon Pálsson's visit to Norway, where he convinces King Magnús of the desirability of taking the islands (Chapter 37-38), Magnús's journey and retinue at the Battle of Menai Strait (Chapter 39), and King Magnús's activities at various sites along the Scottish coast and in the Hebrides (Chapters 40-41). We hear of his trick to secure the peninsula of Kintyre for himself: King Malcolm had granted him possession of all islands that were separated from the mainland by water deep enough to permit the passage of ship with its rudder down. Magnús, we are told (Ch. 41; 98-99):

lét hann draga skútu yfir Sátírseið. Konungr helt um hjálmvöl ok eignaðisk svá allt Sátíri; þat er betra en in bezta ey í Suðreyjum nema Mön. Þat gengr vestr af Skotlandi, ok eið mjótt fyrir ofan, svá at þar eru jafnan dregin skip yfir.

had a skiff hauled across the narrow neck of land at Tarbert, with himself sitting at the helm, and this is how he won the whole peninsula. Kintyre is thought to be more valuable than the best of the Hebridean islands, though not as good as the Isle of Man. It juts out from the west of Scotland, and the isthmus connecting it to the mainland is so narrow that ships are regularly hauled across (86).

Of his death, however, the saga simply states (Ch. 43; 102):

Þá er Magnús konungr hafði landi ráðit níu vetr, fór hann ór landi vestr um haf ok herjaði á Írland ok var um vetrinn á Kunnaktum, en um sumarit eptir fell hann á Úlztíri Barthólómeussudag.

After ruling Norway for nine years, King Magnús sailed west over the sea to plunder in Ireland. He spent the winter in Connaught and was killed the following summer in Ulster, on St. Bartholomew's Day [August 24] (88).

As a comparison of these two passages shows, Orkney and the islands and coast of the Irish Sea merit detailed description in the text, but events inside Ireland are mentioned with only the broadest of place names, even when they entail such occurrences as the death of the earl in battle.

Such spotlighting lends each text a decidedly partisan flavor: we are not presented with a balanced account of Norse-Celtic relations, but rather with an image of the confrontation of two cultures, as seen from a single vantage point. As we shall see, *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* reverses *Orkneyinga saga's* tendency precisely, offering us a quintessentially Irish view of the same events. In the Irish text, the abrupt arrival of the Norse as raiders is noted in Chapter 4. No details of where they come from are supplied, although the places they raid and ruin are carefully enumerated. In Chapter 26, the Norse appear to simply pack up and leave, as the narrator declares: “Bai, imorro, arali cumsana deraib Erend fri re .xl. bliadan can inred gall” / “Now however, there was some rest to the men of Erin for a period of forty years, without ravage of the foreigners” (Ch. 26; 25-26). Again, we are not told where the Norse have gone but only that they are no longer in Ireland. In Chapter 27, however, they return just as abruptly: “Tanic iarsin rig longes abdul mor clainni Imair inn Ath Cliath; ocus ro hinred ursor Erend uli leo, ocus ro loted leo am Ardmacha” / “After this came the prodigious royal fleet of the children of Ímar to Áth Cliath [Dublin]; and the greater part of Erin was plundered by them. Ard Macha also was pillaged by them” (Ch. 27; 28-29). The Norse leave again at the end of the chapter, returning to Scotland for no stated reason. Reading between these two texts, then, it is as if we are viewing the same events via different cameras, with a voiced-over narrator on each side describing the events from a single, opposed vantage point. And yet, in so doing, each text contributes to or reflects an underlying shared understanding of the events themselves and their importance in the history of the region.

A further shared formal feature found in both texts is a selective, occasional focalization in the second degree. Jesch (1992:339) describes this tendency in her discussion of *Orkneyinga saga*, but the characterization can equally be applied to *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*. In each text the narration shifts at certain moments from a basic omniscient narrator, who dominates for the bulk of the text, to a narrator whose viewpoints become for a time identical to those of one of the narrative's prime characters. As Jesch puts it, "occasionally the narrator as it were zooms in on one of the characters in the story and tells the events from the perspective of that character" (339). During these striking and relatively exceptional moments in the text, point of view is highlighted, and the audience is denied full information in the interest of allowing the audience to imagine more fully the situation and perspectives of a particular character. In *Orkneyinga saga* this focalization parallels precisely the slowing of pace of narration described above and the privileged points of view of some of the characters. Sveinn Ásleifarson, Earl Rögnvaldr, Earl Páll, and other key characters become further characterized through this technique. In some cases, indeed, the management of point of view seems to derive directly from the writer's sources: in closing the narrative of Earl Páll's abduction, for instance, the narrator states: "Ok er þetta frásögn Sveins um þenna atburð. En þat er sögn sumra manna, er verr samir" (Ch. 75; 170) / "This is Sveinn's account of what happened, but according to some people, the story was a lot uglier" (139).

Part of the mechanics of shifting to this focalized account involves announcing its onset to the reading audience. Both texts demarcate the shift clearly within their discourse. In *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, for instance, a purely narrative account of the Battle of Clontarf is interrupted to allow us to see the battle from Brian's limited and marginal perspective. The narrator addresses the reading (or listening) audience with the statement: "Imtus imorro Briain mic Cennetig" / "Let us speak now of the adventures of Brian, son of Cenneidigh, during this time" (Ch. 113; 196-97). *Orkneyinga saga's* Chapter 56 provides similar stage directions for the reader. As the narrative moves from accounts of Earl Magnús's life to a recounting of his attested miracles after death, the narrator announces the shift: "Nú munu vér fyrst láta dveljask söguna of hrið ok segja heldr nakkvat frá þeim jartegnum háleitum, er guð hefir veitt fyrir verðleika sakar ins helga Magnúss jarls" (Ch. 56; 122) / "Now we must first let the story rest for a while and instead tell something of the sublime miracles which God performed because of the merit of the holy jarl Magnús" (102). The two texts display a surprisingly similar inscribed narrator, one probably strongly influenced by hagiographic literature, a quintessentially important literary and religious genre of the time throughout the region (Nagy 1997; Lindow 2001; DuBois 2008; Ommundsen 2010).

Another striking similarity between these texts, however, is their substantive incorporation of poetic texts either as narrative events or as narrative evidence. In the first case, a narrator may announce that the particular narrative moment described was the occasion upon which some famous or noteworthy poem was composed. In this sense, the poem becomes evidence of the historical significance of the moment and its implications for people of its time or afterward. The fact that a poem was composed is meant to convey the notion that the moment was important; the fact that the poem was remembered by others is intended to indicate that the memory and the discussion of the event lived on in oral tradition. In the second case, a narrator introduces a poem as a source of information regarding a narrative moment described in the text.

Verse here becomes a sort of eyewitness or at least a contemporary account, one that adds credibility to the retrospective description of the event at hand.

Judith Jesch (1993:212) differentiates these two uses of poetry in her examination of *Orkneyinga saga*. According to Jesch, in the earlier portions of the saga, when the events recounted take place farther back in history, verse is employed as simple evidence. The fact that Rögnvaldr Brusason was fostered at the court of King Ólafr, for instance, is substantiated by quoting part of a verse by Óttarr svarti (Chapter 19). Later in the saga, however, as the pace slackens and the text provides greater detail on all aspects of the story, verse can be presented as a narrative event in itself. Illustrative is Chapter 85, in which Rögnvaldr Káli is depicted delivering witty verse regarding a variety of subjects, particularly regarding his shipwreck experience.

In *Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaib*, meanwhile, verse is sometimes presented as evidence, as for example, in the opening description of the Dál gCais (Ch. 41; 55), where a poem by Cormac mac Culennán is quoted in evidence of the esteem paid to the rulers of Cashel. More often, however, interpolated poetry is a narrative event characterizing the person speaking the verse and allowing for a glimpse into the personality and motivations of the character(s) involved. In Chapter 52, in the aftermath of the decisive Battle of Sulcoit (968), for instance, King Mathgamhain asks his brother Brian about the battle: “Ocus do bai Mathgamain oc fiarfaidhe scél do Brian, ocus do bi Brian acc innisin scél dó, ocus a dubairt in laidh” / “And Mathgamhain asked Brian for an account of the battle, and Brian related the story to him, and he spoke this poem” (Ch. 52; 76-77). What follows is a poetic dialogue between the brothers in which Brian reports on his victory in battle and Mathgamhain praises him, although noting some anxiety about whether this win will prove advantageous in the long run. In a note on the passage (1867:77, n.10), Todd observes that this poem appears only in Ó Cléirigh’s Brussels transcription of the text and not in either of the earlier manuscripts. Todd also notes that Ó Cléirigh has modernized the poem’s orthography and “perhaps also the language.” Although arguing for the poem’s antiquity, Todd nonetheless leaves open the possibility that it did not appear in this place in the original manuscript that Ó Cléirigh transcribed but that it may have been inserted by the friar in this place during the copying process.

In contrast, in Chapter 73 Ó Cléirigh’s transcription leaves out a long and artful poem that is included in earlier manuscripts: a poetic incitement of Aedh O’Neill to take up arms against Brian. As Todd notes in his critical apparatus, Ó Cléirigh’s text elides the poetic performance entirely, noting simply: “Do roine an fili a thechtairecht amail as ferr ro fhét fri hAédh. Asbert imorro Aodh ó Neill, 7c:” / “The poet did his message as best he could for the information of Aedh. Then Aedh O’Neill answered &c, as in Chapter lxxiv” (121, n.4).

In my own work on medieval lyric (DuBois 2006:37-64), I have noted the ways in which such interpolated verse allows for a slowing, even halting, of the pace of a narrative progression, allowing the audience to contemplate the significance of the moment as a juncture of importance in and of itself, rather than as just a further step in an unfolding series of events. Such halting occurs particularly when the interpolated verse is treated as a narrative event. Thus the decision of whether or not to include verse is not merely a question of access to manuscript copies of the poems, but of judgments regarding the relative importance or value of the narrative moment. It is interesting to note the ways in which verse is treated in these two works and the degree to which

a single logic seems to operate across cultural and literary divides. Although *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* makes more consistent use of verse as a narrative event, both texts contain plentiful amounts of poetry and use it as a key part of characterization and narrative interest.

In providing uneven treatment of varying narrative moments, spotlighting only a single side or locale of a historical conflict, strategically allowing audiences into the minds of particular characters, and incorporating poetry as an important part of the narrative framework, both *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* display a highly comparable set of formal characteristics, ones that make the texts resemble each other to a surprising degree, despite their overtly partisan attention to the opposite sides of the narrated Norse-Celtic conflict. *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* are more alike than their cultural assertions of conflict might lead us to assume, and, as we shall see, this common ground extends beyond form to include important aspects of narrative content as well.

### Commonalities of Content

When we turn to questions of narrative details, *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* again present a surprising degree of common ground, particularly on the level of character type and function. We may first note that both texts employ stock stereotypes in depicting the enemy. This fact will become clearer in some of the discussion below, but suffice it to say here that the Irish text depicts the Norse as water-borne, roving, and brutish, while the Norse text depicts the Irish as conniving and prone to sorcery.

In *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, the Norse are typically depicted with water metaphors, as if they were one with the element that brought them to the shores of Ireland. Consider, for instance, the description of Norse attacks in Chapter 35 (41-42):

Do lionadh Mumha uile do thola eradbhail, ocus do murbrucht diaisneisi long, ocus laidheng, ocus cobhlach, conach raibhe cuan, na caladhphort, no dún, no daingen, no dingna i Mumhain uile gan loingeas Danmarccach ocus allmurach.

The whole of Mumhain became filled with immense floods and countless sea-vomitings of ships and boats and fleets, so that there was not a harbor, or a landing-port, nor a Dún, nor a fortress, in all Mumhain without fleets of Danes and pirates.

The writer amasses long chains of alliterating terms to describe the Norse, few of which are positive in any way (Ch. 91; 158-59):

Batar, imorro, dun darna leith in catha sin glaim glonmar, gusmar, glecach, galach, gnimach, gargbeoda, duabsig, dian, demnietach, dasachtach, diceillid, docoisc, dochomuind, becca, borb, barbarta, boadba, ath, athlum, anniartacha, urlam, angbaid, irgalach, nemnech, niata, namdemail danair; dana, durcraidecha, anmargaich, anbli, allmarda gaill, gormglasa, gentlidi; can chagill, can cadus, can atitin, can comarci do Dia no do duni.



Shouting, hateful, powerful, wrestling, valiant, active, fierce-moving, dangerous, nimble, violent, furious, unscrupulous, untamable, inexorable, unsteady, cruel, barbarous, frightful, sharp, ready, huge, prepared, cunning, warlike, poisonous, murderous hostile Danars; bold, hard-hearted Danmarkians, surly, piratical foreigners, blue-green, pagan; without reverence, without veneration, without honour, without mercy, for God or for men.

On the other hand, the Irish are depicted in *Orkneyinga saga* as duplicitous and magical. As we shall see below, the two principal magic objects described in the text—a killing shirt and an enchanted banner—are both the products of Gaelic women. And in one of the very few scenes in which the narrator actually follows his characters into Ireland, Sveinn Ásleifarson—the doughty and heretofore undefeated Viking of the saga—is tricked to his death in Dublin (Ch. 108; 288):

Um morgininn eptir stóðu þeir Sveinn upp ok vápnuðusk, gengu síðan til staðarins. Ok er þeir kómu inn um borgarhliðin, gerðu Dyflinnarmenn kví frá borgarhliðinu allt at gröfunum. Þeir Sveinn sá ekki við ok hljópu í grafirnar.

In the morning, Svein and his men got up, armed themselves and walked to town as far as the gate. The Dubliners formed a crowd so that the way to the pits was clear, and Svein and his men, suspecting nothing, fell right into them (217).

For the writer of *Orkneyinga saga*, the Dubliners appear to be Irish, or at least behave in some sort of Irish (that is, underhanded) manner; in *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, of course, they are depicted as purely Norse. In any case, Ireland is a place of duplicity and misdirection, a place where people triumph through cunning.

Such stereotypes create stark contrasts between Irish and Norse, ones that, when coupled with the textual silence regarding the Other when away from the narrative's inner world, create the impression of utterly separate, mutually hostile polities. In *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, the fierce Norse appear out of nowhere, harry and oppress, and then disappear again into the waves of the sea. In *Orkneyinga saga*, the mysterious Irish wait silently to be attacked, put up their resistance during memorable battles and magic spells, and then recede again from view. Yet the texts also simultaneously acknowledge extended cultural contact and intermarriage. As we shall see, the magic banner made in *Orkneyinga saga* is produced by Earl Sigurðr's Irish mother, while the impetuous Gormflaith, Brian's estranged and ill-willed wife, is the former spouse of the Dublin king Amlaíb Cuarán (Óláfr kváran). Sigurðr eventually marries a Scottish princess, while Brian marries his daughter to King Sigtryggr Silkenbeard of Dublin. In a very real sense, each text asserts stereotypes and narratives of mutual opposition while revealing processes of cultural merger. Such competing narrative depictions create a paradox in both texts, which, similarly, goes largely unaddressed by the narrator, or even by later scholars.

A further element of similarity of content lies in the narrative treatment of brotherhood. The portion of *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* devoted to the Dál gCais (Chapters 41-121) centers initially on a partnership between the two sons of Cennétig (Cennedigh), Mathgamhain and Brian. Mathgamhain, the elder, serves first as leader, but relies strongly on his brother for

military support, particularly in defeating the Norse at Limerick. And after Mathgamhain's death, at the hands of Irish and Norse enemies, Brian takes the throne as his successor. There are intimations of strains in their relationship, chiefly due to the fact that Mathgamhain is a little too forgiving of his enemies and too trusting of his allies for his own good. Such a failing sets the narrative grounds for Brian's superior rise to power, but also for his eventual demise due to the unfaithfulness of in-law relations. This notion of a partnership in ruling between brothers—potentially with rivalry and even animosity—is a familiar feature in many Celtic narratives, some of which are Irish (for example, in tales of Naoise and the sons of Usnech [Gantz 1981:256-67; DuBois 2006:56-63]). It also abounds in Welsh tradition, as Patrick Ford (1977) has demonstrated in his translation and examination of the *Mabinogi* and related medieval Welsh tales. One need think no further than the relations of Bendigeidfran and Efnisien (Ford 1977:57-72), Gilfaethwy and Gwydion (89-110), or Llud and Llefelys (111-18) for a sense of the remarkable productivity of this motif in Welsh tradition, creating imagistic resonances that the story of Mathgamhain and Brian echoes.

The same attention to brotherhood occurs over and over again in *Orkneyinga saga*, where time and again the earldom is subdivided for a generation between the sons of the previous earl, leading to fraternal conflicts that also often result in conflicts between uncles and nephews. Maria-Claudia Tomany (2008:129) notes that this feature of Orcadian rulership is shared with Norway: "But Orkney, like Norway, also offers a possibility for several earls, usually brothers or cousins, to share or to divide between them the rule of the islands." William Ian Miller observes that the kinship system of Icelanders—and probably also other Western Scandinavian populations—was cognatic (1990:143). In other words, property and inheritance tended to pass through the male line, but in the absence of suitable male heirs, could pass through the female line instead. The notion of partible inheritance—of dividing a legacy into equal pieces rather than bequeathing it solely to the firstborn son, as in primogeniture—seems to have been a viable method of organizing the transferral of property from one generation to the next, even if in practice it could create sizable difficulties on the level of a state or realm. In both Norse and Celtic traditions, brothers represent prime means of achieving or maintaining control of an area, but they also represent potential challenges to longterm stability, since the brothers inevitably vie with each other for preeminence. It is perhaps intended as a sign of Brian's moral superiority—indeed, sanctity—that he resists such enmity in his life. The Orcadian saint figures Magnús and Rögnvaldr do not always show such magnanimity.

If the texts' attention to issues of brotherhood may seem reminiscent of each other, their attention to outspoken wives and powerful women is even more noticeable. Within recent scholarship on *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, the character of Gormflaith—Brian's resentful wife who helps instigate the revolt that leads to the Battle of Clontarf and ultimately to Brian's death—has attracted extensive attention. According to James Doan (1985), Gormflaith seems to carry on an ancient Celtic tradition of locating the sovereignty of the land in a queen, who confers upon the man who acquires and marries her rulership over the kingdom. As Doan notes, Gormflaith's very name reveals this function: "her name contains the element *flaith* and means literally 'illustrious or splendid sovereignty' suggestive of [her and other such queens'] role as 'bearers of sovereignty,' perhaps literally as well as figuratively, since they would be the mothers of future sovereigns" (94). Doan's mythological reading of Gormflaith is carried on by W. Ann

Trindade (1986). In a more recent work, Ní Mhaonaigh (2002) takes up the character of Gormflaith, contextualizing her in a long line of Irish queen figures with the same name and suggesting some rhetorical processes at work within medieval histories. Rejecting to some degree the mythic reading of the queen as a sovereignty figure, Ní Mhaonaigh focuses on Gormflaith's depiction as a canny manipulator in dynastic struggles. She quotes John Ryan's wry speculation that the men of Leinster would not have revolted from Brian's rule "were they not nagged into irresponsible fury by a woman's tongue" (Ryan 1967:363). Lahney Preston-Matto (2010) draws on both Ní Mhaonaigh (2002) and O'Brien O'Keeffe (2007) to locate Gormflaith's experience in an Irish tradition of political hostage taking, meshed with the rhetorical construct of "phantom agency," in which male writers of later generations blame sequestered women for their imprisonment and rape, thereby exculpating the men involved. Gormflaith does not appear in *Orkneyinga saga*, but she is depicted in *Njáls saga* as Kormlöd, where she offers her sexual attentions to a variety of Norse warriors in an attempt to win their support against Brian. Such behavior harkens back to Medb of the *Táin* and her similar tactics, sometimes involving the favors of her daughter as well (Carson 2007).

Although by no means receiving the same degree of scholarly attention, the figure of Brian's daughter in *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* presents a parallel instance of an Irish goading woman. Married to the Norse king whom the writer designates only as *mac Amlaib* ("son of Amlaib"), that is, King Sigtryggr/Cedric of Dublin (d. 1042), she participates in the kind of intermarriage that the text's rhetoric would seem to deny. When the Irish forces of the Battle of Clontarf manage to drive the Norse into the sea, the sharp-tongued Irish wife—standing alongside her Norse husband on the battlements of the Castle of Dublin—mocks their retreat, stating (Ch. 110; 192-93):

"Is doig lemsa," arsi, "ro bensat na Gaill re nduchus."

"Cid sen, a ingen," ar mac Amlaib.

"Na Gaill ic tocht is in fargi, ait is dual daib," arsi, "nuchu netar in aibell fail ortho, acht ni anait re mblegun mased."

Ro fergaiched mac Amlaib ria, ocus tuc dornd di.

"It appears to me," said she, "that the foreigners have gained their inheritance."

"What meanest thou, o woman?" said Amlaib's son.

"The foreigners are going into the sea, their natural inheritance," said she; "I wonder if it is heat that is upon them; but they tarry not to be milked, if it is."

The son of Amlaibh became angered and gave her a blow.

Such depictions of taunting women can be seen as interesting elements of *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, but from the comparative perspective they take on even greater significance, for the goading woman becomes a key motif in Icelandic sagas, including in *Njáls saga*. As Hudson (2002:256) notes, *Njáls saga*'s Hallgerðr can be seen as a parallel "vengeful woman" to Gormflaith. But the saga also contains other women of this sort: Njál's wife Bergþora, for instance, who goads her sons into avenging the deaths of various family members or retainers (Chapters 44 and 98), and Hildigunnr, who goads her uncle Flosi into avenging her husband's

murder (Chapter 116). Hildigunnr does so in a manner strongly reminiscent of Gormflaith. Where Gormflaith refuses to mend a cloak that had been given to her brother by Brian, throwing it instead into the fire, Hildigunnr saves the bloody cloak of her murdered husband Höskuldr to throw upon her uncle's shoulders as a means of shaming him into action (Magnusson and Pálsson 1960:239-40). The prominence of such characters in Old Norse literature has long been noted, and excellent recent works have examined the motif of the "strong Nordic woman" from a variety of perspectives (Jochens 1996; Anderson and Swenson 2002).

Interestingly, in *Orkneyinga saga*, the best exemplars of this type of empowered and conniving woman are Frakökk and her niece Margrét. Frakökk first appears in the text in Chapter 53, where she is described as one of the daughters of a wealthy farmer named Moddan of Caithness. She is married to Ljot the Renegade of Sutherland and appears to be of either Scottish or mixed Scots-Norse background. Together with her sister Helga, she uses her skills in magic to create a poisoned shirt, intended to kill Earl Páll, the brother/rival of Helga's son Earl Hákon (Chapter 55). Regrettably, Earl Hákon sees the shirt first and claims it for himself, succumbing immediately to its poison and dying soon after donning it. Páll drives the sisters out of Orkney, and they return to Sutherland, where they bide their time, waiting to attack again.

In Chapter 63, Frakökk sees her chance when an emissary from Earl Rögnvaldr arrives to ask their support against Earl Páll. Frakökk's reply shows her power and confidence (Ch. 63; 143-44):

“Vitrīga er þetta ráð sét, at leita hingat til afla, því at vér höfum frændafla mikinn ok marga tengðamenn. Ek hefi nú gipta Margrétu Hákonardóttur Maddaði jarli af Atjoklum, er göfgastr er allra Skotahöfðingja at ættum. Melmari, faðir hans, var bróðir Melkólms Skotakonungs, föður Davíðs, er nú er Skotakonungr,” sagði hon. “Höfum vér ok mörg sannlig tillköll til Orkneyja, en erum sjálf nökkurir ráðamenn ok kölluð heldr djúpvitr; kemr oss ok eigi allt á óvart í ófriðinum.”

“It's clever of him to look for our support when we have so many powerful friends and marriage connections. Now that I've married off Margrét Hakon's Daughter to Earl Maddaðr of Atholl, we've many a good claim to Orkney, for he's the best-born of all the chieftains of Scotland, his father Melmari being brother of Malcolm King of Scots, father of David the present king. I'm not without influence myself and people think me pretty shrewd, so it's unlikely that I'll be fooled by whatever might happen in this conflict” (119).

Despite her confidence, however, Frakökk raises a poorly equipped army inexpertly led by her grandson Ölvir, whom Páll easily defeats (Chapter 64). Later, in Chapter 74, Frakökk's niece Margrét and her husband Earl Maddaðr plot with Sveinn Ásleifarson and are able to capture and threaten the life of Earl Páll, Margrét's brother (Chapter 75). They depose and possibly blind Páll so as to replace him with Margrét's three-year old son Haraldr Maddaðarson as the next earl and rival to Rögnvaldr. Although Rögnvaldr subsequently shows little fear of Frakökk, Sveinn Ásleifarson feels differently, stating of Frakökk and Ölvir: “Jafnan munu mein at þeim, meðan þau lifa” (Ch. 78; 177) /“As long as they're alive they'll always cause trouble” (Chapter 78, 144). Sveinn eventually burns Frakökk to death in her house. Margrét returns to the saga briefly in Chapters 92 and 93, where she bears Sveinn Ásleifarson's brother a child after the death of her

husband and later marries Erlendr the Young of Shetland, both of which events cause her son Haraldr great embarrassment and anger.

To be sure, female characters with similar independent streaks are found in both Irish and Norse traditions, and one need look no further than Medb of the *Táin* or Brynhildr of *Völsunga saga* for examples deeply rooted in each culture's mythologies. But it is also interesting to note that the motif seems more a shared feature of the region in general than a unique characteristic of only one tradition. And it is worth noting that in both *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* the chief exemplars are Gaelic women in relationships with Norse men. The same tendency recurs in other Icelandic sagas, including *Laxdæla saga* (Chapter 13), in which Höskuldr's silent concubine Melkorka eventually proves to be an Irish princess and a very effective advisor of her son Ólafr Peacock (Sveinsson 1934).

Another striking feature common to the two texts is the central narrative role they accord banners in connection with the Battle of Clontarf. Hudson (2002:249-50) notes in particular Chapter 89 of *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, in which Brian's harrying of undefended territories in Leinster (Laighin) leads the Scandinavians to prepare for battle at Magh n-Elda: "Ot concatar na gaill na forlosci i Fini ocus tuaith Etair, tancatar ina nagaid in Mag nElda, ocus ros comraicset ocus tucsat a nidna catha os aird" / "When the foreigners saw the conflagration in Fine Gall and the district of Edar, they came against them in Magh n-Elda, and they met, and raised their standards of battle on high" (Ch. 89; 154-55).

More striking, however, is the text's description of banners on Brian's side, and their importance for motivating or sustaining troops. In the height of the Battle of Clontarf, Brian is depicted taking a special interest in whether the banner of his son Murchadh is still aloft. Brian, we are told, is not on the battlefield himself but rather is bent in pious prayer at a convenient vantage point. In a narrative device commonplace in Irish literature, Brian repeatedly asks information of a young attendant (Latean), who describes what he sees, receiving in return the elder's canny interpretation of what has just been described. Brian pauses in his prayer a first time to ask about the banner, and when he hears that it is still standing, and with it many others belonging to the Dál Cais, he states happily: "Is maith in scel sin, am" / "That is good news indeed" (Ch. 113; 198-99) and returns to his prayers. A little later, he again asks for an update on the battle, inquiring about the status of his son's banner in particular. On hearing that the standard has moved westward but is still aloft, Brian states: "Is maith betit fir Erend, arse, cen bias in mergi sin na hessum, daig biaid a mesnech fein, ocus a nengnum in gach duni dib i cen iticerat in mergi sin." / "The men of Erin shall be well while that standard remains standing, because their courage and valor shall remain in them all, as long as they can see that standard" (Ch. 113; 198-99). Another fifty psalms, fifty prayers, and fifty Pater Nosters later, Brian inquires once more. The attendant describes the chaos of the battle, noting that the foreigners have been defeated, but that the standard of Murchadh has fallen. At that, Brian exclaims (Ch. 113; 200-01):

"Truagh an scel sin," ar Brian; "dar mo breithir" arse, "do thuit eineach ocus engnam Erenn an tan do thuit an meirge sin, ocus do thuit Ere de go fir, ocus nocha ticfa taraéis co bráth aon laoch a ionnsamhail na cosmaileis an laoich sin."

“That is sad news,” said Brian, “on my word,” said he, “the honour and valour of Erinn fell when that standard fell; and Erinn has fallen now indeed; and never shall there appear henceforth a champion comparable to or like to that champion.”

Brian now reveals that he had had a premonitory dream the night before in which Aibhell of Craig Liath (the banshee of the House of Munster) had appeared to him and told him that the first of his sons that he saw today would succeed him as king. With Murchadh dead, Brian now confers his throne upon Donnchadh, sending the attendant away to convey the news. He dies himself soon after. This account of a significant banner in the Battle of Clontarf contains no implication of magic. Rather, Brian appears simply to rely upon the banner to ascertain whether or not his son is still alive. Yet the textual connection with the banshee’s prophecy and Brian’s own repeated ominous attention to the banner lends it a kind of supernatural aura that can be sensed in the text.

In contrast, the banner of interest among the Orcadians at the Battle of Clontarf is that of Earl Sigurðr. In *Orkneyinga saga* (Chapter 11) we are explicitly told that Sigurðr’s banner depicts a raven in flight and is magic, possessing the particular characteristic that it will lead to victory its owner but doom to death the person who carries it. And interestingly, the narrator tells us that this banner is the product of an Irish woman—in fact, Sigurðr’s mother Eithne, daughter of a king Kjarval (Cerbhall mac Dúnlainge) of Ireland. We know from annals that Cerbhall was ruler of the kingdom of Osraige, a narrow realm squeezed between Leinster and Munster, running from the Viking settlement of Waterford inland all the way to the lower Midlands. In conferring the banner upon her son, Eithne—described as *margkunnig* (“magic”)—states: “Tak þú hér við merki því, er ek hefí gört þér af allri minni kunnáttu, ok vænti ek, at sigrsælt myni verða þeim, er fyrir er borit, en banvænt þeim, er berr” (Ch. 11; 25) / “Now, take this banner. I have made it for you with all the skill I have, and my belief is this: that it will bring victory to the man it’s carried before, but death to the one who carries it” (Ch. 11; 36-37). Sigurðr has a series of military successes as result of this magical device, but gradually his men seem to learn of its effect upon its carrier and begin to avoid it. In the midst of the Battle of Clontarf, the narrator states: “Þá varð engi til at bera hrafnsmérit, ok bar jarl sjálfr ok fell þar” (Ch. 12; 27) / “No one would carry the raven banner, so the Earl had to do it himself and he was killed” (Ch. 12; 38). The motif of the raven banner becomes more developed in *Njáls saga* (Chapter 157) as well as in *Þorsteins saga*, where it becomes a narrative hot potato passed feverishly between warriors fearing its inevitable effect. Sigurðr at last seizes the banner himself and stuffs it under his tunic, receiving a mortal blow soon after. Robert Hudson suggests that the authors of these later sagas may have had a version of *Orkneyinga saga* available to them or some other intermediary text or narrative drawing on the lore reflected in the *Orkneyinga saga* account. Significantly, although possibly Oðinnic in character and implication, the banner is depicted by the saga writer as the product of Irish sorcery, a further instance of the kind of cultural stereotyping operating in the text. Although Sigurðr is by implication half-Irish himself, and marries the daughter of King Malcolm of Scotland, his persona is presented as Norse and the magic he relies upon as Celtic.

As the above discussion indicates, in life Norse and Irish are portrayed as vastly different in comportment and temperament. In death, however, their heroes often are depicted with similar imagery of martyrdom or sainthood. Hagiography was a dominant narrative model as well as a

probable source for both texts, and the death scenes of key characters often evince striking, even surprising, hagiographic details. In *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib*, King Brian takes on saintly attributes in the midst of the Battle of Clontarf. At some seventy years of age, he has grown too old to do battle and must instead rest alongside the battlefield, praying fervently. His death is depicted as that of a martyr, even while he deals his attackers deadly blows just before that death. In *Orkneyinga saga* the deaths of both Earl Magnús and Earl Rögnvaldr are also depicted with hagiographic imagery, and characters after their deaths swear upon them as saints. Rögnvaldr makes a vow to Earl Magnús to aid him in his career (Chapter 68), while Sveinn Ásleifarson vows to Rögnvaldr at his death in Dublin (Chapter 108). For Marlene Ciklamini (1970) Earl Rögnvaldr is a martyr-like figure who strove to “curb the reckless pursuit of honor and blood revenge” at the heart of Orcadian culture of his day. As Rögnvaldr becomes inscribed as a saint, Sveinn Ásleifarson becomes in turn an embodiment of the figure of the “warrior of the heroic cast and a viking who was admired by a society which, though Christian, was largely heroic in outlook” (95). Maria-Claudia Tomany (2008) explores Magnús’s sanctity further, comparing the *Orkneyinga saga* account to surviving *vitae* regarding the saint. Thomas D. Hill (1981) reminds us of the degree to which even seemingly pagan, “heroic,” or purely secular details in such texts can stem from exegetical traditions and the narrative models afforded by saints’ lives and miracle collections. In this use of hagiographic imagery in the two texts, as probably in many other of the commonalities noted above, we are in no way dealing with a case of the direct influence of one text on the other, but rather of a shared reliance on an ambient literary and cultural tradition promoted by the monastic and broader cultural institutions of the region and reflected in various literary manifestations like the texts at hand.

## Conclusion

A linguistics conference in 1959 led to the first extensive publications on Norse-Celtic textual influences from scholars working within the Icelandic or Irish literary establishment, creating a set of observations open for later scholars to test or extend but that have often gone simply repeated as fact ever since. Proinsias Mac Cana’s views on the utter lack of influence of Old Norse on Irish literature were noted at the outset of this paper. Einar Ó. Sveinsson offered the Icelandic rejoinder, dismissing Celtic influence on Icelandic tradition as largely nonexistent, despite the acknowledged high rate of migration of Irish to the island of Iceland during the settlement period. Sveinsson states, “All things considered . . . it seems quite evident that Norse civilisation predominated in Iceland, the development there being the same as in many colonies, i.e., the largest immigrant population carries most weight and in course of a few generations absorbs the minority groups that come from other nationalities and have different traditions” (1957:4). Naturally, this rather simplistic rendering of colonial situations and multicultural contact no longer squares with scholarly understandings of these complex processes, and one could easily imagine that the Norse predominance asserted would be questioned by scholars of later generations. To be sure, although both Sveinsson and Mac Cana deny any degree of intercultural influence in their respective national literatures, they each go on in their articles to discuss a wide array of apparent influences and borrowings in both directions.

Characterizing such influences as insignificant and tangential to the celebrated national traditions of which each man was a recognized authority seems to have been a necessary preparatory remark in all such discussions of intercultural influences during the period.

In the last several decades, however, insightful studies have been produced by folklorists and medievalists with a strong interest in tracing intercultural influences, particularly of Gaelic tradition on Icelandic (Chesnutt 1968; Almqvist 1978-79; Sayers 1994; Gunnell 2007; Sigurðsson 2000), but to some extent in the opposite direction as well (Ní Mhaonaigh 2002; Downham 2005). Much of this work has taken place in response to the remarkable progress made in the field of archaeology regarding the Norse presence in the British Isles, work that has gone far to uncover the day-to-day life of these heretofore largely mythologized populations (Wallace 1992; Clarke et al. 1998; Larsen 2001; Downham 2007; Valante 2008; Graham-Campbell and Batey 1998). Assimilating these new understandings into their cultural perceptions and identity performances, it is no doubt accurate to say that modern Dubliners celebrate their city's Viking heritage to a much greater extent today than they would have a hundred years earlier, as evidenced by a thriving museum, public monuments, and ongoing archaeological investigations. In certain respects, both modern Irish and modern Icelanders are more comfortable with the notion of a hybrid past than they were a century ago.

If research on *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* has thus acknowledged the text's value as a rendering of medieval intercultural contact noted earlier and helped raise awareness of such processes on the popular level, such perspectives have not been extensively applied to *Orkneyinga saga*. As Michael Lange (2007) has shown, Orcadian identity has tended to stress on the one hand its Neolithic past as well as its Viking era over any acknowledgement of a specifically Celtic heritage that would tie the islands more closely to the current situation of Scottish rule. In this context, *Orkneyinga saga* has acquired the status of a national text, a chronicle that demonstrates conclusively the uniquely Norse character of these remote northern islands at the periphery of Scotland, albeit with interesting modifications in the early twenty-first century (Owen 2005; Tomany 2007).

On a broader, theoretical level, Gisli Sigurdsson (2000, 2004), Tommy Danielsson (2002) and Ian Beuermann (2006) have worked to develop a more nuanced and complex understanding of oral tradition in Old Norse literature, one that has begun to inform judgments about Icelandic literary history and the development of the sagas in particular (Andersson 2006). We are today more comfortable with the idea of a posited oral tradition that we cannot necessarily reconstruct but that we can tell existed through the renderings it receives or provokes in literary works. *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* are two such works, each decidedly literary and bookish, but each somehow engaged with an ambient historical tradition that the writers seem to acknowledge and make use of. Other texts drawing on the same immanent narrative could be added to the comparison, including the Isle of Man chronicle *Cronica Regum Mannie et Insularum*, and various works in Welsh that reference the same period and some of the same figures (Broderick 1991). When we draw these works into comparison with one another, we allow ourselves to imagine a world in which oral tradition passed easily between cultures that lived alongside each other, cultures that exchanged ideas in part through literary (monastic) channels but also through more mundane secular exchanges, particularly among populations that intermarried readily over the course of centuries. Such, of course, is not hard to imagine, as it



mirrors what we know about the region from archaeology and what we can say about contact situations in many other parts of the world. Yet this very logical understanding of the Irish Sea region has not been accepted among scholars until quite recently, in part, as I suggested at the outset of this article, because of a preference for monocultural analysis and the imagined construction of independent societies, histories, and cultures. If we allow ourselves to see the Irish Sea region as an area of cultural exchange and even merger, then *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* become not outlier texts but markers of sustained cultural contact, contact impossible to appreciate or even to note without the careful and demanding work of comparative analysis.

John Miles Foley, in surveying the state of the art in contemporary studies of oral tradition, writes (2010:17):

While the orality versus literacy thesis originally helped to create a niche for oral traditions alongside “literature”—making room in the discussion of verbal art for something other than single-authored, freestanding, epitomized texts . . . we now confront a natural plethora of diverse phenomena that draw both from oral traditions and from texts, and it has become our responsibility to create a suitably flexible theory to understand this remarkable diversity.

Within this theoretical enterprise, medieval texts—“voices from the past”—offer particular insights as works that have been composed, performed, received, and subsequently adapted in contexts that straddle any rigidly defined oral/written divide. As I have tried to suggest in this essay, this fused oral and literary context may also have crossed cultural and linguistic lines, even to the extent of joining populations that regarded each other, at least on some levels, as enemies. Arriving at a narrative of contact and exchange holds interest not only on the scholarly level but also as a historical example to set alongside the many fine studies of intercultural contact that have been produced in connection with contemporary societies. A comparison of *Cogadh Gáedel re Gallaib* and *Orkneyinga saga* reminds us that many of the processes that scholars today may perceive as quintessentially modern have abundant counterparts in earlier eras. In this respect, works such as these two medieval texts offer powerful insights into the workings of culture, narrative, and text-making within a shared but disputed common ground.

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