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ASPECTS OF NATURE
IN EARLY IRISH RELIGION

An Essay in the Phenomenology of Religion

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Ph.D. Thesis

Edinburgh University

1993



To Betty Farquhar, née Lyle

1924-1977



ABSTRACT

This study examines beliefs about nature in early Irish religion, comparing and contrasting them with similar beliefs elsewhere, particularly in the Bible. Examples are assembled from a wide range of early Irish literature including place-lore, sagas, eulogies, annals and mythological histories, as well as more specifically ecclesiastical material such as hagiography, apocrypha, liturgy and the works of Patrick.

The area of investigation, method and materials are described in chapter one, together with a brief discussion of terms and an introduction to developments in the study of primal religions. Subsequent chapters focus on particular aspects of nature, grouped under the following headings: a) the land with its mountains and hills, b) wells, rivers, and lochs, c) trees, woods and singing birds, d) poetry of the woods, e) sun and fire, f) bad weather and natural disasters.

Biblical parallels are discovered for many early Irish beliefs and practices. This is attributable partly to the conscious introduction of biblical material by medieval Irish scholars, but parallels also appear to have been present before the adoption of Christianity. This is found to be in keeping with the nature of primal religions and their relationship to Christianity as described by H.W. Turner and outlined in chapter one. Movements towards synthesis with or rejection of Irish primal traditions are presented in so far as beliefs about nature were affected. One of the main areas of convergence is identified as the belief that nature is a place of theophany.

The study focuses mainly on the period between the fifth and the twelfth centuries. Earlier traditions are also assumed to be present, though usually in modified form. Later material has occasionally been included where it seemed relevant.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the author of this thesis and that it is my own work.

Mary A. C. Low

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PREFACE

Off the West coast of Scotland, lies a tiny island said to have been visited by Brendan and later by Colum Cille on his way to Iona. Its ruined monastery is thought to have been built by monks from Iona as a place of retreat. It had been described to me several years previously by Rev. Joe Brown, who was formerly minister of the nearest mainland parish. In May 1987, I found myself making plans to go there. Feeling rather dazed after three intensive years as a theology student and lacking any clear sense of direction, the idea was to test the beginnings of an interest in Celtic spirituality by spending a day on the island.

One morning at the beginning of June, we jumped from the deck of a boat onto the rocks and started picking our way through the bog-cotton and the yellow irises towards the ruins. We came at them from behind, past the bake-house and down the narrow path with the garden and the graveyard to our right. Straight ahead was the monks' landing place, too narrow for our boat or any but the smallest craft.

We grazed our knees getting into the beehive cell, crouched in the souterrain, loitered in the roofless oratory. But what I remember most about that day was the sweep of the sky, the brightness of the sea, the seal who came up to look at us, the boatman's concern with the tides. Whatever I had been looking for from that rather self-conscious pilgrimage of discernment, the experience was mainly of a vibrant world of nature refusing to be ignored. Absurdly, this was not what I had expected.

I was familiar with the poem translated by Kenneth Jackson as 'St Columba's Island Hermitage': - *Meallach liom bheith i n-ucht oiléin*. I went home and read it again, together with the other nature poems in the *Celtic Miscellany*. Why did I find them so attractive? They were as fresh and inviting as a spring day. They were also unlike anything I had come across in Continental Christianity of the same period or earlier. Was this part of their attraction? Did they speak to some level of experience unvisited by the theologies of the Western Mediterranean, or rarely expressed there? I began see that poems like these might open the door to some interesting religious territory.

The resulting study extended well beyond the small number of nature poems usually assigned to the 'religious' 'monastic' or even 'hermit' sections of twentieth-century anthologies. Such poems were quickly seen to belong to a wider context in which nature was often involved in events or actions of more than ordinary significance.

I would like to thank my two supervisors at Edinburgh University: Professor James Mackey from the department of Theology and Religious Studies, New College, for his enthusiasm and critical support; and Professor William Gillies from the Celtic Studies department for giving so freely and patiently of his time. I am also grateful to the Faculty of Divinity for having had the confidence to pay my fees and provide me with a grant for the first three years.

Several other professors and scholars directed me to useful articles and warned of possible pitfalls. I am particularly indebted to the many teachers in Galway, Cork, Dublin, and Maynooth who offered advice and suggestions for further reading. In Edinburgh, Noël O'Donoghue supervised the first year of my research till his

retirement in 1988 and continued to provide encouragement thereafter. Frank Whaling also helped to lend definition to the study during its early stages. Brief interviews with Andrew Ross, John Parrott and Professor John Gibson were all invaluable, as were conversations with my fellow-students in the Celtic Christianity seminar and Dr Jill Munro. None of these people are in any way responsible for my mistakes, which are of course all my own.

The thesis would never have been completed without the good-humoured practical support of my husband, Bruce, who shared my moments of exasperation and excitement and willingly spent several holidays in Ireland and the Western Isles, looking for holy wells and various obscure monuments. The kindly interest of family and friends also helped me along. Special thanks are due to Muriel Wilson, Martin Marroni and Claire McCrae for proof-reading. Veronica Ross, Tony Cliff and Tom Cameron helped with various word-processing problems. John Goodall checked my Latin. Richard Hargreave provided the frontispiece. Chlöe was a constant unflappable presence. Last but not least, thanks are due to my father, Jim Farquhar, whose early lessons in writing have stood me in good stead.

Gattonside,

1st December 1992.

CHAPTER ONE

Area of investigation, method and materials

Three related circumstances gave rise to this study: a visit to an island associated with Colum Cille, a sense that nature was an important part of that island experience, and a reading of the 'Religion' section of *A Celtic Miscellany* by Kenneth Jackson, in particular the poem translated as 'St Columba's Island Hermitage'.¹ The relationship between nature and religion in Celtic Christianity presented itself as an interesting subject for research.

An early decision was taken to focus mainly on the Irish tradition. I have included under that heading, several texts relating to Iona and other parts of the Hebrides, since these often belong historically and linguistically to the same world. It has not been possible to include material from other Celtic countries, notably Wales. There is however a fine tradition of early Welsh nature poetry, which it is important to be aware of.

Having read through the 'Religion' section of *A Celtic Miscellany*, I turned to the section on 'Nature' and found further texts in which religion was clearly a factor. 'The Hermit's Hut', describes the beauty and abundance of the woods around Marbhán's hermitage.² In 'The Ivied Tree-Top' someone praises a 'little hut' or (in some translations 'oratory') which seems to be a tree sanctuary of some kind: 'My darling, God of heaven, was the thatcher who has thatched it'.³ Also in this section are a number of prayers

apparently addressed to the moon or the sun.⁴ These are taken from Alexander Carmichael's *Carmina Gadelica*.

Nature features again in Jackson's section on 'Description'. In one text a mysterious woman appears to Bran and describes to him 'The Islands of Earthly Paradise' - 'without sorrow, without grief, without death, without any sickness, without weakness'. Can this be included under the heading of religion? It is not the paradise of Eden or the New Jerusalem, but it is none the less a paradise - a place of everlasting bliss where death and suffering are unknown. This is not Christianity as we know it, ^{but} it clearly touches on important religious themes.

'The Islands of Earthly Paradise' forms the introduction to a larger work known as 'The Voyage of Bran' which belongs to a recognised genre of 'voyage literature'. Two similar voyage tales are categorised by Jackson as 'Celtic Magic'. This categorisation tends to imply that they are not religious texts, but 'The Voyage of Mael Dúin' and 'The Voyage of the Úi Chorra'⁵ both include religious motifs alongside descriptions of beautiful wooded islands, resplendent birds and so on. Most of the wonders and miracles in these tales are unfamiliar from a biblical or theological point of view. However, there are some recognisably Christian elements as well. For example, Mael Dúin and his companions meet a former companion of St Brendan living in a little church. They cross themselves with Brendan's writing tablet.⁶ In an earlier paragraph, Díurán takes possession of a silver net 'for the glory of the name of God' and brings it home to lay on the altar in Armagh.⁷ The Úi Chorra of the second story are brigands who become disciples of St Finnian

of Clonard.⁸ They meet bird-souls released from Hell, a sabbath-breaker, and a bird with the soul of a woman who introduces herself as 'of the land of Ireland' and 'one of your nuns'.⁹

A similar picture emerged from a reading of other famous anthologies: Kuno Meyer's *Ancient Irish Poetry*, Gerard Murphy's *Early Irish Lyrics* and Jackson's earlier *Studies in Early Celtic Nature Poetry*. I noted that some nature passages contain obvious Christian references, others do not. Some seem to be straightforward descriptions eg. of the seasons. Others employ motifs which are plainly mythological but again unfamiliar from a biblical or theological point of view. These are conventionally termed 'Otherworld' motifs, because they relate to places and beings from beyond the boundaries of everyday experience. The most likely source for these Otherworld motifs seemed to me to be pre-Christian cosmology and religion. However, no strict division was discernable between Otherworld texts and texts on explicitly Christian subjects. Sometimes both elements were present in the same text.

As far as nature is concerned, the same sort of imagery can be found in both. Trees, woods, islands, birds, water, sunlight, animals, plants, the weather - these began emerge as favourite motifs in all sections of the anthologies. It became clear that to study the explicitly Christian passages in isolation would be both impractical and unsound. The material was too well mixed within the texts and unknown dimensions of meaning could be missed through ignorance of the wider context.

Before going any further, it might be helpful to explain a few terms. I quickly abandoned Jackson's classification-system. It was probably never intended to mark rigid divisions but some of the distinctions which it implies are theologically unacceptable. His use of the term 'Religion' is particularly misleading. Jackson was not alone in equating religion with ecclesiastical subject-matter but this usage is too narrow to be adopted here. 'Religion' is hereafter used in the inclusive sense, ie. it is not taken to be co-extensive with Christianity or Christian monasticism. In the field of theology and religious studies, it is standard practice to refer to non-christian faiths as religions. There is therefore no reason to call the pre-christian faiths of Ireland anything other than religions.

The term 'magic' is not used here. This is simply to avoid prejudging unfamiliar rituals and beliefs by labelling them in this way. 'Magic' is almost always a pejorative term in theology, as it is in anthropology. It implies the manipulation of impersonal forces as opposed to the offering of prayers to God or the gods, primitive superstition rather than genuine faith.¹⁰ Its application to any past tradition is problematical but early Irish literature is full of stories of gods, goddesses and personal Otherworld powers in relationship with men and women. Some stories of weather-working might be thought of as examples of 'magic', but this is to assume that the elements and the forces governing them were seen as impersonal powers - a questionable view, as we shall see.

The terms 'myth' and 'mythology' can be understood in many different ways. I understand myth as a poetic narrative which explores ultimate questions and attempts to make sense of experience.

This is a working definition only. It is not intended as an original contribution to any wider debate. I do not equate mythology with fantasy or illusion or use it to distinguish non-Christian from Christian religious material. Both can be said to use mythology in their quest for meaning.

In order to get a clearer idea of what nature in general might have meant to the early peoples of Ireland, it was necessary to become familiar with a wider range of early Irish literature than I had first envisaged. Sagas, mythological histories, 'love stories', tales from the Finn Cycle, legal texts and so on, were studied alongside overtly ecclesiastical material like hagiography, liturgy, hymns, apocrypha and so-called 'hermit poetry'. The various collections of *Dindshenchas* - place lore - proved particularly useful. I used a preponderance of vernacular texts, expecting to find Irish Christians expressing themselves most freely and distinctively in their own language. This expectation was founded on the observation that the use of the vernacular has always been an essential step in the assimilation of Christianity by cultures other than its home culture, from Greece and Rome to contemporary Africa.¹¹ However, a belated look at the Latin hagiographies showed that nature imagery and miracles involving nature were present there as well. Future research might therefore pay more attention to the Hiberno-Latin literature. It is noticeable however that Patrick's fifth-century *Confession* uses nature themes very differently from the later Hiberno-Latin hagiographies. The development of a vernacular tradition in the intervening period could therefore have facilitated

the expression of more native attitudes towards nature in both languages.

Primary sources now became the foundation of the work. In the course of general reading, references to nature were noted wherever they occurred, particularly where there was a clear association with a sacred/Otherworld event, place or personage. They were then indexed under a variety of headings, eg: Trees, Water, etc. As some sections of the index became bulkier than others, possible chapter headings began to emerge. To some extent the choice of chapters reflects the amount of material available. Animals are an exception. They were excluded because it was realised at an early stage that they could take up an entire thesis of their own. As the chapter-headings began to emerge, research into other aspects of nature had to be discontinued. Constraints of time and space made it impossible to pursue beyond the preliminary stage, material on stones and rocks, the sea, plants (other than trees) or the moon and stars. Nor was it possible to examine every detail of the nature poetry tradition. Comments have generally been restricted to poems which have a direct bearing on the subject-matter in hand.

In its final form, the thesis comprises the following chapters:

1. Area of investigation, method and materials.
2. The Land (plains, hills and mountains)
3. Water sanctuaries (wells, lochs and rivers)
4. Trees, woods and singing birds
5. Poetry of the woods.
6. The Sun and fire.
7. Bad weather and Natural disasters.

The chapter on 'Trees, woods and singing birds' includes a certain amount of material on islands. Chapter five, 'Poetry of the Woods' is in effect a continuation of chapter four: a significant number of 'hermit' or monastic poems either have a woodland setting or use tree

and/or bird imagery at some point. Also included in this group are some poems from the 'wild man' tradition. These have proved difficult to categorise, but they often seem to have spiritual content even if their relationship to monastic poetry is not always clear. 'Poetry of the Woods' examines these various texts using insights gained from preceding chapters. I hope I may be excused for including *Meallach liom bheith i n-ucht oiléin* - 'St Columba's Island Hermitage' - in this section. Trees are not mentioned in it at all, but it is closely related to the tradition of island paradises and there is specific mention of the 'wondrous birds' with their 'joyful tune'.

'Bad Weather and Natural Disasters' examines passages in which nature appears as a hostile or destructive force. Some of the material included here could have been treated in earlier chapters, eg. barren land, dangerous waters, consuming fires. However, it was decided to collect these negative aspects together, along with storms and winter cold, a) in order to show that that the authors of these works were aware of this negative aspect of nature, and b) to see how they coped or failed to cope with this awareness. Although some biblical parallels are cited in this chapter, a comprehensive review would have taken us far beyond the bounds of this thesis into the complex realm of theodicy.

As for the period of the study, it has no defineable *terminus a quo*. The earliest written text which I have used is probably Patrick's fifth century *Confession*. However, scholars are divided on the extent to which pre-Christian oral traditions survived into the Christian period, influencing the written texts. This is a matter of on-going debate, but few would doubt that a certain amount of pre-

christian mythology survived in (more or less) modified form, and that the beliefs and practices of early Christian Ireland continued to be informed to some extent by what religionists and missionaries nowadays call the 'primal world-view' or 'primal imagination'. We shall return to these expressions in a moment.

The *terminus ad quem* is roughly the end of the twelfth century. At around this time, the first of the Continental orders became established in Ireland, a series of 'reforming' synods attempted to bring Irish Christianity more completely into line with European norms, and the Anglo-Norman invasion drastically reduced the power of the old Irish aristocracy - and with it their patronage of the older monasteries. Despite an intense burst of literary and cultural activity in the period leading up to and including these events, the twelfth-century has been called the end of the 'Celtic period' and as such, provides us with a useful stopping place, even if it did not bring the distinctiveness of Irish Christianity entirely to an end.¹² I have taken the liberty of including some late-medieval texts (eg. Bardic poetry) and items from the folk tradition where these seemed to illuminate the earlier material in an interesting way.

Although I read a number of purely historical works in the course of my research, this is not a thesis in church history or literary history. The task of situating each of the various texts in its precise historical context would certainly provide interesting additional information and a more detailed study might usefully explore developments in the use of nature themes and nature imagery within the Christian period. However, it has not been possible to pursue this question in any detail here.

Of more immediate interest to me was the extent to which early Irish Christians retained or departed from the attitudes towards nature held by their pre-Christian ancestors. Some commentators have suggested that in fact they retained a great deal from the past. P.L. Henry and Noël O'Donoghue both discern a 'pre-Christian savour' in the famous fourth stanza of *Faeth Fiada* - the early Irish prayer known as 'The Deer's Cry' or 'St Patrick's Breastplate' in which the petitioner, having invoked the Trinity, Christ and the angels, goes on to invoke the sun, moon, fire, lightning, wind, ocean, earth and rocks as well, as additional protection against the powers of darkness.¹³

Alexander Carmichael believed that some of the traditions in *Carmina Gadelica* were pre-Christian in origin. He even went so far as to speak of 'sun, moon, star and fire worship once prevalent, nor yet obsolete'.¹⁴ In many of these prayers, nature is plainly regarded as a source or vehicle of spiritual power: eg. the anointing of the palms with various natural substances in 'Invocation of the Graces', the splashing of the child with water in 'Bathing Prayer', the turning of the face to the sun in 'Invocation for Justice'.¹⁵ This property of nature, which we might call its 'sacramentality' (though such a word would never have been used at the time) finds theological echoes in the Prologue to John's Gospel, and in Teilhard's theology of the Cosmic Christ¹⁶ - but it is untypical of the theologies which dominated the Western Mediterranean in medieval times.

Over against this we have Robin Flower's belief that the best early Irish nature poems were the work of Christian hermits of the *Céli Dé* movement and that 'they, first in Europe had that strange

vision of natural things in an almost unnatural purity....¹⁷ The idea of this poetry as somehow 'first in Europe' helped me to understand part of my own fascination with it. The oldest poems precede Francis of Assisi's 'Canticle of the Sun' by some four or five centuries. But is this poetic vision of nature entirely attributable to Christianity? I was interested in the idea of 'eyes washed miraculously clear by a continual spiritual exercise' but spiritual exercise is not an exclusively Christian invention. Zazen and Shinto have both contributed to the famous tradition of nature poetry in Japan.¹⁸ Flower's thesis is further weakened by the difficulty of linking any of the so-called hermit poems with actual practising hermits.¹⁹ The monastery rather than the hermitage seems to have been the source for most of them,²⁰ However, for present purposes, the choice of subject matter is more interesting than the precise identity of their authors.

Gerard Murphy made the even more specific claim that early Irish nature poetry was a direct response to monotheism and the doctrine of Creation.²¹ He points out that it is written in non-traditional verse forms, which is true, but this tells us more about literary techniques than about subject matter. He goes on to say that the nature theme is generally absent from the 'early pagan sagas'. This statement requires more careful examination. While it would be true to say that nature is not a dominant theme in texts like 'The Cattle Raid of Cooley' - *Táin Bo Cuailgne* - and 'The Battle of Moytura' - *Cath Maige Tuired* - it is subtly present none the less and sometimes plays a decisive rôle in the action. Several rivers rise against Cú Chulainn's enemies in answer to his prayers; the Morrígan tells the

Dagda that she will be 'a giant oak in every ford and in every pass you will cross'; and in 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel' - *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* - the major rivers and lakes of Ireland contribute to Conaire's death by mysteriously depriving him of water.

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Nature is present again in the paradise landscapes of the Voyage and Journey traditions and is central to the Amairgen poems in the *Lebor Gabála* - the 'Book of Conquests'. Presumably Murphy regards these as 'wizardry' and 'magic' - terms which he uses to exclude certain unidentified texts from his discussion. The assumption seems to be that rituals, incantations and myths unfamiliar from a Christian point of view, are not to be taken seriously as religious material. This may account for his omission of the following chant attributed to Amairgen, poet of the Milesians:²³

I am wind on sea
I am ocean wave
I am roar of sea
I am bull of seven fights
I am vulture on cliff
I am dewdrop
I am fairest of flowers
I am boar for boldness
I am salmon in pool
I am lake on plain
I am a mountain in a man
I am a word of skill
I am the point of a weapon
I am God who fashions fire for a head
Who smooths the ruggedness of the mountain
Who is he who announces the ages of the moon?
And who, the place where the sunset falls?
Who calls the cattle from the house of Tethys?
On whom do the cattle of Tethys smile?...

'I am' is of course, also a phrase of special significance in the bible. It is Yahweh's self-designation in *Exodus* 3.14. and John's Gospel uses it several times in relation to the identity of Jesus.²⁴ But it seems unlikely that either of these could be the source for

this concentrated litany of nature. The wind, the sea, the loch, the sun and the pool all have numinous associations in early Ireland as we shall see.²⁵ There are also a number of Otherworld beasts: the bull and the salmon are particularly associated with divinity in many stories. Amairgen does not invoke these numinous entities as phenomena separate from himself. He even says at one point 'I am God' - *am dé* - and asks a series of 'who?' questions reminiscent of the theophany in Job 38. The sense of distance between subject and object, human and divine, has disappeared. It is surely no coincidence that this poem appears in the text at the moment when Amairgen steps ashore, at the mouth of the sacred river Boyne, to take possession of Ireland, the land whose name is also the name of a goddess.

It could be argued that this poem and similar examples, are simply a form of rhetoric.²⁶ Interpreted thus, Amairgen would be expressing his delight at having brought the Milesians safely ashore and boasting of his prowess - either out of professional pride or as a sort of psychological tactic. While both of these elements may be present in the poem, the inclusion of so many numinous places and creatures suggests that a purely rhetorical-psychological interpretation leaves part of the sense untouched. In addition to the resonances of 'I am' in the Judeo-Christian tradition, consider the following sacred text from the opposite end of the Indo-European world:

I am the Lion among beasts and the Eagle among birds...
I am the Wind among purifiers, the King Rama among warriors
I am the Crocodile among fishes, and I am the Ganges among rivers.²⁷

The extent of Indo-European influence on Celtic society has been widely discussed.²⁸ However, there need be no historical connection

between this and the Amairgen poem. It would certainly be rash to interpret early Irish poetry as if it were Vedantic theology. However, this extract from 'The Divine Manifestations' of Krishna' should alert us to the potential theological depths of 'I am wind on sea' even if its source of inspiration could be shown to be purely local and spontaneous. Of course, Amairgen is not a divine figure like Krishna, Yahweh or Christ. He is a mythological ancestor rather than a god. However, the poem could represent the utterance of an ecstatic or a medium and might even reflect a pre-Christian *credo* or hymn. One way or the other, it suggests that Christianity was not the only influence at work in early Irish attitudes towards nature.²⁹ Murphy also excludes the nature texts of the Finn Cycle, seeing them as an exercise in deliberate 'paganisation' - a point which Kenneth Jackson found unconvincing.³⁰

Murphy further examines a number of well-known hagiographies and notes that the early saints of Ireland were great lovers and observers of nature. Many of them are indeed presented as such, but the idea that this was entirely due to their Christian faith is more difficult to accept. From a Christian point of view, it is a flattering theory, but it fails to convince the fair-minded reader that there was really no such appreciation before the missionaries arrived. It also gives rise to the following interesting puzzle: if love of nature was in fact the result of missionary teaching, where did the missionaries get it from, since it is so untypical of the rest of Europe at the time?

Recent developments in the study of primal religions may offer a helpful perspective on the widely-held range of views which I first

associated with O'Donoghue and Carmichael on the one hand, and Flower and Murphy on the other. There can be no doubt that the early Irish Christians celebrated, as part of their new faith, a close connection between nature and the Sacred. They often expressed this with reference to the Bible. But a clearer understanding of the relationship between Christianity and the primal religions is necessary if we are to avoid the mistaken assumption that Christian origins rule out 'pagan' ones and vice versa. The biblical tradition itself is heavily influenced by the primal traditions of the Middle East. Some of these closely resemble primal traditions from Ireland. The potential for confusion - and assimilation - is considerable. These factors form an important part of the background to this thesis and I shall say more about them in a moment, but first it is necessary to explain the use of the terms 'primal religion', 'primal world views' and 'primal imagination'.

'Primal religion' has been adopted here in place of the term 'paganism' which is no longer current in the field of Religious Studies. It has been avoided here for several reasons, not least its ambiguity. At present it can be used (either positively or negatively depending on the attitude of the speaker) to denote, i) a hedonistic approach to life, ii) godlessness / lack of any religion, iii) pre-Christian religion, iv) post-Christian religion.

More serious than the problem of ambiguity, is the way in which it has often been applied (in a wholly negative way) by Christians, to largely unexamined non-Christian religions. This is incompatible both with the phenomenological approach, and with some central branches of Christian teaching: for example, the instruction of the

Second Vatican Council to enter into dialogue with other religions and to acknowledge, preserve and encourage the good spiritual and moral elements, as well as the social and cultural values to be found in them.³¹

The term 'paganism' is also rejected by many non-Western Christians, particularly in post-missionary Africa where exposure to the pejorative usage means that 'paganism' is widely understood as an insult to the ancestors and to many aspects of native culture which are otherwise held to be compatible with Christianity. Just as the missionaries of an earlier generation learned the inappropriateness of talking about 'the heathen', so today's missionaries are learning not to refer to Primalists as 'pagans'.

The problems of ambiguity and offensiveness are compounded by a third difficulty, that of envisaging a universal religion which is free from all traces of Primalism. In practice, the radical separation of primal religions from Christianity has proved impossible to realise or even to imagine. Harold Turner in his seminal article 'The primal religions of the world and their study', points out that primal religions not only precede other religious systems, they have also contributed to them. For Turner, primal religions are the 'most basic or fundamental religious forms' in the overall history of humankind ... 'a common religious heritage' of humanity'.³² This is not intended to imply that primal religions are all the same, or that they are fragments of some shattered original belief-system. Turner's point is that the primal religions are elemental as well as basic, primary as well as prior.³³ Any attempt

to eliminate them from subsequent faiths could be compared to knocking down the load-bearing walls of a house.

The terms 'primal imagination' and 'primal world-view' can be used to describe the outlook from within a living primal religion, but they have a wider application as well. They can also be applied to these elemental forms of faith as they subsist in the universal religions and continue to arise in human consciousness. Thus primal world views are discernable in the scriptures and ceremonies of the universal religions as well, and primal imagination plays an active rôle in the faith of many perfectly orthodox Christians, Jews, Moslems, Hindus, Buddhists and so on.

Turner describes six features which primal religions exhibit to varying degrees. These can be summarised as follows:

- 1) A sense of 'kinship with nature', of being children of 'mother Earth' and siblings of the plants and animals 'which have their own spiritual existence and place in the universe'.
- 2) A sense of 'creaturehood' or realistic humility about the human condition and a sense that human beings stand in need of 'a power not their own'.
- 3) A belief that human beings are 'not alone in the world', but live in a 'personalised universe' surrounded by friendly and unfriendly transcendent beings and spirits more powerful and ultimate than themselves.
- 4) A belief that men and women can 'enter into a relationship with [the] benevolent spirit-world and so share its powers and blessings and receive protection from evil forces'.

5) A sense that this relationship between human beings and the gods continues beyond death, so that in the majority of primal religions 'the ancestors ... remain united in affection and mutual obligations' with the living.

6) The belief that we live in a 'sacramental universe' where the 'physical' acts as a vehicle for the 'spiritual', with no sharp dichotomy between the two.

On first considering these six points, I realised that with minor adjustments they could also describe the sort of Christianity I grew up with and knew as a child: for gods read God, for spirits read angels/demons, for ancestors read family members who have died and gone to heaven. This apparent contradiction is resolved by the concept of the primal imagination as that element in human consciousness which preserves even in subsequent religions, certain 'basic or fundamental religious forms' which are elsewhere manifest in the primal religions. The question of whether the attitudes to nature exhibited by any one Irish text are 'pagan' or 'Christian' is now clearly seen to be based on an over-simplified model of religious identity. Christianity and primal religion are different certainly, but they are not in radical discontinuity. Christianity necessarily connects with and builds upon certain essential features of the primal tradition even as it transforms or rejects others.

As long as the influence of Semitic primal religions and the primal imagination on Judeo-Christian tradition remains unrecognised, there is a risk that attitudes to nature in early Christian Ireland will be misunderstood. Large sections of the thesis are therefore devoted to a review of nature texts in the Bible where, alongside the

familiar polemic against idolatrous worship, there is a clear tradition of sacred trees, wells, mountains and so on. These are often associated with divine or angelic appearances to the ancestors or prophets. They are a focus for sacred activities and symbolise divine attributes. Mountains are frequently important in the life of Jesus and John's Gospel is particularly fond of water imagery. Like the prophets and Psalmists, many New Testament writers use nature imagery in speaking of the Divine.

This review of biblical nature texts is a necessary part of the complex and ultimately impossible task of distinguishing native from biblical traditions in the early Irish texts. Without an awareness of this biblical material, one might easily overlook direct scriptural influence in texts which appear at first sight to be thoroughly native in character. However, this is not the only possible misreading. Since the primal religions represent 'a common religious heritage' of humankind, similarities between the Irish and the biblical material might be attributed to biblical influence and Christian teaching when in fact they are connected only at the level of the primal imagination. Secondly, in many texts these convergent biblical and native insights may have merged to the point where they are indistinguishable, or where an unknown and invisible amount of native material is submerged within an obviously Christian document. Add to this the influence of non-biblical Christian texts and the rôle of the creative imagination and it becomes clear that no amount of textual analysis will ever reconstruct a pre-Christian Irish nature theology.

On the other hand, no Christianity in the world is entirely unrelated to the pre-existing religion and culture of its people. If we are to discover what gives early Irish Christianity its distinctive fascination with nature, we must learn to recognise both biblical/theological influence and the influence of pre-Christian Irish culture and religion. One way of doing this is to carefully compare and contrast any Irish text where scriptural or theological influence is suspected, with its biblical/theological parallel or parallels. In this way it becomes possible to distinguish some of the constituent parts more clearly. In the process, one becomes aware of just how closely native and biblical mythology became interwoven as the early peoples of Ireland made Christianity their own, preserving within it a sense of the sacramental universe and of kinship with nature.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. *CM*, revised ed., Harmondsworth, 1971, 279-80
2. *Ibid.* 68-70
3. *Ibid.* 72-73
4. *Ibid.* 85-86
5. *Ibid.* 152-159, 160-162.
6. *Ibid.* 159.
7. *Ibid.* 158.
8. See full version of *Iomramh Churraig Hua Gcorra* - 'The Voyage of the Hui-Corra's Boat', ed. Whitley Stokes, *RC* 14, 22-69. According to Stokes (§5) these three brothers, Lochan, Enne and Silvester, are listed as saints in the *Féilire Oengusso* for 31st December.
9. Jackson, *Ibid.* 161.
10. For a more detailed discussion, see James P. Mackey, 'Magic and Celtic Primal Religion', *ZCP* 45, 1992, 66-84. Also J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, abridged edition, London, 1922, 48-52.
11. See A.F. Walls, 'The translation principle in Christian history', *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church*, ed. P.C. Stine, Leiden, 1990 24-39; John V. Taylor, *The Growth of the Church in Buganda*, London, 1958.
12. The term 'Irish Christianity' is not intended to conjure up any kind of monolithic organisation with clearly-defined doctrines of its own. The sources suggest a large number of loosely-connected communities of faith, each looking back to a founding abbot and meeting either formally or informally as occasion demanded.
13. See Noël O'Donoghue, 'St Patrick's Breastplate', *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity* ed. James P. Mackey, Edinburgh, 1989.46-54. 'Pre-Christian savour' is O'Donoghue's translation of a phrase used by P.L.Henry in *Saoithiulacht na Sean-Ghaeilge*, Dublin, 1978, 137.
14. C.G. I. 2nd ed., Edinburgh, 1928, xxxix.
15. *Ibid.* 6-7; 60-63; 52-59.
16. O'Donoghue describes a link between the Celtic and the Teilhardian world-views in 'St Patrick's Breastplate', *vid.sup.* n.13, 50, 60-62. Many of his former students will be familiar with his insight that Johannine Logos theology represents a similar point of view.
17. *The Irish Tradition*, Oxford, 1947, 42.
18. Comparisons have sometimes been made between Irish and Japanese nature poetry, most recently by Seamus Heaney in 'The God in the Tree', *Pleasures of Gaelic Poetry* ed. Seán MacRéamoinn, London, 1982, 25.
19. See Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Early Irish Hermit Poetry?', *Sages Saints and Storytellers*, ed. d. Ó Corráin, L. Breatnach, & K. McCone, Maynooth, 1989, 251-267.
20. Including some monasteries of the Culdee reform. See Peter O'Dwyer, *Céli Dé, Spiritual Reform in Ireland, 750-900*, 2nd ed., Dublin, 1981.
21. *Studies*, 20, 1931, 87-101.
22. *Táin Bo Cuailgne* Recension I. ed. Cecile O'Rahilly, Dublin, 1976. *Cath Maige Tuired* ed. Elizabeth Gray, Irish Texts Society 52, London, 1982, 48-49. Jeffrey Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, London, 1981, 104.
23. *LG* ed. R.A.S. Macalister, *ITS* 44, 110-113, from 33, §387 and 59, §418.

24. John 6,41; 8,12; 8,58; 10,7; 14,6; 15,5.
25. *vid.inf.* Chapters 2 and 5.
26. A number of Welsh 'boasting' poems are reminiscent of Amairgen's 'I Am': cf., J.E. Caerwyn Williams, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1971; Katherine Simms notes two similar Irish examples, including the three quatrains beginning 'I am the serpent destroying hosts', from the second Irish life of Máedóc of Ferns, in *Irish Lives of Saints*, ed. Charles Plummer, II, 277; Simms, 'Satire', 5.
27. *Bhagavad Gita* 10.30-31; Cf. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, London, 1970.
28. Myles Dillon, 'The archaism of the Irish tradition', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 37; 'The Hindu act of truth in Celtic tradition', *Modern Philology*, 44, 1947, 137; *Celt and Hindu*, Dublin, 1973, 11; Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology*, 16,60-61; Elizabeth A. Gray, *Cath Maige Tuired*, *Irish Texts Society*, 52, London, 1982, 5; and Ó'Cathasaigh, 'Cath Magh Tuired as Exemplary Myth', *Folio Gadelica - Essays Presented to R.A.Breatnach* ed. Pádraig de Brún, Cork, 1983, 3; For a caveat, see McCone, *Pagan Past*, 13-17,19-21.
29. 'I am wind on sea' is not an isolated example. The *LG* includes a number of other Amairgen poems. Eg:

I seek the land of Ireland.
 Cursed be the fruitful sea
 Fruitful the ranked highland,
 Ranked the showery wood,
 Showery the river of cataracts,
 Of cataracts the lake of pools,
 Of pools the hill of a well,
 Of a well of a people the assemblies,
 Of assemblies of the king of Temair,
 Temair hill of peoples,
 Peoples of the Sons of Míl,
 Of Míl of the ships, of barks,
 The high ship Ériu
 Ériu lofty, very green,
 An incantation very cunning,
 The great cunning of the wives of Bres,
 Of Bres, of the wives of Buaighe,
 The mighty lady Ériu,
 Erimón harried her,
 Ir, Eber sought for her -
 I seek the land of Ireland.

(*Ibid.* 114-117; 38-39 \$394;56-57 \$416) is not the place to attempt a detailed analysis of this poem, which is at times rather obscure, but it would seem that Amairgen is addressing the helpful Otherworld powers, perhaps Ériu herself: there are further references to numinous lochs, pools and water-courses, as well as to mountains, trees and hills. The poet praises Ériu for her fertility and her hospitality to the sons of Míl. The poem can be seen partly as a petition, but it is also a blessing: the subjunctive mood clearly conveys the intention that she should become as praiseworthy as he describes. His description of Ériu as having a dynasty of Milesian kings (based at Temair ie. Tara) reminds her indirectly of her promise that the land would be theirs forever. The prophetic intentions of his words are particularly

apparent here. In many ways this poem is like a Psalm: it invokes the divine being with praises and blessings and it inspires the people with confidence that the land is theirs, having been promised to them by a deity long ago. Despite these fundamental resemblances, the style and imagery of the piece remain totally unlike anything scriptural or ecclesiastical.

30. Jackson *Studies in Early Celtic Nature Poetry*, Cambridge, 1935, 172-3.
31. *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, 1965.
32. H.W. Turner, *Australian Essays in World Religions*, ed. Victor Hayes, Bedford Park, 1977, 28.
33. Cf. the following observation by A.F. Walls, director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, in Edinburgh: 'All other faiths are subsequent and represent, as it were, second thoughts; all other believers, or for that matter non-believers, are primalists underneath.' 'Primal Religious Traditions in Today's World', *Religion in Today's World*, ed. F. Whaling, Edinburgh, 1987, 252.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LAND

The land was sacred in early Irish religion. Even after the adoption of Christianity, its plains, hills, mountains, wells and rivers continued to be full of the memory of gods, goddesses and supernatural beings. Stories attaching to them were usually set in the mythical past, but they remained present to the imagination through poetry and literature as well as through festivals, assemblies and Christianised pilgrimages. For many biblical writers as well, the land was full of the divine presence. This has not always been recognised, either by Christians or non-Christians,¹ but it is particularly true of parts of the Hebrew Bible.

This common religious attitude towards the land, with its high places and watercourses, probably provided the peoples of early Ireland with one of the 'bridges' by which they were able to cross from the old religion to the new without becoming totally cut off from their religious and cultural heritage. This was part of a process of conscious and unconscious enculturation which began with the missionaries² and continued apace as the age of mission drew to a close and was replaced by an increasingly self-confident native church with its own leadership, its own language, and its own theological idiom. Many of the old sacred places were Christianised, often by adding another layer of myth to the compost heap of their religious associations. But there is little evidence of people being forced to abandon their sacred wells and holy mountains, which generally continued to be seen as suitable places for worship.

In the course of this chapter, we shall be looking first at the religious significance of the land as whole, then at its mountains and hills. At each stage, the Irish texts will be compared with biblical ones in order to illuminate some of the similarities and differences. The on-going question of borrowing versus common origin is not one which I expect to be able to answer completely, if indeed it can be answered by anyone. Biblical influence is clearly present in many texts, but most comparatists would also want to leave room for J.G. Frazer's view that the striking resemblances between different religions are often due to 'the similar and independent workings of the mind of man in his sincere if crude, attempts to fathom the secret of the universe, and to adjust his little life to its awful mysteries'.³ To pursue borrowing to its limits would take us far beyond the range of this thesis. Hilda Ellis Davidson has drawn attention to similarities between the early Celtic religious attitude towards nature and that of the Scandinavian and Germanic religions.⁴ The peoples of Asia Minor, Greece and Rome also had their holy mountains, sacred waters and so on.⁵ However, it will not be possible to pursue these connections here.

I. THE GODDESSES AND THE LAND

a) The Sovereignty myth: The land is at the very heart of the sovereignty myth. During the reign of a good king, the land was held to flourish through his ritual marriage to the 'sovereignty goddess' and his exercise of *fír flathemon* - the kingly virtue by which a rightful ruler pronounces fair and true judgements in harmony with the cosmic order. Unfair judgements traditionally led to his downfall. Conair Mór is a good example of both scenarios. In his heyday, the kingdom enjoys 'the three crowns of Ériu: the crown of corn, the crown

of flowers and the crown of acorns.⁶ Later, his unfair judgements in favour of his foster-brothers cost him his kingship and his life.⁷ The later medieval chieftain, Tadhg Mac Ruaidhri was praised by his bard on account of the good weather, fine crops and so on: the land blossomed under his rule.⁸

The sovereignty myth sees the ruler as wedded to the land, that is, to the goddess, through whom everything will flourish if his judgements remain true and fair. At some level clearly, the land and the goddess are one. There is no single source for the sovereignty myth. Its characteristic features appear commonly where good and bad government are to be illustrated, or good and bad candidates for kingship. Sovereignty motifs occur in relation to many different goddesses, so that in the *Lebor Gabála* they are attached to Ériu, elsewhere to Medb, Étaín, Eithne, Mór Muman and many others. Stories of her relationship with the king sometimes begin when he encounters her as a young woman of supernatural beauty. At other times she appears first as a *cailleach* - a hag - before being transformed (or transforming herself) into a beauty. Often she offers him a cup of wine or ale, and this becomes the sign and seal of their relationship.⁹

She becomes his bride and he becomes king, united not only with the goddess and therefore with the land, but also perhaps the Otherworld in general. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, in his illuminating article "The Semantics of *Síd*" has shown how through this marriage bond or covenant, the king becomes a link person between the two worlds; the *áes síde* have 'delegated' sovereignty to him.¹⁰ As long as he rules according to their standards of truth and right judgement (which he

may have acquired from them through an Otherworld teacher or father or through a gift) and as long as he respects the limits set upon him through his *geasa* or taboos, there will be peace - *síd* - in the land; his bride will blossom and the kingdom will thrive. If he abuses his position, all this will be reversed: crops will fail, there will be famine and disease, enemies will overrun the country, and it will not be long before he loses both the sovereignty of the kingdom and his own life. The goddess herself survives from generation to generation, seemingly eternal like the land itself. This does not preclude stories of her death, but she is always likely to reappear, in recognisable form, sometimes bearing exactly the same name.

There are many variations to this story, but these are its principal components. I have taken the liberty of arranging them into one sequence, rather than quoting directly from the texts.¹¹ It is worth noting that scenes from this myth sometimes turn up in stories which have nothing to do with kingship. There are occasional examples of other people effecting the transformation of a *cailleach* - the poet Senchán Torpeist for example or Dubh Ruis the harper.¹² This is one reason why I hesitate to say that there was a complete physical identification between the goddess and the land or kingdom. While they are very close and may at some stage have been one and the same, we should remain open to the possibility that she is not limited by her identification with the land; as we shall see, goddesses with sovereignty features in one context often have other spheres of influence as well.

b) The Dindshenchas: The identification of the goddess with the land is found frequently in the collections of onomastic tradition known as *dindshenchas* - place-lore.¹³ *Dindshenchas* is found in all kinds of other works as well: in the *Táin* for example, and the Finn Cycle. This preoccupation with the land was habitual and deep-seated, here as in Israel where the biblical writers make frequent asides about the history and meaning of certain place-names. It seems to have been important to know the land intimately and to remember (or invent) ways in which it was associated with various deities, ancestors and heroes. No doubt it was important, in the days before maps, to know the lie of the land as precisely as possible and to be able to demonstrate ancestral claims. But it was not at this stage simply an inanimate object, the prey of economic forces. There was still a recognition that it had, in a very real sense, a life of its own, which could make or break the people who depended upon it. In the end, it held more power of life and death over the people than any king.

The *dindshenchas* was compiled between the tenth and the twelfth centuries. Much of the material appears to be very old¹⁴ and the sense of it is wearing thin in places. Some of it has been revised and elaborated: the fair of Carmun for example¹⁵ is described very much as a medieval fair, with a careful eye to matters of rank and precedence. Mass is offered at the close, and Patrick, Brigit, Coemgen and Colum Cille are invoked as patrons. But for all the lateness of this account, the tradition may indeed reach back into pre-history. Its pre-Christian origins are freely proclaimed, alongside its ecclesiastical credentials.

Fairs like these were generally traced back to a number of female figures whom we may call, provisionally, the 'festival goddesses'. Carmun, Tailtiu and Macha are three of the most significant. There was also a fair at Cruachu, named after a little-known figure called Crochen - said in one source to be a handmaid of Medb's mother, Étain.¹⁶ The names of these founding goddesses are also place-names, so again there is a clear identification with the land. Recognising their importance, Marie-Louise Sjoestedt referred to them as the 'mother goddesses'¹⁷ because their festivals were said to ensure life and fruitfulness, powers incidentally which are also displayed by male deities like Lugh of the harvest festival and the Dagda, otherwise known as Eochaid Ollathair or 'All Father'. The term 'fertility goddesses' springs to mind, but one questions the usefulness of this term. It begs too many questions about the nature of the pre-Christian Irish pantheon, and restricts their function without evidence. We do not after all refer to the Christian father God as a 'fertility god' although harvest festivals were held in his honour and it was believed that he would feed his people with finest wheat and make Israel bloom like a lily.¹⁸

The 'festival goddesses', like the 'Sovereignty', to whom they are closely related (if they are not one and the same) were clearly associated in some way with fruitfulness and good weather; but like the 'Sovereignty' their power was also said to extend the establishment of peace and stability in the land: 'grey-bearded men, friendship among chieftains.'¹⁹ This peace was supposed to be acted out during the fair-days at Carmun and Teltown, with the various parties giving pledges of non-violence for the duration of the fair.²⁰

Nor was this intended to be merely a temporary truce; the promulgation of laws and judgements is also named among the business of Carmun fair.²¹ The intention was clearly to establish an agreed code of behaviour between neighbours and to iron out any possible causes of disagreement in a relatively congenial atmosphere.

This can be seen as an extension of the goddesses' involvement with the land and its people. Without peace and stability, the agricultural cycle would be disrupted, famine would threaten and with it, weakness, disease, and vulnerability to enemies. Through holding the fair of Carmun, people expected: *corn and milk and freedom...good cheer in every house, fruit, nets of fish...*²² The *Dindshenchas* associates the fairs particularly with Lughnasad, the pre-harvest festival celebrated at the beginning of August. This was also referred to as *Brón Trogain* - 'when the earth sorrows under its fruits,'²³ as if the earth was in labour, but had not yet given birth.

In Armagh, 'the fair of Patrick of Macha'²⁴ was traditionally linked with the triad of goddesses called Macha. The farmland around Armagh city is said to have been named after Macha, wife of Nemed, who cleared a plain for her and named it after her when she died.²⁵ Another Macha, Macha Mong-ruad - Red-haired Macha - is said to have ordered the construction of Emain Macha when she was queen of the area. One version of her story says that the fair was held to lament her, just as the fairs of Carmun and Tailtiu were believed to be the funeral games of their founding goddesses.²⁶ A third Macha,²⁷ was made to race against Conchobar's horses during the autumn festival, and died soon afterwards giving birth to twins. Patrick and his successors established themselves on a nearby hill, Ard-Macha - the

heights of Macha - where the present-day cathedral still stands. Here in this great centre of early Irish Christianity, a plain, an earthworks, and a hill all bear the name of Macha and are associated with the August festival.

The gathering at Teltown or Tailtiu was held on a hillside near the confluence of the Boyne and the Blackwater, by present-day Navan.²⁸ Tailtiu, in the *Dindshenchas* was the daughter of Mag Mór - 'great plain'. Like Macha wife of Nemed, she and her mother have strong agricultural connections and were said to have been in Ireland before the Gaels and even before their gods. According to the tradition, Tailtiu was widowed when these newcomers arrived, and became the wife of the new chief, who kept her in captivity. She spent her time clearing trees with an axe and reclaiming meadowland till 'it became a plain blossoming with clover'.²⁹ She is named as one of the many fosterers of Lug.

Unlike Macha, Tlachta and a number of others, Tailtiu does not die in childbirth, but her work in the forest is also a life-giving work from which she dies. She asks that funeral games be held to lament her and promises that as long as she is remembered and accepted, all kinds of benefits will result: for fifteen days before and after Teltown fair, there would be "corn and milk in every house, peace and fair weather for the feast."³⁰ The parallel with Carmun is clear, and again the hope seems to have been that this prosperity and peace would continue throughout the period between fairs.

Despite the detailed *Dindshenchas* of Carmun, there is no agreement as to its physical location. The poet describes people genuflecting and chanting Psalms above her 'hallowed water',³¹ so there must have

been a significant river or pool nearby as at Tailtiu, but whether the site was Wexford or Kildare or some other place, we shall probably never know.³² Carmun's eponymous goddess was thought of as 'a fierce marauding woman' who came to Ireland with her three sons, devastating everything in sight - the sons by plunder, Carmun by blighting the fruit-trees or the corn.³³ Here the farming-fertility connection is shown in the negative. Like the Sovereignty Goddess, Carmun has the power to withhold life as well as to give it. She is eventually defeated by the *tuatha De Danann*, the sons are sent into exile and she dies. But the celebrations which follow are certainly not straightforward exultation at the death of an enemy. There is admiration, respect, even some regret:

Thither came for the delight of her beauty
To keen and raise the first wailing over her
The tuatha Dé over this noble plain eastward
It was the first true assembly of Carmun.³⁴

A hill near Athboy in County Meath is named after a goddess called Tlachta who died giving birth to triplets. A fair was held there as well.³⁵ The 'rampart' of Tara was said to be the burial mound of Tea who had hills dedicated to her all over Ireland.³⁶ There was of course a famous gathering at Tara - the *feis* held to inaugurate a new king. This seems to have been a different sort of festival, more clearly related to the 'sovereignty goddess'³⁷ but like the others it has a goddess name, a hilltop association, and a concern with fertility. There may have been more assemblies than those mentioned in the tradition, and many presiding goddesses whose names are long since forgotten.³⁸

Perhaps the most striking identification of goddess-name and place-name is the name of Ireland - Ériu. Together with her two 'sisters', Banba and Fóbla, this triple deity is in some way synonymous

with the island itself. The tradition tells us that Carmun, Macha, Tailtiu, Tlachta and the like are dead and buried. In one recension of the *Lebor Gabhála*, even Ériu and her sisters are said to have been killed during the Milesian invasion.³⁹ But there is a sense in which these various goddesses never entirely disappear. Their influence lingered on; the festivals continued to be held. And through a passing reference in the 'Death of Crimthainn' - *Aided Crimthainn maic Fidaig* we get a glimpse of a goddess called Mongfhinn 'to whom women and the common people still offer their prayers.'⁴⁰ Mongfhinn was also believed to be dead, or more accurately perhaps to have died on the eve of Samain - the autumn festival. But people still prayed to her. This is in its own way, no less paradoxical than the Christian practice of praying to Jesus or the saints.

The *dindshenchas* shows a degree of continuity between the old religion and the new. The old myths still held a certain power - otherwise why invoke them? - and the benefits of Carmun fair could be ascribed first to herself and then, without further ado, to the Christian God:

may there be given to them, from the Lord,
the earth with her pleasant fruits.⁴¹

The goddess has taken up the position almost of a patron saint while the celebrant asks, in this rather oblique manner, for the blessings of peace and plenty. Whether her death is part of the original myth or not is impossible to tell. It could be a device to distance her from a Christian audience or, if we are right in thinking that Lughnasad assimilated an earlier goddess festival, it could date from that time. On the other hand, her death may have been symbolic of the turn of the

year, as in the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Whatever the explanation or the theology, these festivals can be seen as celebrations of the great provider, the giver of life.

II. THE LAND IN THE BIBLE

The relationship between God and the land in the Hebrew bible is usually that of creator and sustainer:

In his hand are the depths of the earth
The heights of the mountains are his also
To him belongs the sea for he made it
And the dry land, shaped by his hands.⁴²

The image of Yahweh shaping the contours of the land suggests both an intimate connection and a certain distance between him and his work. Generally speaking, the Judeo-Christian tradition has tended to emphasise God's otherness and transcendence. The creator was nevertheless believed to be intimately involved with his creation - moulding it like a potter or a sculptor, sending or withholding the rain, making the crops grow and so on.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob does not commonly give his name to lands and settlements. Where this does occur, it is part of a wider description as in Beth'el, etymologised by one of the authors of Genesis as 'house of El'. Another example would be Isra-el, he who strives with El;⁴³ Only Peni'el, face of El, approaches the sort of physical identification which we shall find in Ireland.⁴⁴ The land is however, immensely important in the Old Testament. The call of Abraham is to 'a land that I will show you',⁴⁵ The call of Moses is to 'a land flowing with milk and honey',⁴⁶ The Jewish experience of God in the bible (and again today) is intimately bound up with the land of Israel, its fruitfulness, and its peace or lack of it. Rain and drought, stability and war, bumper harvests and sickness were all

ascribed to the hand of God who went by many names: El (with all its variations) Yahweh, Adonai, or the Elohim.

Around the time of the exile, prophets like Jeremiah and others frequently denounced the leaders of society for damaging the covenant relationship by which Yahweh kept his people secure in the land. Hosea in particular, uses the image of a broken marriage. The marriage of Yahweh with his people is different from that of the Irish 'sovereignty goddess' with the king - most obviously in the reversal of genders. There can be no question of Ireland having borrowed this idea from the bible. Both draw on an image of sacred marriage, uniting human and divine, and common to many religions. The prophets of Israel, like the myth-makers of Ireland, also saw blessings and disasters as signs of divine favour or disfavour.⁴⁷ In Israel their denunciations give way now and again to a longing for some future time when peace and prosperity will be restored - a return to the golden age of the Davidic kingship in the coming of the Messiah, or even a return to Eden, a sort of paradise regained:

The wolf shall lie down with the lamb....they shall beat their swords into ploughshares....the mountains shall drip with sweet wine, and the hills shall flow with milk.⁴⁸

Such visions of peace and fertility are of course very like the condition of Ireland under a good king.

The term 'land of promise' is also common to both: 'Ireland became a land of promise during [Cormac's] reign'⁴⁹; 'Abraham sojourned in the land of promise' - but in the latter case there is no utopian description.⁵⁰ The milk-and-honey land promised to Moses is a more likely source for the term *Tír Tairmgiri* which is probably a direct

translation from the latin *terra repromisionis*⁵¹ But all faiths have their paradise, and even if the Irish Christians did borrow some of their terminology from the bible, they often ignored much of its content and substituted something which they valued from their own tradition. Milk and honey do not figure prominently either in the *Tír Tairngiri* or in *Tír na n'Óc* - the land of the young - or in *Mag Mell* - the delightful plain. The term *Tír na mBéo* - land of the living - may also be biblical in origin, but there it tends to mean simply 'here and now' ie. not the 'Pit' - the place of the dead. Again, there are no extended descriptions of the land of the living in the bible.⁵² If the term has indeed been adopted from abroad, it has been grafted on to native content, so that far from being a synonym for everyday human life, *Tír na mBéo* is an Otherworld paradise to be reached only after a journey of some kind.

Echtra Cormaic i Tír Tairngiri - Cormac's journey to the land of promise - describes a thoroughly Celtic paradise with a silver fountain, hazel trees, salmon, hot baths, feasting on roast pork. There is also a self-harvesting field, and seven miraculous sheep and cattle which provide as much wool and milk as anyone could possibly need.⁵³ The idea of ease and abundance is the same here as in the land flowing with milk and honey. What need was there to borrow foreign imagery for paradise when they already had their own? Some of the *echtraí* and *immrama* undoubtedly add Christian elements to the various paradise islands: Psalm-singing birds for example, but psalms apart - birds and islands are far from being standard features of any biblical paradise. We shall return to this in chapter three; for the moment let it be said that Ireland and Israel both had their own paradise lands,

different but 'congruent',⁵⁴ so that a certain amount of fusion was inevitable.

There are several places in the bible where the straightforward theology of sin and retribution, virtue and reward, begins to be questioned⁵⁵ It is nevertheless one of the commonest ways in which people of all religions and cultures have tried to make sense of evil and suffering. Prophets like Amos believed, rightly or wrongly, that it was the hypocrisy and injustice of Jerusalem's leaders which led to its downfall. In Ireland, as we have seen, a similar logic was applied in that the Otherworld powers were believed to withdraw their support from a king who failed to govern truthfully and fairly. In both Ireland and Israel leadership was vested in a king who held his mandate from an Otherworld source - God or the Sovereignty Goddess.⁵⁶ The quality of this relationship was reflected in both cases by the Land, which flourished or withered in direct proportion to the king's justice or *fír flathemon*. One of the Psalmists has this idea in mind when he makes the following plea:

Give the king your justice, O God,
And your righteousness to the royal son
May he judge your people with righteousness
And your poor with justice,
Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people
and the hills in righteousness.⁵⁷

The coincidence of Irish and Judeo-Christian sources is so striking at this point that it raises the question whether the virtue of *fír flathemon* might not have been adopted from the bible to express a new ideology of Christian kingship. This is perfectly possible, but again the adoption of Christian terminology is no proof of a revolutionary change of outlook. On the contrary, the virtues of 'righteousness and justice' may have found favour in Ireland precisely because they reinforced certain established ideals of kingship. Whatever the extent

of the convergence between the two traditions, Irish kingship retained its own character in many ways. One clear difference is the biblical emphasis on the king's protection of the 'widow and orphan' and the poor in general. Some equivalent concern finds its way into the Irish lives of saints, but is rarely articulated with reference to the king or the warrior aristocracy. There is also the whole goddess dimension of Irish kingship and the land. Although sacred marriage is present as an image in parts of the bible, the Irish version not only had a different conception of the Divine in terms of gender; it also had a continuing ritual expression which has no equivalent in Christianity.

III. MOUNTAINS AND HILLS

a) In Ireland; As we have seen, place-names in Ireland are often Goddess-names as well. Goddesses seem to have had a particular association with hills and mountains. Sometimes it was believed that an Otherworld woman had frequented such places, like Mis of Slieve Mis who wandered the mountain mad with grief till the king's harper cured her with his love and effected her transformation.⁵⁸ At other times the goddess was said to be buried under the hill like Carmun or Tailtiu or Buí, whose name attaches to the *tumulus* at Knowth (*Cnoc Buí*), overlooking the Boyne near Newgrange.⁵⁹ Often they still exerted some kind of influence from their burial place. Indeed the *síd* mounds, which were the graves of the ancestors in stone-age times, are paradoxically lively places, full of music and feasting. These fairy hills are probably the commonest Otherworld location found in the texts, commoner than any version of the land of promise. Whole households of deities might be found there, near at hand, but only occasionally visible.

Créide, in the *Acallam na Senórach*, lives in the *síd* mound on the Paps of Anu, and Finn spending the eve of Samain on the same mountain, sees the fairy-knolls open and a feast in progress.⁶⁰ On that same night he avenges the death of a friend who had been killed wooing an Otherworld woman from another fairy hill - Cruachan Brig Ele.⁶¹ The name Cruachu is also a goddess name, as we have seen. Medb is Medb of Cruachan, now Rathcroghan near the village of Tulsk in Roscommon.⁶² There are a large number of *tumuli* on this site, several wells, and the famous cave, Oweynagat - cave of the cats. This is a non-funerary souterrain rather than a cave, and appears frequently in the mythology: the Morrígan emerges from it; Nerai disappears into it and never returns; malevolent birds fly out of it, wild pigs, cats and female werewolves too.⁶³ An ogam inscription on the lintel appears to refer to Medb: MAQI MEDDVII - though its authenticity is called into question by the curiously masculine form of the name.⁶⁴ Feidelm, the prophetess who foresees Medb's defeat at the beginning of the *Táin*, comes from *síd Chruachna*⁶⁵, and lest all its associations appear to be baleful: a wounded hero is taken there and comes out healed in *Táin Bó Fraích*.⁶⁶ Rathcroghan was probably once an inauguration place like Emain and Tara.⁶⁷

The three Machas are associated with a plain and two hills - Emain Macha and Ard Macha. In County Limerick, Cnoc Áine was said to be frequented by Áine, who was wooed roughly (and unsuccessfully) by the king of Munster's son on the night of Samain. She appears later as the wife of a Munster earl in the fifteenth century and was still associated with a local family as late as 1896. It was around this time that a group of girls reported having met her on Cnoc Áine on

Midsummer's Eve. It was the custom for people to gather there on that particular night to light fires and bless the cattle. As the night wore on, Áine appeared and revealed to the girls a crowd of invisible people who had been there waiting, since 'they wanted the hill to themselves.'⁶⁸

At times the identification of the land and the goddess was so close that various features of the landscape came to be seen as her body: we have already mentioned the Kerry mountains known as the Paps of Anu. Festival-goers at Carnun made their way 'across the noble smooth cheek of ancient Carnun'. This sort of body imagery persisted into the bardic period: the Christian poet Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe describes Jesus' sepulchre as '*the womb of the earth*'⁶⁹ Even today, the metaphor of the land as a woman's body still has a certain potency among Irish poets.⁷⁰ The theories of the biologist James Lovelock, consciously refer back to this way of thinking. His 'Gaia hypothesis' - that 'the entire range of living matter on Earth... could be regarded as constituting a single living entity.'⁷¹ is named after the Greek goddess 'wide-bosomed Gaia' who is of course the earth.⁷²

It is probably impossible to reconstruct a consistent pre-Christian theology from all these scraps, if indeed there ever was one. Sometimes the goddess and the land appear to be one and the same; more often she inhabits the territory associated with her. She may live under the ground or roam about on the surface. Sometimes her mountain is a natural feature, sometimes it is artificially constructed. We are probably dealing with layer upon layer of religious imagination going back through Christian to the primal

religions of Celtic and pre-Celtic times. The mounds themselves are among the oldest human constructions in the world.

Despite all these variations, the core symbol 'mountain' remains.⁷³ It would seem that mountains and hills were seen as places of theophany, where the goddess might appear at any moment, or where one might suddenly 'see' into the Otherworld. How did this association come about? Did people really encounter a supernatural reality there? It has been suggested that such phenomena belong to a stage in the evolution of consciousness, before the inner and outer worlds were as sharply differentiated as they are today.⁷⁴ Others believe that this sort of consciousness is still accessible - to poets, for example, and presumably to other artists as well.⁷⁵ Did the girls who claimed to have met Áine on Midsummer's Eve project her onto the external world from some normally inaccessible level of their minds? Did they simply invent the story to draw attention to themselves? Or was it perhaps a traditional way of describing some experience which we would now express quite differently? People with little or no experience of such matters, will probably find this sort of explanation more acceptable than the proposition that it is sometimes possible to encounter an externally existing spirit-world. However, the existence of such a world seems to have been taken for granted in rural Ireland from earliest times until relatively recently. Even today such beliefs have not entirely disappeared, and are even attracting a certain amount of renewed interest.⁷⁶

Another reason why mountains and hills mediated an experience of the Divine, may be to do with their physical characteristics. High places are places of power in a very practical way: easily defended,

commanding a distant view. If the deity is one who protects his or her people from invaders, then the mountain would be one of the places where this protective function would have been most strongly felt. Looking down on the enemy from a great height would indeed give one a sense of having the gods at your side. Kings were often inaugurated on top of *tumuli* which must often have been *side*. Practically speaking, this enabled the assembled tribe to witness the event; but it probably had a symbolic meaning as well - such that his kingship rested, or was founded, on the 'mystical support' of the Otherworld.⁷⁷

In the *Acallam* however, C ael is tested rather than protected on the Paps of Anu, where he lies 'exposed to difficulties, for four days and half a week.'⁷⁸ Finn's night on the Paps of Anu is also a night of testing: he goes armed - previous men have died there - and engages in a blind combat with the mountain's Otherworld inhabitants. In another part of the tradition, St Patrick fasts against God for forty days and forty nights on Croaghpatrick, driving a hard bargain.⁷⁹ Christians have often shied away from this idea of confrontation with God. But Patrick, in this story, is perhaps no more stubborn than Job as regards the righteousness of his cause. One might also cite the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel, and even Jesus in Gethsemane. In comparison with the agony in the garden, his earlier temptation in the wilderness is almost a calm exchange of proof-texts. Interestingly, both of these trials traditionally took place on mountains: the Mount of Temptation outside Jericho and the Mount of Olives outside Jerusalem.

It would be satisfying to be able to make some link between spiritual 'peak experiences,' and the sense of exhilaration which

climbers sometimes experience on the tops of mountains today. But this this is not a link which one finds often in early Irish literature.

'Delightful to be on the hill of Howth,' writes one twelfth century poet, imagining Colum Cille's feelings of at-homeness before exile.⁸⁰ There is certainly a sense of pleasure here, and perhaps some echo of the protective mountain - the mountain refuge - but whether it could be called a 'peak experience' is dubious. In another poem, the cliffs and crags of Arran are praised, but from a safe distance.⁸¹ The real mountain-man amongst poets is probably Suibne, *fer benn* - man of peaks, or antlers⁸² - who is usually miserable on the mountain-top - unless the following poem is an exception. Like Michael O'Clery, Murphy classes it as a Suibne poem, although the manuscript ascribes it to Moling:

I love to hear blackbirds warbling, and to listen to mass: Time passes swiftly for me as I rest above Durad Faithlenn. / I sleep to those melodies on mountain tops and tree tops; the tunes which I hear are music to my soul.⁸³

The main source of pleasure here is not in fact the mountain, but the music of the birds and the distant chanting from the monastery. Suibne does not usually find the mountain so gentle: it is more often a place of terrible loneliness and bitter cold. A tenth-century poet preferred to contemplate the winter mountain from the comfort of a warm fire: /

Cosy our pot on its hook,
Crazy the hut on the slope of Lon
The snow has crushed the wood here,
Toilsome to climb up Ben-bo.⁸⁴

It is surely not insignificant that the fairy hills were usually in fact burial mounds - prehistoric houses of the dead. We do not know what beliefs the megalithic people had about heaven and the afterlife,

but the Celts (arriving much later) saw the *tumuli* both as as Otherworld dwellings, inhabited by beautiful men and women, and also as places from which frightening things might emerge.

I would suggest that to visit the mountain or the fairy hill was sometimes (and still can be) to become aware of mortality.⁸⁵ It is as if the mystery of death and the miracle of being alive, coincide on the holy mountain, releasing a powerful blend of thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations. In such a situation, it is difficult to ignore the fact that the world is largely governed by forces beyond our control. Very little is known about the origins of the monastery on Skellig Michael, but it is by all accounts a hard, dangerous, beautiful place, where one is constantly at the mercy of the elements. As such, it may well have been the kind of place where this sort of experience was deliberately sought out, for whatever reason.

b) Mountains and hills in the bible: Biblical writers also thought of mountains as places of power where the divine presence might be felt, heard or even seen. There is no space here to list all the Holy Mountains of Israel or all the occasions on which God is encountered on the high places. The Old Testament scholar Roland De Vaux, notes that many of Israel's holy places, including the mountains, had been sacred from earliest times. They were Semitic sanctuaries long before the bible was written - centres for the primal religions of the Canaanites, Hittites, and Phoenicians as well as for the Hebrews.⁸⁶ Such sites belong to the bedrock of religion in the Middle East; on these were laid the foundations of present-day Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Intuitions which formed here, nourished the imagination of

the later biblical writers. Even as they struggled to dissociate themselves from high places and spreading trees in the interests of a purer Yahwistic cult centred in Jerusalem, their writings remained full of nature imagery drawn in many cases from the religious environment of the past.

At an early period in their history, the Israelites thought of Yahweh as dwelling in or on a sacred mountain in the Wilderness, or perhaps in a cave on that mountain.⁸⁷ This was where they would go to await the theophany - the voice or vision of God.⁸⁸ According to one tradition, this mountain was Horeb where Moses saw the burning bush and later received the covenant.⁸⁹ This same mountain was associated with Elijah who spends the night in a cave there before hearing the voice of God telling him to go out and stand outside, where he experiences the earthquake, wind and fire which precede the theophany itself as a 'low murmuring sound' or 'gentle breeze'.⁹⁰ In another version of how the covenant was received, it is Mount Sinai which is called 'the mountain of God.' Yahweh descends upon it⁹¹ and Moses goes up to meet him, together with a number of other people and 'they beheld God and ate and drank.' Other holy mountains in the area were Thabor, Carmel and Hermon. All three of these were sacred to several different Semitic cults.⁹² Hermon is sometimes identified with Mount Zion, whose temple came to be thought of as the only true dwelling place of Yahweh.⁹³ The Psalmist occasionally feels that God does not just *live* on the mountain: he *is* the mountain:

The Lord is my rock and my fortress, and my deliverer
My God, my rock in whom I take refuge.⁹⁴

This is of course a metaphor, but it is almost certainly based on earlier close associations between God and the mountains and high places.

The 'high places' of the biblical times and earlier were not always naturally occurring mountains. The texts also talk about high places being built, or in some cases 'cast down.' The word for such a place is *bamah*. De Vaux explains:

The one and only meaning which suits all the references is 'a mound or knoll' for the purposes of cultic worship. They may have used sometimes a prominent rock, but it would seem that this mound was usually artificial.⁹⁵

He goes on to review some of the archeological evidence including the discovery of a large oval platform dating from the third millenium B.C. - ie. roughly contemporary with Newgrange - a circular heap of stones fourteen yards across, which in Ireland would be called a cairn, and a series of artificial mounds on the crest of a hill near Jerusalem.⁹⁶ In the bible *bamôth* often have as 'adornments' a *massebah* or standing stone and an '*asherah* which might be either a wooden pole or a living tree. These cultic objects were regarded as male and female symbols. They recalled a theophany, and were also signs of the continuing divine presence. Jacob set up his pillow as a *massebah* at Beth'el.⁹⁷ Cairns and standing stones connected with *bamôth* were also sometimes memorials to the dead.⁹⁸ Later writers who were anxious, for whatever reason, to dissociate Israel completely from Canaanite practices, denounced *bamôth* as anathema to all true worshippers of Yahweh. This has tended to obscure the fact that from earliest times to the end of the monarchical period, these knolls or artificial mounds were not just legitimate but favoured holy places of Israel where Samuel and Solomon went to offer sacrifices.⁹⁹

The New Testament and early Christian traditions also looked to the mountains. According to tradition, Mount Thabor was the mountain

of Transfiguration, in a story modelled to some extent on the theophany at Horeb.¹⁰⁰ Mountains are among Jesus' favourite places of prayer in the gospels, particularly mountains at night.¹⁰¹ He also teaches and prophesies on various hills¹⁰² including in the temple on Mount Zion. He spends his last night on the Mount of Olives, (once sacred to a god known as Yahweh 'the destroyer')¹⁰³ and dies on the hill of Calvary. This death came to be seen in its own way as a powerful theophany: 'Truly this was the Son of God!'¹⁰⁴

When we compare the lore of the high places in Israel and in early Ireland, there are clear similarities. For Suibhne and the Psalmist, the mountain could be a place of refuge. More often perhaps it was an awesome place, a place of testing. It belonged to that marginal zone, like the biblical wilderness, where the Otherworld / God was felt to be very near.¹⁰⁵ Mountains seem to have been thought of by the ancients as places where this sort of encounter might be deliberately sought out, in the hope of ... what? There are probably as many answers to this question as there are stories of the experience: Patrick goes to the Rick to strike a bargain; Finn to seek revenge; Moses returns with the Covenant; Elijah with renewed courage. The historical Patrick tells us in his *Confession* (§16) that he prayed on the mountain out of love and fear, with the spirit of fervour within him.

Religious imagination went to work slightly differently in Ireland and Israel. For example, Ireland preserved the image of the deities in or under the hill, long after the Israelites had largely gone over to the image of a sky God who had a house or footstool on a hill in

Jerusalem. Secondly, Ireland retained the female image of God for much longer. The goddess or goddesses have never really disappeared from Irish poetry and mythology, whereas one has to go back to the Ras Shamra texts to discover that El once had a female partner.¹⁰⁶

The story of St Patrick on the Rick is a good example of the way that native and biblical traditions could meet and merge around a common symbol. At first sight the sacredness of Croaghpatrick looks like pure importation. Tirechán was probably the first to publicise it in connection with Patrick who does not appear at all in the relevant *Dindshenchas*.¹⁰⁷ The story is packed with biblical allusions including a series of explicit comparisons between Patrick on the Rick and Moses on Mount Sinai. The saint is credited with a refrain similar to the words of Jacob after his night of wrestling with the angel or with God: 'I will not let you go unless you bless me,' says Jacob¹⁰⁸. whereas Patrick keeps repeating 'I will not get me gone, since I have been tormented, till I am blessed.' There are also echoes of Abraham's bargaining with God on behalf of Sodom: if fifty just men could be found there Yahweh would not destroy the city. Abraham gets this number reduced from fifty to forty and so on down to ten.¹⁰⁹ Patrick haggles over how many souls shall be freed from hell through his intercession, and as the numbers rise steadily, he adds a number of other conditions as well: that the Saxons may leave the land, that he alone may judge the Irish on the Day of Judgement.

However, there is clearly another source of inspiration at work here. The writer uses the bible very boldly and freely, mixing at least three stories together and presenting Patrick as a figure

greater than Abraham who failed, after all, to save Sodom and Gomorrah from destruction, and equal to Moses and a number of other biblical figures. Secondly, there is no mention of fasting in the story of Moses on Mount Sinai, or on Horeb either for that matter. We have already seen how in one version of the story Moses and his companions 'beheld God and ate and drank.'¹¹⁰ The fasting motif could have been derived from Jesus' temptation in the wilderness - this may be where the helpful angel comes from - but there is no bargaining with God in that story. The most likely source is therefore the native institution of fasting for redress: 'I will not get me gone since I have been tormented...' *Patrick's terms are uncompromising: '... till I am dead or till the requests are granted to me.'*¹¹¹ *The petition against the Saxons and the granting of what amounts to the power of the keys to Patrick, shows that the story is also to some extent motivated by political concerns.*

The Croaghpatrick story is a fusion, sometimes an uncomfortable fusion, of biblical and native elements. But it is unlikely to have been the original reason for the summer pilgrimage which thousands of people still make to the mountain at the beginning of August. Like many similar pilgrimages, this coincides with the old festival of Lughnasad and is therefore almost certainly pre-christian in origin. The presence of a large number of standing stones in the salt marshes between the mountain and the sea suggests that the area had been some kind of cultic centre since earliest times.

In his discussion of the relationship between the Canaanites and the Hebrews, Sandmel makes the following interesting observation:

The Canaanites were well rooted in the land when the Hebrews entered it. Moreover they were not exterminated, though in the five books of Moses the injunction that they should be is frequent. While religious differences between the Hebrews and the Canaanites were sharp at some points, the notion that the Canaanites and the Hebrews were totally different ..is a misconception... When peoples who have nothing in common encounter one another, little mutual interpenetration can occur; when peoples meet who have something in common, they can naturally borrow from each other.¹¹²

A similar situation seems to have prevailed in Ireland between primal religionists and Christians. They had in common a set of primary religious symbols which would have been instantly familiar from the native point of view, and which were, for the missionaries, part of the common currency of biblical language. Not all Christians were of a mind to make this link. Perhaps they wished to avoid syncretism, not realising that their own faith was already a powerful synthesis of Semitic, Greek, North African, and Roman thought. Perhaps like the prophets, they were reacting against some aspect of the old religion; but it is notoriously difficult to distinguish righteous indignation from propaganda: Jews, Christians, Canaanites and Irish pagans have all been accused at one time or other of 'abominations' notably the sacrifice of children. While human sacrifice was undoubtedly practiced in parts of Europe and the Middle East at some time, it is difficult to know how widespread it was and whether the two Irish references to child sacrifice - at Cromm Cruach and elsewhere - represent a historical reality or simply a desire to demonise the Irish primal religions by linking them with the worship of Molech in the Old Testament.¹¹³

Later visitors from Britain and the continent took it for granted that their own brand of Christianity was the norm and that Ireland's was an aberration. Often they simply condemned what they did not

recognise. The twelfth-century pronouncement of Giraldus Cambrensis that 'the Irish are ignorant of the rudiments of the faith' seems to have been based mainly on the observation that they did not pay tithes or obey the same code of canon law.¹¹⁴ Irish Christians had long been under pressure to conform more completely to continental patterns. With the coming of the continental orders and then the Anglo-Norman invaders, this pressure was greatly increased. The sort of vigorous enculturation, which we found even amongst fervent anti-primalists like Muirchú, began to die back.

Not before time, some might say. It had reinterpreted the native tradition almost beyond recognition, and at the same time had assimilated so much from it, developing at such a tangent from continental theology, that on some points the two seem irreconcilable: the story of Patrick on the Rick is unusual, to say the least. His confrontational fasting against God is a far cry from either the Augustinian guilt or mystical self-abandonment. His power of the keys and his place on the day of judgement must certainly have raised a few eyebrows in Europe. As we continue to examine the distinctive faith of the early Irish Christians, it will be necessary to ask: how genuine and successful a synthesis is this? The danger would be that it failed to do justice to either. In the presence of Patrick the super-druid of Tara, terrifying the 'heathen' into submission, one can not help feeling that in this case at least, we are getting the worst of both worlds.

So what about the land with its hills and mountains? Is there a genuine convergence here between the best insights of the two traditions? In the bible, the land is created by God *ex nihilo*. In

Ireland, the creation story if it ever existed, has been lost; it would be foolish to attempt a comparison from the scraps which are left. In Ireland the land is strongly associated with a female deity, who sometimes seems almost indistinguishable from it; her influence over such abstract virtues as peace, truth and fairness, suggests however that she was more than simply an 'earth mother' or a 'fertility goddess'. In Israel, the dominant image of God is male, and his relationship with the land is like that of a craftsman, shaping the world, but not himself fully part of it. This idea was to be significantly modified by the 'logos' theology of John's gospel, which forged a connection between Jesus of Nazareth, the Old Testament Word of God, and the Stoic doctrine of a life-principle present in all things. The doctrine of the incarnation also envisages a God who has entered much more fully into the created world.

Both traditions believed that the world was being continually sustained and renewed by the Divine power or powers - in Israel, Yahweh, in Ireland, a goddess or *aes síde* in general. This was accomplished in cooperation with men and women, through their king or other tribal representative. Through good government the land would thrive, through bad, it could become a desert; human behaviour was believed to directly affect the life-giving relationship with the deity through the land. Both traditions had similar visions of the Land of Promise - the paradise kingdom, which was like the kingdom of God or the blissful Otherworld - made present among them.

Mountains and hills clearly belong to a very ancient stratum of religious experience common to both. In Israel, some of these fell from favour as early Hebrew religion developed into Judaism, but

others remained, notably Sinai, Horeb and Zion, and Jesus' practice of praying on mountain tops carries the tradition forward into Christianity. In Ireland as well, Cruachu and the hill of Tara fell into disuse, but other high places, like Croaghpatrick and Armagh, continued as centres of worship. The goddess myth lingered around others - like Cnoc Áine - for centuries. The high places of Israel were perhaps less likely to be burial mounds than those in Ireland. But they were equally places where people might be tested to their limits in an encounter with the Divine. In both traditions, mountains were places of theophany where God, or the Otherworld, was felt to be very near.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 2 - THE LAND

1. For a review of the debate within the churches see Ian Bradley, *God is Green*, London 1990. And from a different perspective: Lynn White 'The Historical Roots of our ecologic crisis' *Science*, 155,3767,10.3.67. 1204-7.
2. For a discussion of the unavoidable translation process which occurs when people try to communicate their faith from one language and culture to another, see John V. Taylor, *The Growth of the Church in Buganda*, London, 1958, especially pp.253-4 on 'the difference between the message proclaimed and the message heard'; also, A.F. Walls, 'The translation principle in Christian history', *Bible Translation and the Spread of the Church*, ed. P.C. Stein, Leiden, 1990, 24-39. The process of conscious and deliberate enculturation (or 'acculturation' - both terms are used) is not a new phenomenon. Gregory the Great is said to have recommended it to Augustine of Canterbury; Bede EH.I.30.
3. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, (abridged edition) London, 1922, re-issued 1990, 358.
4. *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, Manchester, 1988, passim.
5. There was a clear Celtic presence in the Eastern Mediterranean between the fourth and the second centuries B.C. They are often described as practising their own version of the local religion: in an aside in the story of the Golden Fleece we hear that among the Celts, amber was said to be the tears of Apollo. (Michael Grant, *Myths of the Greeks and Romans* 295.) Henri Hubert (*The Greatness and Decline of the Celts*, 53) notes that according to Plutarch, there was once a Celtic priestess of the Phrygian Artemis. Her name was Camma. (*Amat.*22.768. *De Mul.Virt.*20.257) Even if there is no direct connection between these Eastern Celts and their Irish relations, some of the classical myths were undoubtedly familiar to medieval Irish writers: the *Codex Bernensis* 363 for example includes extracts from Virgil, Ovid, and Horace. (See Ludwig Bieler, *Ireland Harbinger of the Middle Ages*, 125) The Morrigan is equated at one point in the *Táin* with Allecto, one of the Furies. O'Rahilly, *Táin* 152.
6. From *Togail Bruidne Da Derga - 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel'* - ed. J. Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas* 77-78. Cf. 67: 'There was a great bounty no thunder, no stormy weather in Conaire's reign'. Cf. Morann's advice to a young king that through *fír flathemon* there is peace, security, fruitfulness, abundance of fish and protection of cattle. *Audacht Moraind* ed. F. Kelly, Dublin, 1976, §12-28.
7. *Ibid.* 67-112. Cf. Donn of the Milesians who insults the goddess Ériu and fails to inherit the land. *LG* 5 (ITS 44) 44-45 §414 from *Lebor na hUidre* manuscript.
8. Tadhg's reign brings abundance of corn, hazels, acorns, honey and sloes. He is good for cattle and also for the weather, peace and freedom. Lambert McKenna, *Aithdioogluim Dána* Irish Texts Society 37 and 40, 5 §20.
9. Kim McCone provides a number of examples. *Pagan Past and Christian Present*, 109.
10. *Eigse*, 17,145.
11. Among the *loci classici* of the sovereignty myth are *Echtra mac nEchnach Muigmedóin*, the story of Lugaid Laíg in *Cóir Anmann*,

- Tochmarc Étaín*, and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. See also articles by Tomás Ó Máille, 'Medb Cruachna' *ZCP*, 17, 1927, 129-46; R.A. Breatnach, 'The Lady and the King' *Studies* 42, 1953, 321-6; Prionsias MacCana, 'Aspects of the theme of King and Goddess' *EC*, 7, 1955-56, 76-114, 356-413; 8, 1958-9, 59-65; Máire Bhreatnach, 'The Sovereignty Goddess as Goddess of death' *ZCP*, 39, 1982, 243-60.
12. Patrick Ford, 'The blind the dumb and the ugly' *CMCS*, 19, 1990, 30-34; Brian Ó Cuív, 'The Romance of Mis and Dubh Ruis' *Celtica* 2, 1952-54, 325. The existence of these other stories provides us with an interesting puzzle. Are they secondary reflexes of the theme at a literary level, or do they tell us something about the nature of the Irish deities in the immediately pre-Christian period? Could it be that the goddess who transforms herself (or is transformed) is less specific to kingship than has generally been supposed? The strict division of Irish goddesses into categories like 'sovereignty' 'land' 'war' and so on, is difficult to maintain. Cf. J. Carey, 'Notes on the Irish war goddess', *Eigse* 19, 1982-3, 263-75.
 13. This led Carey (vid. sup. n.12) to use both terms: 'the sovereignty goddess' and the 'land goddess'; but as he himself observes, it could be argued that 'the tutelary quality itself implies the concept of sovereignty'. *Ibid.*, 274-5.
 14. Carney, *Early Irish Poetry*, 59-60.
 15. E.J. Gwynn, *Metrical Dindshenchas*, III, Todd Lectures Series 10, Dublin, 1913, 2-25.
 16. Michael Herryty. 'A Survey of the Royal Site of Cruachain in Connacht' *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries in Ireland*, 113, 1983, 124; Cóir Anmann ed. W. Stokes, *Irische Texte* III, 403.
 17. M.-L. Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, London, 1949, 24-31.
 18. Ps. 147, 14; Hos. 14, 6.
 19. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III, 18-19, line 119.
 20. The annals record the rare occasions on which this peace was seriously disrupted. See D.A. Binchy, 'The Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara' *Eriu* 18-19, 1958, 118-120.
 21. Stokes, *Rennes Dindshenchas*, RC, 15, 314 Dues and tributes were supposed to be settled at the same time: *Met.Dind.* III. 18-19. lines 214-5
 22. Stokes, *Rennes*, *Ibid.*
 23. M. MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasad*, Dublin, 1962, I, 7, citing *Tochmarc Emire*, RC, 11, 442-3.
 24. As it is called in Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* IV, Todd Lectures Series 11, Dublin, 1924, 158-9.
 25. Stokes, *Rennes*, RC, XVI, 45.
 26. *Ibid.*, 44-46.
 27. daughter of Sainrith mac Imbaith, "and men say that she was Grian Banchure 'the sun of women' daughter of Midir of Brí Léith." *Rennes*, *Ibid*, 46.
 28. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* IV. 146-163.
 29. In *Rennes*, her husband clears it, just as Nemed clears a plain for his wife Macha.
 30. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* IV. 152-3.
 31. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III. 22-23. line 275.
 32. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III. 2-25, 470-7.

33. For fruit, see Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III.4-5. line 41-42; For corn, see Rennes, RC, 15, 311, 313.
34. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III.8-9 lines 73-76.
35. Stokes, Rennes, RC, 16, 61.
36. Stokes, Rennes, RC, 15, 277-279.
37. Binchy, 'The Fair of Tailtiu and the feast of Tara', 127-136.
38. Sjoestedt, *GHC*, 30.
39. Michael Clery's recension, 268-271, §188; Cf., Macalister, *LG*, 5, ITS 44, 60-63, §421, where they are referred to simply as 'the three queens of the Tuatha Dé Danann.'
40. 'Samain is called by the rabble 'Mongfind's feast', for she was a witch and had magical power while she was in the flesh; wherefore women and the rabble make petitions to her on Samain.', *Aided Crimthaind Maic Fidaig*, ed. Stokes, RC, 24, 178-9, §7. Cf., *Echtra Mac Echdach Mugmedóin*, where Eochaid Mugmedón reigns at Tara with his wife, also called Mongfind. Her four sons, who compete for the kingship with Niall Nóigíallaig, are known as *macc na mórríona*, which Maud Joynt translates as 'the sons of the great queen'. *Ériu*, 4, 1910, 91-111, §68a.
41. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III, 22-23. lines 271-2.
42. Ps. 95.
43. Gen. 28.19; 32.27. The Hebrew El can be seen as a development of the Canaanite supreme god El, who was thought of as father and creator, but was not otherwise particularly associated with the land.
44. Gen. 32.20.
45. Gen. 12.1.
46. Ex. 3.8.
47. Eg: Amos. 4-5:7.
48. Compiled from examples of this genre as found in passages beginning at Is. 11.6, Mic. 4.3, and Joel. 3.18.
49. Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Semantics of *síd*', *Eigse*, 17, 1977-79, 144.
50. Heb. 9.11.
51. According to M. Dillon, *Early Irish Literature*, London, 1948, 101.
52. Ps. 27, 13; 52, 5; 116, 9; 142, 5; Job 28, 13; Ezek. 32, 23-31; 26, 20; Is. 28, 11; 53, 8.
53. *IT*, 3. 183-221, §35-52.
54. The idea of 'congruence' is borrowed from Ó Cathasaigh, 'Semantics,' 144.
55. Eg., Ps. 73, 3-14; Job passim; Lk. 6, 20-25; 13, 1-5; Jn. 9, 1-3. The unjust death of a just man can be seen as one of the mainsprings of New Testament theology.
56. Cf. the 'mystical support' of human sovereignties identified by Georges Dumézil and applied to the early Irish kingship by Ó Cathasaigh, 'Semantics', 145.
57. Ps. 72, 1-3.
58. Ó Cuív, 'The Romance of Mis and Dubh Ruis'.
59. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III, 40; Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Eponym of Cnogba' *Eigse*, 22, 1987, 27.
60. O'Grady, *SG*, II, 120; 'The Boyish Exploits of Finn' ed. K. Meyer, *Eriu* 1, 1904-5, 180-190, §24.
61. *Ibid.* §21-26.
62. Descriptions of the site and reviews of its historical and mythological associations are taken from Michael Herrity *op.cit.*

- and John Waddell, 'The royal site in Connacht', *Journal of Irish Archeology* I, 1983, 21-46.
63. Waddell, *Ibid.*, 21-22.
 64. *Ibid.* 33; unfortunately, the authenticity of this ogam is called into question by the curiously masculine form of the name. According to W. Gillies, the feminine form would have been 'Medvias'. Personal communication, February 1991.
 65. O'Rahilly, *Táin*, 143.
 66. See 'The Cattle Raid of Fróech', trans. J.Gantz, *EIMS*, 122.
 67. Waddell *op.cit* 23; *Cath Muigi Rath* ed. C.Marstrander *Eriu* 1911, 233.
 68. Áine traditions taken from Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, 112; A ráth Aine [*sic*], appears in *Ac.Sen.*, where Aine is the daughter of Modharn king of Alba from *dún mónaidh*, which O'Grady takes to be Edinburgh. She goes to Ireland to marry Finn, lives there for seven years, builds a *rath*, and bears two sons - Illan and Aedh beg, after whose birth she dies. Caeilte sings the lament of *ráth Aine* in *SG*. II. 180-181.
 69. *The Poems of Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe* ed. N.J.A. Williams, Dublin, 1980, 237.XXI.5.
 70. E.g. Nuala Ní Dhomhaill, "Marvellous Grass" and "The Shannon estuary welcomes the fish." *Selected poems: Rogha Dánta*, Dublin, 1988, 74-75; 158-159.
 71. J.E.Lovelock, *Gaia: a New Look at Life on Earth*, Oxford, 1979, 9, quoted by Bradley, *God is Green*, 19.
 72. In the Greek creation myth, *Theogony*, Gaia is the first deity to come into being after Chaos. Michael Grant, *Myths of the Greeks and Romans*, London, 1989, 100.
 73. I acknowledge a debt to Noël Dermot O'Donoghue whose lectures and seminars to undergraduates at New College, Edinburgh, often included reflections on the image of the mountain, with particular reference to the prayer of Jesus, St John of the Cross, and Celtic spirituality. Some of these reflections are included in his book on prayer: *The Holy Mountain*, Dublin, 1983.
 74. Bede Griffiths, *A New Vision of Reality*, London, 1989, 37-38.
 75. Nuala Ní Dhomhaill, for example, speaks of the fairy fort as an inner reality - a subconscious other world from which the 'stuff' of poetry arises. *Sleeping with Monsters* ed. Wilson / Somerville-Arjat, Edinburgh, 1990, 149-150.
 76. This would seem to be the direction of recent, as yet unpublished, work by O'Donoghue. Building on developments in the theology of imagination, and on personal knowledge of the religious traditions of Glen Flesk, Co. Kerry, he suggests that imagination may be the means of discovering (in the sense of 'uncovering') this normally hidden world: 'The Imaginal World and the Celtic Tradition', Edinburgh, 1992. Cf. the early twentieth century researches William James's pupil, W.Y. Evans Wentz: *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*, Oxford, 1911.
 77. Ó Cathasaigh's describes this as the 'material/physical correlative of an abstract connection': 'Semantics' 148.
 78. O'Grady, *SG*, II, 120.
 79. *The Tripartite Life of Patrick*, ed. W. Stokes, vol.1, 112-121, and vol.2, 474-479.
 80. K. Meyer, *AIP*, 85.
 81. *Ibid.*, 59.

82. O'Keefe, *Buile Suibhne*, §40, 80-81.
83. G. Murphy, *EIL*, 115.
84. Meyer, *AIP*, 57; Also *RC*, 11,125.
85. See, for example, O'Donoghue's reflections on the view from the burial mound of Cairnpapple in West Lothian, Scotland: 'The overwhelming vista [here] is ... across the valleys of time, across four thousand years to the men who first came here to worship their gods and bury their dead. How completely our little day vanishes into that vast night; ... what prayer can I say here that is not blown away on the wind?' *The Holy Mountain*, 58.
86. Roland De Vaux, *Ancient Israel, its life and institutions*, London, 1973, 274-288.
87. Samuel Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures*, New York, 1978, 27.
88. *Ibid.* 27-28.
89. Deut.4,10-15.
90. I Kings,19,8.
91. Ex.19 and 24.
92. De Vaux.*op.cit.* 280-281.
93. *Ibid.*,281.
94. Ps.18.2.
95. De Vaux,284.
96. *Ibid.*,285.
97. *Ibid.*,285-6.
98. *Ibid.*,287.
99. I Kings.19.8.
100. Mtt.17.1; De Vaux,280.
101. Mtt.14.23 and par; Lk.6,12; 22,39-41 and par.
102. De Vaux, 280-281.
103. Sandmel, 376 n.7.
104. Mtt.27.54.
105. A. & B. Rees, *Celtic Heritage*, London, 1961, 83-94; J. Falaky-Nagy *The Wisdom of the Outlaw*, 35-37.
106. According to Gibson, El's consort was Athirat or Elat - not Asherah, as stated by DeVaux. *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, Edinburgh, 1978, 4.
107. Carney, *EIP*, 61.
108. Gen.32,26.
109. Gen.19,20-33.
110. Ex.24,11.
111. *Trip.* 1, 116-117, line 13-14; F. Kelly, *Early Irish Law Dublin*, 1976, 182. Cf. the confrontational fasting of Adamnán in order to extract from God a law exempting women from military service. There too the fast takes place in the context of nature: not a mountain this time but a lough and later under the earth. *Cáin Adamnáin* ed. K. Meyer, Oxford, 1905, 4-9, §6-15.
112. Sandmel, 34.
113. Old Testament references: Lev.20,2-4; 2 Kings 23,10; Jer.32,35. Irish references: Stokes, *Rennes*, *RC* 16,36; and *Echtra Airt mic Cuinn ocus Tochmarc Delbcháime* ed. R.I. Best, *Eriu* 3, 1907,154-5,§8. Whatever the historical realities behind these claims, child sacrifice has often been used as a libel against people of other religions: Jews were accused of it by Christians in medieval England; Christians were accused of it by Romans in second century Carthage: see Tertullian, *Apologia* §7-8.
114. *The History and Topography of Ireland*, §98.

CHAPTER THREE

WATER SANCTUARIES

Springs, wells, rivers and lochs often have strong goddess associations in Irish mythology. Water deities were also known in the religions of Vedic India, ancient Egypt, Babylon, Greece and Rome, and they are still a common feature of primal religions around the world.¹ It would be surprising therefore, if the Semitic peoples (so long familiar with desert surroundings) had not at some time shared this widespread reverence towards water. We shall see that in fact they did, and that this reverence found its way into the Bible, where it not only survived but developed into one of the central symbols of Christianity.

In Ireland, Boann is the river Boyne as well as the eponymous deity of Newgrange - *Bruig na Boínne*, with its spiralling wave-like patterns by the door. In the Old Irish *Aislinge Óengusso* - the dream of Oengus - Boann presides there together with the Dagda and Oengus their son.² This was her permanent home. The Dagda is said to have visited her there from Uisnech while her husband Elcmar was away.³

The Morrígan, another of the Dagda's sexual partners, also has an association with water. The Dagda finds her in Glen Etin, washing herself astride a river. She promises to help him against his enemies and tells him to send his magicians to meet her at the Ford of Destruction.⁴ Her courting of Cú Chulainn also takes place at a ford, and when he rejects her, she comes against him in a series of animal forms, the first of which is an eel.⁵ Earlier Cú Chulainn had prayed to the river Cronn for help and it rose up against his enemies, as did

the Colptha and Glas Gatlaig.⁶ Colptha is the name given to the lower reaches of the Boyne.

The Shannon was another sacred river - Sinann - and women's names attaching to other watercourses also reflect a lingering awareness of the old religion. Liffe was thought of as a goddess name, attached to both a river and a plain.⁷ The *Lebor Gabála* 'explains' a number of place-names as commemorating women who died during the Milesian invasion: Scene the satirist whose name belongs to the river-mouth and harbour at Inbher Scene⁸ and Fial who was bathing near her husband in a newly sprung-up river when she happened to see him naked and died instantly of shame: hence, we are told, the river Fial.⁹ Similar, though less colourful, 'explanations' are provided for a number of other 'female' landmarks around Slieve Mis¹⁰ which is a goddess location in its own right. In Scotland, the Clyde (Clota) and the Dee (Deva) were both originally goddess names.¹¹

The custom of throwing offerings into wells, rivers and lochs is very ancient and probably owes something to the matter-of-fact observation that water is not only essential for life but also dangerous, deserving of respect: *The lough will claim a victim every year*, according to the fishermen of Lough Neagh.¹² Archeologists have recovered examples of Celtic metalwork from the beds of the Bann and the Shannon¹³ and it is possible that these and similar hoards found in lochs and peat bogs may be votive deposits.¹⁴ The *Tripartite Life of Patrick* mentions druids making offerings at a certain well, and Adamnán also mentions a well as the focus of non-Christian worship, though he makes no mention of offerings.¹⁵ Later tradition records examples of people throwing food and pieces of clothing into lochs and

wells, or even the heads of their enemies. Certain lochs and wells may have been to water what caves were to dry land: orifices of the earth, entrances to the Otherworld. In one text, even the sea was described as rushing in and out of the womb of the earth, causing the tides.¹⁶

The water's edge can be seen as one of those marginal places between two worlds, where Otherworld powers were felt to be very near - as on the mountain top. We are told that poets would sometimes go to the water's edge looking for inspiration.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, it was also a place of prayer: Adamnán says that Colum Cille used to chant his psalms on the beach at dawn, and there are many examples of saints who are said to have prayed standing in water - either in rivers or at the sea shore.¹⁸ The custom seems to have persisted: a seventeenth century account of the pilgrimage to Lady's Island, County Wexford, describes how crowds of people used to wade round the island three times in their bare feet or even on their knees, on the fifteenth of August every year. On the same day in 1978, Patrick Logan saw some 20,000 people making the same circuit.¹⁹ One of the stations of the Lough Derg pilgrimage is at the water's edge, where some pilgrims step into the water. In times gone by, such exercises also involved immersion.²⁰

There are a number of tales of journeys to a world under the waves. Colman mac Luachain is said to have received a lordly welcome from the water creatures when he spent a day and a night under the river Brusna.²¹ In another story, Ruadh mac Rígdoinn visits nine beautiful women in a land under the sea.²² There are also a number of stories of people being carried off by water monsters.²³

To throw something into the water was probably to deliver it into the lap of the goddess or the god, in the hope that this voluntary sacrifice or tribute would help to foster a good relationship. The question of human sacrifice is sometimes raised, and though there is no clear evidence of it, it can not be ruled out. In the tenth century 'Life of Mochta', the druids demand that a human victim be thrown overboard to calm a storm at sea; but as Plummer points out, this may be modelled on the story of Jonah.²⁴ The payment of tributes to human leaders, in money or in kind, was part of the social system of many early cultures. In return, the overlord was supposed not only to refrain from harassing his vassals, but actively to protect them. It is possible that the throwing of objects into lochs and wells was seen as establishing an equivalent contract with the Otherworld powers.

Wells called *tobar Áine* in Derry and Tyrone were sacred to the goddess Áine, whom we have already met in connection with Cnoc Áine.²⁵ In Donegal, fishermen used to ask a blessing and lower their sails in the direction of a well near Teelin Bay called *Tobar na mBan Naomh* - the well of the holy women. These three were said to have been nuns who grew up in the vicinity of the well. However, this explanation fails to disguise a resemblance to the old triple goddesses. There was an all-night gathering at this well on the eve of the summer solstice.²⁶ A number of wells dedicated to the Holy Trinity may also once have belonged to triple deities (usually goddesses) of the old religion; one of these is the source of the Boyne, where the 'pattern day' or annual pilgrimage is held on Trinity Sunday.²⁷ It is impossible to say whether the many wells of Brigit or Bride were originally dedicated to the goddess or the saint, if indeed these two

can be distinguished. The Brigit's Well at Cliffony, County Sligo, holds its pattern on the old festival of Imbolc. ²⁸

Most holy wells are nowadays associated with a male saint eg. Moling, Colman, Patrick, Colum Cille. Plummer notes that water miracles are particularly common in the Lives of Abban, Ailbe, Bairre and Declan. He attributes this to the influence of 'the cult of the Celtic water deity' on Irish hagiography.²⁹ Plummer's unitary and departmental assumptions are questionable as we shall see, (particularly when we come to examine deities associated with the sun and fire) but there can be little doubt that water had sacred associations in both pre-Christian and Christian Irish religion.

A certain amount of direct continuity is suggested by the dates of the pattern days of some wells. An account written in 1744 tells how 'vast throngs of rich and poor' used to visit the Struell Wells near Downpatrick, on Midsummer's eve and the Friday before Lammass.³⁰ The water was said to have been blessed by St Patrick, but it was not his feast day which drew the crowds: it was the summer solstice and the festival of Lughnasad. As with the Croaghpatrick pilgrimage, which took place around the same time, it seems likely that visits to the Struell wells (and many others) predate any visit by their patron saint.

Most of Ireland's holy wells are simple affairs, often unmarked and open to the sky, sometimes with a little house for the 'guardian' of the well. Sometimes an offering is made, either to the guardian or by throwing something, usually money, into the well itself. At Moling's well (St Mullins) there is a wellhouse constructed in such a way that the water enters through a stone conduit from the pool above,

and tumbles over a stoup and onto the floor, before flowing out under the threshold like the river in Ezekiel's vision.³¹ There is a hedge around the well itself, recalling the hedge which once surrounded the perpetual flame at Kildare,³² and a circular path so that pilgrims can still walk around it sunwise praying the Our Father and the Hail Mary - biblical prayers to a pre-christian ritual.

At one time it might have been possible to find rags or threads tied to this hedge or to a nearby tree, like votive candles or prayer flags. The comparison is not an idle one, even though today's visitors to holy wells, might be said by some (including themselves) to be making a wish, rather than actually praying. The distinction between a wish and a prayer is not always clear:

That my husband may get his health...

That my son Joseph may pass the Intermediate...

That my daughter Eileen may do well at her music...

That her aunt my remember us in her will...

That there may be good weather for the hay.³³

A few years ago I was told that prayer-rags could still be seen at St Enda's well outside Galway. It turned out however, that the well had been 'restored', the rags cleared away and, eerily, the well had dried up.

WATER AND WATER IMAGERY IN THE BIBLE

De Vaux includes sacred waters in his chapter on Semitic and early Israelite sanctuaries.³⁴ Some of them were places of theophany - where people were believed to have seen or heard God:

The Well of the Living One who Sees

Hagar, wandering alone in the desert, meets an angel by a spring: 'The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur.'³⁵ The text makes no clear-cut distinction between the angel and Yahweh himself.³⁶ Hagar names the well Beer-la'hai-roi - well of the Living One who sees - and the God whom she had met there - El-Roi, ie. El of Vision.³⁷ This was obviously a well of some significance. The author gives precise directions as to its location, and it appears again later as the well where Rebekkah met Isaac. After the death of Abraham, the two of them settle down to live there.³⁸

Beersheba

Beersheba was another well with sacred associations. Isaac went 'up' to Beersheba one evening after a series of disputes with local herdsmen about watering rights, and Yahweh appeared to him during the night to bless him and renew the covenant with Abraham. It was clearly a religious centre of some importance. Far from disowning it, the Genesis traditions are keen to assert Hebrew ownership and to promote it as a holy place frequented by the patriarchs and visited by God.³⁹

Holy wells of the Negeb, Jerusalem and Jordan

DeVaux lists a number of other places where there were probably holy wells:⁴⁰ at Qadesh, whose name means 'holy' there was a spring 'of judgement' or 'of the oracle'. In the Negeb, there was a village whose name may mean 'the lady of the well.' In Jerusalem there was a spring of the jackal or dragon, of which little is known. There was a temple of Pan near the source of the Jordan, probably on the site of an old Canaanite sanctuary. Note how easily the primal symbolism of water

could cross cultural barriers: Greeks, Canaanites and Hebrews all liked to worship in the vicinity of water, sometimes on the same site. Also by the Jordan was Gilgal, a stone circle said to have been built by Joshua with twelve stones taken from the river bed. This may also have been an old Canaanite sanctuary, but the Israelites worshipped and offered sacrifices there quite legitimately for several centuries.⁴¹

Gihon

The site chosen for the tent of the ark of the covenant in Jerusalem was beside the spring of Gihon. In 1 Kings, David sends Solomon there to be anointed king.⁴² Later, Solomon's temple was built on the same site. Gihon was also the name of one of the rivers which 'flowed out of Eden to water the garden'.⁴³ This could be a chance association, but it seems more likely that it was deliberate. By linking the spring of Gihon with the river of Eden, the suggestion is made that it contains the pure water of paradise, capable of washing away sin and nurturing a new Eden. The builders of the temple made sure that there was always a plentiful supply of water inside the temple precincts; it was contained in twelve specially-designed basins and a 'sea' of bronze⁴⁴. These were used for ritual purification.

From the Prophets to Revelation

Water and water imagery are so common throughout the bible that it would be far beyond the scope of this study to examine every single case. Moses strikes a rock in the desert and waters of Meribah gush out. Meribah is at Horeb, the holy mountain - one sacred symbol flowing from another.⁴⁵ Elisha sends Naaman to wash seven times in the Jordan and be cured of his leprosy.⁴⁶ Ezekiel has a vision of water

welling up inside the temple on Mount Zion and spilling out over the threshold; quickly it becomes a stream, then a deep river with trees on either side, like the stream which the Psalmist used as an image for the Law.⁴⁷ 'Everything will live where the river goes,' says Ezekiel: even the Dead Sea will be full of fish; animals will thrive, trees will bear fruit and never shed their leaves.⁴⁸ This same vision is carried forwards into Christianity by the author of Revelation where the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb.⁴⁹ Mark's Gospel opens on the banks of the Jordan, with John baptising crowds of people in the river, including Jesus and probably some of his disciples.⁵⁰

In many parts of the bible, the fountain of life is a metaphor for God or for God's presence and activity in the world. The Psalmist says, or more probably sings:

*You give them to drink from the river of your delights.
For with you is the fountain of life...*⁵¹

Jeremiah believed that Judah was in mortal danger because: 'They have forsaken the Lord... the fountain of living water'.⁵² For both of these writers, water has come to represent something which begins with material survival but extends far beyond it; they appreciate that to be fully alive is something more than mere existence. Jeremiah is hostile to the primal religions around him. He condemns people who resort to the sacred trees and the high places⁵³ But he cannot dispense with the metaphor of sacred waters - a metaphor which derives from the earliest Semitic primal religions.

It has been suggested that the primal world view includes a sense that human beings stand in need of a power not their own. This could be interpreted in a narrowly spiritual sense, ie. that our souls have to be saved. But since the primal world view makes no sharp

distinction between the spiritual and the physical, material needs are also recognised as gifts which the 'other power' may give or withhold. Water is obviously one of the most basic material needs - a matter of life and death. It is there at the very beginning of Genesis - one of the raw materials of creation.⁵⁴ Hagar's well and the well at Beersheba are depicted as meeting real practical needs, as well as being places of theophany. One can imagine subsequent visitors, thirsty travellers in a hostile environment, also feeling that in some real but inexplicable way, they had met God by these life-giving waters. Subtle theological questions about where exactly God was in relation to the water are unlikely to arise in the midst of such an experience. It would probably have been enough to 'taste and see that the Lord is good'. Neither is it likely that the experience would be very much affected by the race or creed of the drinker, though later it could be described using different divine names and different models of reality. Even then, there is a common acknowledgement that human existence depends on something or someone greater than themselves.

Far from being 'superstitious', the people who worshipped at sacred wells were intensely practical. Their ultimate concern was for life: and in the context of wells, that would also mean green trees and healthy beasts. They observed that water was not just good for drinking but also for health and cleanliness. Without it, they would become dirty and diseased. They would feel bad - and out of this badness, suffering and violence could arise. At some point in this lived experience, offerings began to be thrown into the water and

altars of sacrifice were built in an effort to establish a good relationship with the provider of the well.

'If anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink'⁵⁵

As Hebrew religion became more sophisticated, water became an image for all kinds of other good things which 'come out' from God into the world. The Law is described as a river by the Psalmist and the river of Ezekiel's vision probably stands either for the Law or for God's Spirit. The divine Wisdom is also described as a fountain of life pouring from the 'the mouth' of the righteous' and 'the teaching of the wise',⁵⁶ The Spirit is 'poured out' like water in Isaiah and the same image is found in Joel.⁵⁷

In the fourth gospel, water imagery is used constantly of Jesus. One of the evangelist's principal intentions was to convince his audience of Jesus' divinity. He set about doing this in a way which he hoped would make sense both to Jewish Christians of the diaspora and to Gentiles with a knowledge of the bible. It is characteristic of his skill as an interpreter that John makes such frequent use of the old cross-cultural primal imagery: 'If anyone is thirsty let him come to me and drink'.⁵⁸ Significantly, Jesus is also presented as the giver of life: 'I came that they may have life and have it abundantly'.⁵⁹ He is shown healing a man at a holy well - the pool of Beth-zatha or Bethesda and sending a blind man to bathe his eyes in the pool of Siloam.⁶⁰ There is no sign that Jesus disapproves of Beth-zatha, and indeed the evangelist freely attributes the water's healing power to 'the angel of the Lord'. Votive offerings have been found there from the first century.⁶¹ The pool of Siloam or Shiloah was fed by a canal from the spring of Gihon.⁶² Water drawn there on the feast of

Tabernacles (one of the three harvest festivals) symbolised the blessings of the Messianic age.⁶³ Water can be seen as having its own sacramentality in the bible. It was a visible sign of God's invisible blessings. And in most cases, metaphor and theology enhanced rather than diminished the status of the actual physical wells. People still drank from them, filled their jars, bathed and at the same time became aware of God's vital presence in the world.

The Flood: It might seem that sacred waters are a gentler image than the holy mountain. In general, I think this may be true; water can be just as awesome as any other aspect of nature. Biblical tradition does not gloss over this uncomfortable fact. Although the waters of Genesis are the raw material of creation, they are also dark waters, part of the primeval chaos which responds only to God. This dangerous quality of water is seen clearly in the stories of the Flood, and the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea.⁶⁴ Symbolically, these waters can be understood as washing away evil in order to preserve the good. They are the waters of purification writ large. John the Baptist stands in this tradition, as does Paul with his baptismal theology of passing through death to life.⁶⁵

Water references in the Old Testament are not always what they appear to be: an explicit reference to 'holy water' in the book of Numbers deals with a ritual by which a jealous husband could test his wife for unfaithfulness. He could take her before the priest and make her drink some sort of toxic mixture called 'holy water' or 'the water of bitterness.'⁶⁶ In effect this was a sort of trial by poison and has little to do with real water as such.

Trial by water was known in other parts of the world, including Ireland and Britain. We shall come back to this in a later chapter, but the logic would seem to have been that water is so essentially precious, that evil 'flees' before it. It could therefore be used both for ritual purification and for testing whether or not a person had been engaged in criminal activities. One can accept the premiss without accepting the conclusions.

It is perhaps harder to come to terms with the Psalmist's strange and rather terrible experience of drowning in God: 'Deep calls to deep in the roar of your cataracts; and all your waves, all your breakers pass over me'.⁶⁷ The Psalm starts out with a great longing for God, 'as a hind longs for the running streams'. But as it progresses, it becomes the prayer of all people swept along by forces beyond their control. There was little sentimentality in these ancient people: they knew that water was life-giving and sacramental - and dangerous, and deserving of total respect.

SACRED WATERS IN IRELAND

A distinction is sometimes made in discussions of Celtic religion, between 'earth mothers' and 'water deities'. This is probably misleading in that it prejudices the extent to which the Irish primal religions may have developed a more integrated view of divine activity in the world before the coming of Christianity. There may once have been an idea of the deity of the well, separate from the deity of the mountain or the wood. But by the time the mythology reaches the written page, the picture tends to be more of a deity who is worshipped in different places under many forms. Whether she was associated primarily with hills, plains or watercourses, she brought the same sort of blessings and made the same kind of demands.

According to Janet and Colin Bord, a twelve-day July festival in the Irvinestown district of Lower Lough Erne commemorates what looks like a theophany myth of some kind: a beautiful woman was once said to appear on the lough at that time of year, walking on the water, surrounded by light and carrying wild flowers. This was taken as a sign that there would be fine weather and a good harvest.⁶⁸ A woman called Erne appears in the *dindshenchas* as leader (*tóisech*) of the young women of Cruachan, and an attendant of Medb.⁶⁹ If this is the same figure as is celebrated at Irvinestown, then she is associated with both the lough and with the fairy hill. Through the fine weather and good harvests which accompany her, she resembles the 'festival goddesses', who in turn share many characteristics with the 'sovereignty'. It will be remembered that the fair of Tailtiu took place on a hill overlooking a river, and that the *dindshenchas* describes looking down from Carmun onto an unidentified stretch of water. Áine is also associated with a hill, two wells, a lough and a little river. Étaín, a 'sovereignty' figure in many respects, is transformed at one point into a pool of water. One of the favourite mythological locations for the appearance of a 'sovereignty goddess' is beside a well.⁷⁰

The hag at the well is a motif which suggests a strong link between the 'water goddesses' and the 'sovereignty': there are still a number of wells called *tobar na caillighe*. Her *persona* sometimes seems to have attached itself to old women who, within living memory, were the 'guardians' of Irish holy wells. In Patrick Kavanagh's book 'The Green Fool' a young fellow approaching the guardian of a 'Lady Well' for the first time is warned by the older men: 'Mind yerself, that's

Bullah Wullah's mother'.⁷¹ The female water monster may perhaps be seen as a variation on the theme of the hag at the well - suitably enlarged for the open water.⁷²

Caoilte's Well

There is a story in the *Acallam na Senórach* of how St Patrick wants to baptise a number of people and asks Caoilte for the use of a well. The water which Caoilte offers him comes from a spring called *tráigh dá bhan* - strand of two women - on the shores of a nearby lough.⁷³ The two women, together with the lough-side location, signal at once its likely sacred associations. When Caoilte then goes down to the well and addresses it directly, with a praise poem in its honour, we may be sure that this is in fact a hymn rather than simply an outbreak of romantic feeling. Caoilte begins by praising its cresses and its trout, but the scope of his eulogy soon broadens to include a much larger territory:

Thy wild swine in thy wilderness; the deer of thy fairhunting
cragland, thy dappled and red-chested fawns! Thy mast hanging on the
branches of thy trees... thy fish in the estuaries of thy rivers.

The deity of the well and of the land are one and the same here. Earthy or watery, she is in a very practical indispensable way, the source of all things, the giver of life. As such she can no longer be dismissed as a picturesque water-sprite; it becomes possible to compare her with the God who is the fountain of life in the bible. The extent to which she promises 'life in all its fullness' ie. more than just immediate material needs, will be discussed later. At Caoilte's well, the comparison between the well goddess and the Christian God has already begun when the waters of *tráigh dá bhan* are offered to

Patrick as baptismal waters. The author of the *Acallam* clearly thinks this is quite appropriate and chooses to emphasise the link when he could easily have disguised it. Notice too that the well is *given* rather than taken over. It is the representative of the old order, Caoilte, who makes the connection, matching one image of God with another through the symbolism of the font and the sacred well. Although this is story rather than history, it may well represent one of the ways in which old religious sites became christianised. It also serves as a useful corrective to much over-used theories about cunning (or heroic) missionaries and gullible natives.

Boann, Sinann and Divine Wisdom

At the beginning of *Tochmarc Étaíne* - 'The Wooing of Étaín' - we are told that Boann, the 'river goddess', is another name for Eithne of Bruig na Bóinde,⁷⁴ who is who is clearly a 'sovereignty' figure. Eithne or Ethne appears variously as the name of the daughter of Balor, mother of Lug, Oengus and Colum Cille, lover of the Dagda, wife of Elcmar, Conn, Cormac mac Cuinn, Morann and Conchobar. She is therefore the bride of both gods and kings, as well as the mother of gods, sages and saints; She is part of a goddess triad with Étaín and Medb and elsewhere with Ailbhe and Maighinis;⁷⁵

Several traditions have been combined in each of the surviving versions of the *dindshenchas* of Boann. These may be taken together with the *dindshenchas* of Sinann since the myths of the Boyne and the Shannon are so remarkably similar.⁷⁶ They also reveal a definite awareness on the part of their composers that the 'river goddess' tradition is both like and unlike the biblical tradition. There are

signs of a lively debate as to whether and how the old beliefs can be reconciled with the new.

A certain amount of denigration has probably taken place, particularly in the Boann tradition. The closing sections of the *firstdindshenchas* of Boand, portray her as a silly presumptuous girl who is chased all the way to the sea by a well of power which 'gushed forth every kind of mysterious evil',⁷⁷ It was the well of her father-in-law Nechtan, and only he and his cupbearers could look upon it unharmed. Boann approaches it 'through pride, to test the well's power', walks round it three times withershins, and three deadly waves burst out of the well, disfiguring her and eventually drowning her.⁷⁸ In another version, Boann drowns after hurrying guiltily to wash at the well after her adultery with the Dagda.⁷⁹ All this is clearly at odds with Boann's respected position in other parts of the mythology, notably in *Aislinge Oengusso* - 'The Dream of Oengus' - where she and the Dagda confer about what to do with their grown-up son who has fallen in love-in-absence.⁸⁰ Although the tradition of dangerous waters is very ancient and probably relates originally to the overwhelming energy of the deity, it seems to have been used here to satirise and 'sweep away' a pre-Christian image of the Divine.

Even within the same *dindshenchas* however, the memory of Boann's other identity is preserved in a number of praise-names: 'bright honour', 'white-bellied', 'gentle Boann'. The first Metrical *Dindshenchas* of Boann opens with the observation that the 'stainless river whose name is Boand ever-full' flows not from an evil well, but from *Síd Nechtain*. We know from other texts that this was the mythological source of wisdom, knowledge and inspiration. The scribe

continues: 'Segais was her name in the *síd*... and the river of Segais is her name from that point to the pool of Mochua the cleric.'⁸¹ As the river flows on it acquires different names: 'Arm of Nuadu's wife', 'the great silver yoke', 'river of the white hazel'. The full extent of the author's imaginative vision begins to become apparent with the claim that Boand is also Banna ie. the Bann.⁸² Then, we are told, she crosses the sea to Alba and the land of the Saxons where her name is Severn, and flows eastwards to become Tiber, Jordan, Euphrates, and Tigris 'in enduring paradise.' Here she turns and flows back to *síd Nechtain*. Another equally sympathetic version says that Christ 'ordained a blessing on her', and that she is the Jordan of Erin.⁸³

This Boann, unlike the silly daughter-in-law, is a bearer of Otherworld wisdom, encircling the world from the Irish paradise of the *síd* mound to the biblical paradise of Eden and back again. Something very interesting is going on here. In Irish mythology the source of wisdom is a well, variously named, but a well with hazels and salmon. From it flow a certain number of rivers - five in *Echtra Cormaic*, nine in the 'Dialogue of the Two Sages', seven in the *dindshenchas* of Sinann.⁸⁴ By introducing the Tigris and the Euphrates into the story of Boann and *Síd Nechtain* the author invites a comparison with the Genesis description of the four great rivers flowing out of Eden, two of which are Tigris and Euphrates.⁸⁵ Clearly some sort of synthesis is being attempted.

Could the Irish myth of a river flowing from a paradise well be derived from the myth of the rivers of Eden in Genesis? On examination, they turn out to be too dissimilar; hazel trees and salmon are thoroughly Irish images, far removed from the Semitic

world. Even if this were to be seen as a piece of enthusiastic cultural translation, the number four would surely have been retained in at least one of the many well-of-wisdom texts. It appears in none of them. Finally, the rivers of Genesis are there simply to water the garden of Eden - whereas in Ireland, the well and the river have developed into images of wisdom, poetry and inspiration. There can be no doubt however, that the poet of this part of the *Boann dindshenchas* wishes to compare the sacred waters of Ireland with the sacred waters of the bible. The poet would seem to be suggesting that there is wisdom in both traditions; that native wisdom and biblical wisdom connect; that one flows out to meet the other and returns again enriched; that it is the same river under another name; that both have their origin in God or (to use native terms) in the Otherworld of the *áes síde*.

It is inconceivable that the poet of this part of the *dindshenchas* was unaware of the implications of this image of Boann encircling the world. It is a conscious exercise in bridge-building. A further bridge, if one were needed, could have been the description of God's wisdom as a fountain of life in the book of Proverbs,⁸⁶ but the poet makes no mention of this.

Other writers show some awareness of the connections between the biblical Wisdom literature and the imagery of the fourth gospel. St Berach's hagiographer, for example, begins his prologue as follows: 'To him who desires righteousness, I will give freely from the fountain of living water.' He goes on to describe John the apostle as: 'The man who sucked true wisdom from the breast of the saviour...the fountain of true wisdom' which filled the saints and St Berach.⁸⁷

The synthesis could in fact have been taken further: Divine Wisdom is feminine in the Old Testament or Tanak; Jesus inherits her attributes in parts of the New Testament, particularly as the creative Logos in the fourth gospel and as the image of the invisible God in Colossians;⁸⁸ The poet of the Boann *dindshenchas* could almost have compared Boand the goddess and the sacred river, with Divine Wisdom or the creative Logos, or both.

The authors of the negative traditions of Boann and Sinann, compare the 'river goddesses' not with divine Wisdom but with Eve. Boand is characterised as sinful - she appears at various points in the story as adulterous, disobedient, covetous and proud. The Eve comparison is even clearer in the story of Sinann where the properties of the well are described more fully, together with her motivation for going there. Here it is not an evil well, but Connla's well under the sea. Connla's well, is another version of the well of wisdom: we are told that nine hazels stand there in a dark druidical mist; their nuts fall into the water, where the salmon of wisdom eat them; mysterious bubbles then float downstream⁸⁹ to be consumed by would-be poets and sages. Sinann's 'sin' is that she desires more than anything else, the wisdom conferred by these bubbles: *every sort of fame was at her command, save the mystic art [immus] alone.*⁹⁰ Reaching into the water for it, she drowns. In general, the negative tradition of Sinann is slightly more sympathetic than that of Boann, but there is still no mistaking the suggestion that in reaching for the *imbas* or 'great knowledge' of Connla's well, the Shannon goddess is reaching for forbidden fruit, like that on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

The *dindshenchas* of Boann and Sinann provides a fascinating glimpse of two sides of a contemporary debate. The poet who saw the possible convergence between the 'river goddesses' and God's Wisdom or Logos was intent on saving far more from the old religion than his or her colleague who also used biblical parallels to defame the characters of the old goddesses and bring about their deaths. A similar motivation may lie behind some of the other stories of drowned 'women' who haunt Irish mythology and folklore.

The myth of the well of wisdom would have been important to poets in the Christian period for obvious reasons: it validated their cultural heritage in a way which strengthened their professional interests. But the 'river goddesses' seem to have been more difficult to retain. Exactly why is unclear, since the 'sovereignty goddess' survived relatively unscathed. Whatever reason, the task of 'translating' them seems to have been largely abandoned.

From a present-day perspective, this may appear both disappointing and unnecessary: the Hebrew bible uses a female word, *ru-ah* for God's Spirit, and the Septuagint uses a female image, *Sophia*, for the divine Wisdom. The poets who re-cast Boann and Sinann as Eve, helped to obscure one of the most interesting and valuable features of the Irish religious tradition - the female image of God. In the long-term, they also diminished the holiness of the rivers themselves; instead of being seen as sacramental of divine wisdom and life-giving energy, they became simply useful resources, available for exploitation.

The sacredness of wells survived for longer. Visits to holy wells are still a feature of Irish spirituality today, and in some areas are enjoying something of a revival. On a recent weekday visit to *Tobar an*

Ailt near Sligo, I met seven other people in the space of about twenty minutes - most of them under forty. There are frequent masses and weekly devotions at the well, and huge numbers attend for the three-day pattern at the beginning of July. The two healing sacraments (reconciliation and anointing) are also celebrated at this time, continuing the tradition that this is a healing well. The link with the biblical tradition of sacred waters is brought out in the choice of readings. ⁹¹

The story is told of a man, blind from birth, who regained his sight at *Tobar an Ailt*. The parallel with the biblical miracle at the pool of Siloam is fairly clear, and the Christian character of the man's exclamation is plain enough, but it is mixed with inspiration from a different source:

Oh look on me. I was blind from birth, and saw no light till I came to the blessed well; now I see the water and the speckled trout down at the bottom, with the white cross on his back. ⁹²

Here again, there is a marriage of biblical and native imagery: he does not see Christ, the Messiah, but the speckled trout with the white cross on his back is clearly a symbolic equivalent.

It was almost part of the definition of a holy well to have fish in it, particularly trout, salmon or occasionally eels. These may once have been symbolic of the fish in the Otherworld well, but early continental imagery of Christ as a fish seems to have found a ready reception in Ireland, no doubt because it already was a sacred symbol. When the bardic poets occasionally compare Christ to a fish, they are clearly drawing on both traditions: 'the great Virgin's child...the salmon of the well of mercy.'⁹³ It is possible that the Greek acrostic

- ichthus - 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour' is not entirely the sophisticated literary device which it appears. It too may have pre-christian antecedents in Babylonian or even Indian mythology.⁹⁴

Wells with sacred eels recall the Morrígan's transformation into an eel at Cú Chulainn's ford; the memory of a goddess may also lie behind the story of the man who went to the cave of *Poll na gColum* between Lough Corrib and Lough Mask and took one of the sacred fish from an underground river there. As he was attempting to roast it over the fire, it changed into a beautiful woman and disappeared. It is said that when the fish was next seen, it had the marks of a gridiron on its side.⁹⁵

Logan uses this story to illustrate the belief that fish in holy wells were often believed to be immortal or indestructible. This together with the comparison with Christ, suggests that the fish which inhabited sacred waters were seen as being at least as holy as the waters themselves. It was said that the three trout in St Ciaran's well, Castlekeeran, County Meath could only be seen at midnight on the first Sunday in August.⁹⁶ The date and the threeness suggest that this could be an old primal theophany connected with the festival of Lughnasad and transferred to a Christian saint.

Whatever their sacramental properties, wells also have an obvious material value. Again, we see the possibility that the mystical and the practical dimensions of water were once intimately connected. The presence of fish, together with waterplants like Suibne's cresses and brooklime, would have indicated that the water was reasonably safe to drink. It is possible to imagine that the change to an unpolluted water-supply may well have brought about dramatic improvements in

health. Trout and salmon are also particularly good to eat, and their symbolism is surely connected with their potential for nourishing the body, and (in this relatively undifferentiated world) the mind and spirit as well. There is clearly plenty of scope in this for the imaginative Christian preacher.

It has been impossible in this short space to give more than a few prominent examples of Ireland's sacred rivers, lochs and wells. There are far more of these than could easily be named, many of them small and obscure, others forgotten. I would like to close with just one among many possible examples of a *cuairt* or circuit-pilgrimage, involving sacred waters. This one took place at Dungiven in County Londonderry, and began at the well of Tubberpatrick:⁹⁷

'After performing the usual rounds, devotees wash their hands and feet in the water and tear off a small rag from their clothes which they tie on a bush overhanging the well; they then proceed to a large stone in the river immediately below the old church, and having performed an oblation, they walk round the stone, bowing to it and repeating prayers as at the well. They then enter the old church, within which a similar ceremony is performed, and they finish the rite by a procession and prayers round an upright stone where the people show the print of footsteps which they say are those of St Patrick.'

One has the sense that this cluster of holy places - the well, the river, the bush, the stones - could have been the focus of worship long before the 'old church' was added to their number. This may or may not be true. The pilgrimage to Station Island in Lough Derg, seems to have been a comparatively late development, designed to imitate or even rival, the well-established pilgrimage to Croaghpatrick.⁹⁸ But whatever the antiquity of the pilgrimage at Dungiven, the fascination with water, wood and stone belongs to the ancient and elemental world of the primal imagination. One can only guess at the different

religious ideas and experiences which have become attached to such objects over the thousands of years since they first became the focus of worship. But it is hard to imagine that the intentions of the pilgrims have changed greatly, no matter how they named or imagined their God.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE
WATER SANCTUARIES

1. *The Encyclopaedia of Religion*, ed. M. Eliade, London, 1987, Vol.15, 349-358.
2. Jackson, *CM*, 95.
3. *Tochmarc Étaín*, ed. O. Bergin & R.I. Best, *Eriu*, 12, 1938, §1.
4. *Cath Maige Tuired* ed. E. Gray, *ITS* 52, London, 1982, §84.
5. *Táin*, ed. O'Rahilly, 180.
6. *Ibid.*, 157, 153-4.
7. According to a twelfth-century poem in *DF* I.1, and *Rennes*, *RC* 15.303.
8. *LG*, 5, *ITS* 44, 30-31, §386. The story is repeated in several redactions.
9. *Ibid.*, 32-33, §388.
10. For example, Fás: "from her are named 'the grave of Fás' and 'Glen Fáise' between Sliab Mis and the sea." *Ibid.*, 58-59, §419. Also 60-61, §420.
11. Ross, *PCB*, 21.
12. This saying forms the basis of a poem by Seamus Heaney. *Door into the Dark*, 38.
13. J. & C. Bord, *Sacred Waters, holy wells and water lore in Britain and Ireland*, London, 2nd edition, 1986, 13.
14. M. Herrity & G. Eogan, *Ireland in Pre-history*, London, 1977, 210.
15. *Trip.*, ed. Stokes, I.122-123, II.323; *Adamnán's Life of St Columba*, ed. A. & M. Anderson, London, 1961, II.10.
16. From the treatise *Hisperica famina* discussed by Marina Smyth, 'The Physical World in Seventh Century Hiberno-latin texts' *Peritia*, 5, 1986, 208
17. According to a gloss in the Book of Leister (L.L.186a): 'One day the young poet Nede fared forth till he stood on the margin of the sea, for the poets believed the brink of water to be the place of poetic revelation. He heard a sound in the wave, even a chant of wailing and sadness and he marvelled thereat. So the youth cast a spell upon the wave that it might reveal to him the cause of its moaning.' Cited by Eleanor Hull, *The Poem Book of the Gael*, London, 1912, 52. Kuno Meyer also refers to this gloss with reference to Finn going to learn poetry on the banks of the Boyne: 'Boyish Exploits of Finn' *Eriu*, 1, 1904-5, 185.n.4.
18. The second preface to the *Féilire Oengusso* describes how Oengus the Culdee used to recite fifty Psalms standing in a river: A.T. Lucas, 'Sacred Trees Of Ireland', *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archeological Society* 68, 30. The *Leabhar Brecc* homily on St Patrick's devotions says that he would spend the second watch of the night immersed in cold water: (*Trip.* ed. Stokes, II. 484-485. There are also a number of Scottish examples: Brother Drycthelm of Old Melrose is said to have prayed standing in the Tweed: Bede, *EH*, 5.12) and St Cuthbert supposedly kept vigil in the sea at St Abbs. Both of these are Celtic foundations which traced their ancestry through Lindisfarne to Iona. The practise is known in other parts of the world as well.
19. Patrick Logan, *The Holy Wells of Ireland*, Gerrards Cross, 1980, 154-155-7.
20. Deirdre Purcell *On Lough Derg*, Dublin, 1988, 36.
21. Plummer, *VSH* I, cxlviii, citing *Rennes* M.S.f.77a.

22. For example, the story translated by Jackson as 'Ruadh in the land under the wave', *CM*, 150-151, from *Compert ConCulainn and other stories*, ed. A.G. Van Hamel, Dublin 1956. Other examples are listed by John Carey, 'The Otherworld in Irish Tradition', *Eigse* 19, 1982-3, 39-40.
23. In Adamnán's 'Life of St Columba' a man is carried off by a monster in the river Ness. II.28. There are also a number of examples in the Finn Cycle. *Vid.inf.* chapter 7. The folk tradition also tells of people carried off by water creatures, eg., the 'water horse'. W.G. Wood-Martin gives a number examples: *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland*, London, 1902, I. 377-8.
24. Plummer, *VSH* I, cxlix.
25. Ross, *PCB*, 219. According to Wentz, the folk tradition also associates Áine with Lough Gur - where she appears as a mermaid-like figure (combing her hair while half-submerged in the water) - and with a little river nearby, the Camóg. These traditions seem to be just as strong as those linking her to nearby Knockainy. W.Y.Evans Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries*, Oxford, 1911, 79-80.
26. H. Morris, 'The holy wells of Donegal', *Béaloideas*, IML.VI, 1936, 148-9; The Hag of Beare would be a parallel literary example of a nun-like figure who shares certain characteristics with the pre-Christian goddesses.
27. P. Logan, *The Holy Wells of Ireland*, 39.
28. *Ibid.*, 37.
29. Plummer, *VSH*, I.cxlvii - cxlviii.
30. Bord, *Sacred Waters*, 248. According to P.D. Hardy, the midsummer pattern at Struell lasted for a week and some pilgrims would spend several days there. He describes six stations in all: 1) St Patrick's grave in Downpatrick, where each penitent collected a handful of earth, 2) a house in Downpatrick where they heard mass, 3) Struell hill which they would climb several times in their bare feet or on their knees, 4) 'St Patrick's chair' - three large stones where the penitent would sit and be turned three times, 5) a number of cairns which had to be circumambulated, 6) the 'body well' where better-off pilgrims immersed themselves in a communal stone tank. Poorer pilgrims who could not afford the privacy of the enclosed 'body well', would strip in the open air and bathe in the 'limb well' next door. Some would then go on to the 'eye well' and the 'drinking well' upstream. Hardy includes a fascinating interview with a young man who was doing the stations each morning, fasting, in order to release from purgatory the soul of a complete stranger, Paddy Brady, whom he believed to have appeared to him asking for help: P.D. Hardy, *The Holy Wells of Ireland*, Dublin, 1836, 37-42. By the time Wood-Martin wrote his account of Struell in 1902, the pattern appears to have ceased. *op.cit.* II. 99.
31. Ezek.47.1.
32. Gerald of Wales, *The History and Topography of Ireland*, ed. John J. O'Meara, London, 1988, §69.
33. Patrick Kavanagh, *Lough Derg*, Newbridge, 1978, 34.
34. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 277-279, 293, 102.
35. Gen.16,7. There is another version of this story at Gen.21,14-19.
36. As in the story of Jacob wrestling with the 'angel': Gen.32,24-30.
37. Gen.16,13-14.

38. Gen.24,62-67; 25.11. According to Islamic tradition, the well called Zum Zum in the great mosque in Mecca is Hagar's well.
39. Gen.26,17-33.
40. De Vaux, op.cit. 277-278.
41. Josh.4,1-9; De Vaux, Ibid. 275.
42. 1 Kings,1,33-40; DeVaux, Ibid. 278,102.
43. Gen.2,10-13.
44. 1 Kings, 7,23-39.
45. Ex.17,1-7.
46. 2 Kings, 5,1-14.
47. Ps.1,1.
48. Ezek.47,1-12; Zech.14,8.
49. Rev.22,1-2.
50. Mk.1,9-11 and par. Jn.1,35-40.
51. Ps.36,8-9.
52. Jer.17,13.
53. Jer.17,2.
54. Gen.1,1.
55. Jn.7,37.
56. Prov.16,22; 10,11; 13,14; 18,4; cf. Jn.7,37-38.
57. Is.44.3-4; also Joel.2.28.
58. Jn.7.37; Is.55.1.
59. Jn.10,10; cf 1,4; 7,37-38.
60. Jn.5,1-9; 9,7.
61. Joachim Jeremias *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, London, 1969, 118.
62. Sandmel *The Hebrew Scriptures* 90,n.4.
63. Jerusalem Bible. Note to Jn.9,7.
64. See also Ps.124,4; Is.8,5-8.
65. Romans, 6,3-4.
66. Num.5,11-28.
67. Ps.42,7.
68. Bord, *Sacred Waters*, 136.
69. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III.462-5.
70. And thereafter, a worm and scarlet fly: Gantz, *EIMS*, 45. A further link between water and sovereignty is found in 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel' where, on the night of Conaire's death, Macc Cécht is unable to fill the king's cup at any of the major rivers and lakes of Ireland: Gantz, *Ibid.*, 104-5. Cf. the promise in *CMT* §79 that the rivers will provide no water for the Fomorians.
71. Patrick Kavanagh, *The Green Fool*, Harmondsworth, 1975,54.
72. *Duanaire Finn* ed. Murphy, 2.LX; cf. *DF*, ed. MacNeill, 1.XXIV; for further discussion of the water monster *vid.inf.*, chapter seven.
73. O'Grady, *SG*, 103-4. There is some evidence to suggest that water may have been used for a form of baptism in pre-Christian times: cf. E. Hull, 'Pagan Baptism in the West', *Folklore*, 43/4,1932,410-418.
74. *Tochmarc Étaín*, I.§1., Gantz, *EIMS*, 39.
75. O'Grady, *SG*, 230; *Cath Maige Tuired* §8. Other Eithne relationships collected by Brendan O'Hehir, 'The Christian Revision of Eachtra Airt Meic Cuind...' *Celtic Folklore and Christianity* ed. Patrick Ford, 163.
76. The similar drownings of Boann and Sinann are found in the various *Dindshenchas*. There are at least two of these for each goddess, and each *dindshenchas* is itself a collection of different and

sometimes contradictory traditions. For Boann, see Stokes, *RC*, 15,315, and Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III, 26-33,34-39; For Sinann: Stokes *op.cit.* 457-458, Gwynn *op.cit.* 286-291,292-297.

77. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III,26-27.
78. *Ibid.* 30-31.
79. *Ibid.* 36-37.
80. Jackson, *CM*, 93-95.
81. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III,26-27.
82. *Ibid.* 26-29.
83. *Ibid.* 34-35.
84. *Etudes Celtiques* §35; L.L.186b36 from Stokes *RC* 15,457; Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III, 286-7 and 292-3.
85. Gen.2.10-14.
86. Prov.16.22.
87. Plummer, *Lives of Irish Saints*, I.22, II.22. Cf. The ninth sermon of Bernard of Clairvaux on the Song of Songs, but the parallel is not exact. For Bernard, it is grace rather than wisdom which flows from the 'breasts of the saviour'. In Sermon 13, he speaks of Christ as the source of all wisdom and knowledge, but here the imagery is of water and the rain cycle. The bishop of Down, Mael Moedoc (Malachy), visited Bernard on more than one occasion between 1139 and 1148, and the first Irish Cistercians trained at Clairvaux during the same period.
88. Prov.8,22-31; Cf. Jn.1,1-3; Col 1,15-16 and 2,1-3.
89. Stokes, *Rennes*, *RC* 15, 456-7; Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III 292-295.
90. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III,294-5.
91. Letter from Fr. Eugene McLoughlin, St Anne's, Sligo, 28.2.91.
92. Wood-Martin, *Traces of the Elder Faiths*, 2,112.
93. L. McKenna, *Aithdiogluim Dána*, ITS 37 & 40. Poem 49,§37. Other bardic poets used similar images for Christ: 'the child, the salmon-ever adorable': *ibid.* 70,§12; 'The salmon of the ocean, their warmest friend': 89,§5.
94. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd edition, ed. F.L. Cross & E.A. Livingstone, 1984, Oxford, 51.
95. Logan, 'The Holy Wells of Ireland', 121-2. Wood-Martin mentions a similar grid-iron story, without the transformation motif, but with similar beliefs in the indestructibility of the fish: *Traces of the Elder Faiths*, 2,111.
96. Bord, *Sacred Waters*, 146. Wood-Martin mentions this well and says that it sometimes contained a certain number of trout which the people considered sacred: *op.cit.*, 2, 109-100. There was supposed to be an eel in *Tobar Monachan*, Co.Kerry. For this and other examples see Logan, *op.cit.* 122-3; Joseph Falaky Nagy sees eels, along with salmon and otters, as 'mediating creatures' who can cross between this world and the Otherworld, tending to contain or connote various kinds of power and intelligence: 'Otter, Salmon and Eel in traditional Gaelic Narrative,' *Stud.Celt.* 20-21, 1985-6, 123-144.
97. From the *Statistical Account* of 1813, cited by Wood-Martin, *op.cit.* 2.96-97.
98. M. Haren & Y. de Pontfarcy, *The Medieval Pilgrimage to St Patrick's Purgatory*, Enniskillen, 1988, 30-34.

CHAPTER FOUR

TREES, WOODS AND SINGING BIRDS

There is a tradition in Ireland of holding certain trees in special regard. It used to be common to find them by holy wells, with strips of cloth tied to their branches, and small objects pushed into the trunk: coins, nails, pins, combs, miraculous medals, even rosary beads.¹ However, they were not exclusive to holy wells. Others were found at crossroads, in churchyards, on raths and forts, or simply in fields. Such trees are traditionally subject to a large number of taboos. Cutting them down or taking them for fire-wood was considered particularly dangerous.² The respect in which they are held is sometimes 'explained' through association with a particular saint, who is said to have lived beside it or to have planted his staff there so that it struck root. However, the tradition of sacred trees is older than Christianity. It belongs to the world of the primal imagination, and is known in many other cultures, including those of the Old and New Testaments.

We can not know for certain what part such trees played in the religions of pre-Christian Ireland, but the popular association between druids and oak trees is well-known. It came to prominence largely through the researches of nineteenth century scholars using classical sources such as Tacitus's description of the destruction of the groves of Anglesey.³ Lucan refers to a Celtic assembly place called 'Drunemeton' - a sacred grove, possibly of oaks, somewhere in Galatia;⁴ According to Maximus of Tyre, the Celts worshipped a large oak tree as a symbol of Zeus.⁵

The Greeks and Romans also associated oak trees with Zeus and Jupiter, so it may be that Maximus was interpreting in the light of his own tradition. On the other hand, trees are an ancient and apparently universal symbol of the divine, appearing in the art of Assyria and Egypt, Persia and India, Scandinavia, Japan, the Philippines, Australia and North America. Even where representational art has been rejected, tree symbolism often survives: as in the Jewish menorah, the Islamic tree-of-life pattern.⁶ The link which Maximus makes with Zeus may be his own, or it may be his informant's way of saying that the oak tree represented, for the Celts, a very important deity. One way or the other, it seems likely that trees played a significant part in early Celtic religion in Asia Minor, Britain and Gaul.

However, the emphasis on oaks has probably been exaggerated. Together with the mistletoe (of which few if any examples have ever been found outside the classical sources) they have received a disproportionate amount of attention. In Ireland, oak was only one of a number of species which could be regarded as sacred. Yew, ash and hazel also figure prominently in the early texts. As for the folk tradition, one twentieth-century analysis found that nearly half of 210 trees growing by holy wells were whitethorn (ie. hawthorn), just under a third were ash, with the rest being made up of small numbers of different species.⁷

However, oak was used for Celtic mortuary houses at Hallstatt and La Tène, and Ross cites a burial in the north of England where oak branches were found inside an oak coffin, suggesting that in this case at least, oak had been selected for more than just its material

properties.⁸ There is a brief reference to an oak burial in the *Betha Adamnáin* - Life of Adamnán - where Adamnán keeps watch over the body of a young Pict and finds it strange that 'an old hollow oak-trunk should enclose the son of a king'.⁹ It is not clear from the text whether the tone is one of surprise or of pathos. Either way, Adamnán is portrayed as having no special regard for the oak.

The tradition of sacred trees was however, tenacious and widespread. A.T. Lucas, in his invaluable article, 'The Sacred Trees of Ireland', gives hundreds of examples from the early annals, law tracts, hagiographies, place lore and the folk tradition. Taking the word *bile* as the principal term for a sacred or 'ancient venerable tree', Lucas notes its survival in over twenty place-names from all over Ireland: for example: Billy, Billa, Aghavilla, Ballinvilla, Corravilla, Knockvilla, Drumaville, Gortavella, Lissavilla, Movice and so on.¹⁰

Some medieval writers believed that some of the early inhabitants of Ireland were tree-worshippers: the Dagda was said to have given his hazel-wood shield to Eitheor Mac Cuill - 'because Eitheor worshipped the hazel' - *is e coll da gcreideadh*.¹¹ The three sons of Cermait are listed in the *Lebor Gabála* as: 'Mac Cuill, the hazel his god, Mac Cecht - Tethor, the ploughshare his god, Mac Greine - Cethor, the sun his god.'¹² Other names of similar formation include Mac Cairthin (rowan man), Mac Ibair (yew man) and Mac Cuilinn (holly man)¹³ However, such statements about 'tree worship' are best treated with caution, since they may well reflect the same mixture of knowledge and ignorance as the allegation, heard recently in a television documentary, that the Orthodox worship ikons. There is however, no

reason to doubt that certain trees were once a *visible focus* of worship in Ireland, representing or mediating an invisible divine presence.

To find out more about the rôle of trees in early Irish religion, one might be drawn initially to a number of texts in which trees seem to have some special significance: eg. Suibne's address to the trees, the Old Irish tree-lists, and texts referring to the ogham alphabet. The results however, would be disappointing. Suibhne's address to the trees is mainly descriptive and can not be taken as a reliable indicator of general attitudes towards trees. It is interesting that he should be made to address them in such personal terms, but given his loneliness and his disordered state of mind, the poet's intentions are unclear.¹⁴

The eighth century law tract classifying twenty-eight trees into four degrees of 'nobility' provides no clues as to their religious significance, and assumes that the reader already knows the reason for the classification.¹⁵ Oak, ash, yew, holly and hazel are all classified among the most noble, but no further explanation is offered. The use of tree-names to designate the various letters of the ogham alphabet is similarly recondite. *Auraicept na n-Éces* - The 'Poet's Primer' - even supplements the basic tree list and tree-lore with a long section on the ogham of sows, rivers, fortresses, birds and so on.¹⁶ This might lead one to question how essential trees in fact were to the original ogham. Ogham was certainly carved on wood and the letters were known as *feda* - woods - but the strongest indication of a mythological link is found in the story of how the first ogham was made: Ogma 'a man well skilled in speech and poetry'

was said to have written it as a warning to Lug, that his wife might be carried off to the *síd* 'unless birch guard her.'¹⁷ Unless 'birch' is a cipher for something else (apart from being the first letter of the alphabet) it would seem that one tree at least, the birch, was seen as somehow intrinsic to the origins of ogham. Furthermore, a supernatural protective function is attributed to it by one of the gods. What exactly all this amounts to is unclear.

We are on firmer ground with Lucas's observation that *biledha* often grew on raths, forts, and inauguration places: the Maguires were inaugurated on the 'whitethorn fort' - Lisnaskeagh - in Co.Fermanagh. The Dál gCais had their inauguration *bile* at Magh Adhair near Tulla, Co.Clare. *Craebh Tulcha* (tree of the mound) near Glenavy, Co.Antrim, and *Ruadh-bheitheach* (red birch) in the parish of Killeely, Co.Galway were probably also inauguration trees.¹⁸ This was the tree under which the king was ritually married to the 'sovereignty goddess'. It therefore relates to the sacral kingship, and to the 'Otherworld support' which brought peace and fertility to the land. One of the worst possible insults which an enemy could offer was to desecrate the *bile* of a neighbouring tribe.¹⁹

Kings seem to have been identified in some way with their inauguration trees. In later times, the bardic poets made frequent use of a metaphor in which kings were described as trees and branches. Tadhg Mac Ruaidhri for example, is praised as 'a rugged branch of a kindly tree,' and in another poem of the same period, a king is referred to directly as *an bile*.²⁰ In Tadhg's case, the metaphor can be read as a reference to his ancestors - his 'family tree'. But the second example suggests that the comparison is not simply with the

ancestors but with a royal *bile* of some kind, most likely the inauguration tree.

A slightly different sort of relationship between a king and a tree is found in *Áirne Fíngéin*, the story of the wonders or *buada* which appeared as good omens on the night when Conn Cétchathach was born: among them, a 'marvellous tree' descended from the tree of paradise.²¹ It is unusual to find a tree which is a king's 'twin' in this way. But *Áirne Fíngéin* is not really a story about the relationship between trees and kings. As has been pointed out on more than one occasion, it looks more like a fragment of a myth of origins. Many other wonders spring into being into the same hour: rivers, loughs, plains, even roads.

Some royal *biledha* were protected by law. In a commentary in the law tracts, compensation is laid down for injury to: 'Thy *aimmine*, ie. seat or mound or *bile cáin* (beautiful tree)'. *Aimmine* has also been translated as 'meeting hill' or 'convention-seat'. The commentary is rather a late one, but it is possible that the specific reference to the *bile cáin* indicates the former presence on many royal sites and tribal assembly places, of a sacred tree. Lucas suggests that the *bile cáin* and the inauguration tree could sometimes have been one and the same.²² The sacred character of such trees is further suggested by a reference in the *Táin* to a group of shape-shifting druids known as 'the harpers of *cáin bile*'.²³

There were also *biledha* on ecclesiastical sites: some were associated with a particular saint, and we shall discuss these more fully in the following chapter. The association of *biledha* with churches appears frequently in the early texts, and Lucas argues

persuasively that they represent the continuation of a pre-Christian tradition of sacred trees. He cites the following examples. St Patrick is said to have founded a church near *Bile Tortan*, an ancient tree mentioned in the *Dindshenchas*.²⁴ Also from the Patrician tradition is a place called *Domnach Bile*, which Lucas translates tentatively as 'church of the *bile*'. *Whether this is correct or not, the tree does seem to have had Christian associations, being known as the place where Patrick 'ordained Oengus son of Ailill ... and rested there throughout Sunday.*²⁵ *Cill dara* (Kildare) where Brigit's church was founded during the sixth century, means 'church of the oak'. Animosus described it as *quercus altissima*, suggesting that he thought of it as a mature tree, rather than a sapling.²⁶ St Finnian chose to build his church at *Magh Bhile* (Moville) - 'plain of the *bile*' - from whence Colum Cille (said to have been a pupil of Finnian's) went on to found his own monastery in an oakwood - *Doire Cholaim Chille* (Derry). Oengus the Culdee is supposed to have practised his devotions under a *bile* at *Dísert Oengusa*. A glossator describes it as *bile na cille* - as if such *biledha* 'of the church' were common.²⁷ The same impression is gained from *Buile Suibne*, where Suibne takes refuge in a number of churchyard trees designated as *biledha*.²⁸ Entries in the various annals also mention 'the great oak' at Clonmacnoise, 'the yew tree' of Patrick at Newry, the *bile* of the monastery at Swords, and the great oak tree at Kells. Lucas notes some six places and eleven townlands called Killure, Killanure (and variants) and suggests that these derive from *Cell iubhar* - 'church of the yew'.²⁹

The tradition seems to have extended to sacred woods, like the one already mentioned at Derry: Lucas also cites the yews of Gleann

Uissean, where there was an early monastery, the woods of St Kevin and St Forannan where there were taboos against burning or cutting, and Doire Luráin where there was an ecclesiastical site associated with a bishop called Luran. There was also a wood called *Ross na Ferta* - 'wood of the miracle' - said to have been blessed by Brigit. Giraldus Cambrensis mentions the unusually large numbers of yews in Irish burial grounds and sacred places. He believed them to have been planted by 'the hands of holy men' and describes how a group of archers were smitten with pestilence - 'in retribution for their impiety' - after cutting down the yews and ash trees of St Kenach at Finglas.³⁰

The most revealing example is perhaps that of the monastery at Armagh which was surrounded by a wood described as the *fidnemed* - a term which Lucas saw as combining the words for 'wood' and 'consecrated place'.³¹ It might be thought that the wood was sacred simply because of its proximity to the church. However, *fidnemed* occurs in other contexts as well, and sometimes refers to sacred groves in places outside Ireland.³² Lucas also believed that *nemed* on its own (in various forms) sometimes designates a sacred wood in Celtic areas of the continent.³³ He concludes that the wood at Armagh derived its name from a *fidnemed* which had been there since pre-Christian times and that this could have been what attracted the church-builders there in the first place:

If we accept the statement about the foundation of a church at the *bile Tortan* and the suggestion that Armagh, Derry, Kildare and Clonmacnois were originally pagan seats of sacred groves or trees, then we must visualise the association as beginning in a deliberate effort by the Church to christianise these pagan sanctuaries by attaching them to the Christian ritual while yielding to the

traditional pagan devotion to them. At first, in brief, the church came to the tree, not the tree to the church.³⁴

This seems reasonable, as far as it goes. However, Lucas tends to assume that trees were somehow emptied of spiritual significance during the transition to Christianity. He suggests only practical and tactical reasons for the continuing presence of *biledha* beside churches, as if the early Irish converts suddenly came to see trees, in modern scientific fashion, as spiritually-inert material objects. There is ample evidence - from myth, poetry and the folk tradition - that this simply did not happen. The significance of trees in the Christian period must certainly have been different from what it was before, but we can not assume that the Irish primal imagination suddenly disappeared with the coming of Christianity. This would be to underestimate both its resilience and its creativity.

From the point of view of the missionaries, tactical considerations may well have predominated. The Christianisation of primal sacred sites was after all a recommended method of evangelisation. However, unless we are to see the siting of churches beside sacred trees simply as an act of aggression, the adoption of such a tactic presupposes the transferability of sacred trees from one religion to the other and the realisation that, at a level deeper than local myth, trees belong to the *lingua franca* of primal imagination. It is difficult to imagine how, from the point of view of the Irish Christians - including their poets and their native clergy - sacred trees could ever have been simply a tactic. More likely, their significance came to be conceived, for the most part, in Christian rather than pre-Christian terms.

Exactly how this worked out in practice is unclear. Were such trees now seen as the *bile* of the monastic *tuath*? Or the *bile* of the king of heaven? Or did they draw on broader traditions, not solely concerned with kingship, but with the general presence and activity of the Otherworld powers. Did they come to be seen as mediating the Divine presence, or perhaps the presence of angels and saints? Answers to these questions may emerge in due course, but there is no doubt that the Christian kings and many monastic communities considered it quite appropriate for their sacred sites to be graced with at least one *bile*.

This need not have been simply out of faithfulness to the past. It is possible (even likely) that Irish primal imagination found itself mirrored to some extent in the sacred texts of the bible. Sacred trees and tree symbolism are far from being alien to Judeo-Christian tradition - on the contrary, they are present from Genesis to Revelation and often have a special significance. From today's perspective, it is possible to overlook their significance, but this is less likely to have happened in early Christian Ireland.

TREES IN THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

Consider Muirchú's comparison between the faith of Abraham and that of a young Saxon woman called Monesan: Monesan, we are told, was brought up in Britain at a time when the whole country was 'frozen in the chill of unbelief'. In spite of this unpromising background, she developed a lively inquiring spirit and an 'ardent desire to see God'.³⁵ Her parents brought her to Patrick because she refused to get married and questioned them constantly about the origin of the sun.

She had arrived in some undisclosed way at the doctrine of creation, so that when she eventually meets Patrick, he recognises her as a believer and baptises her without further instruction. Muirchu seems rather surprised himself by this example of faith among the 'pagans' but he attributes it readily enough to the action of the Holy Spirit and, interestingly, to the way in which Monessan 'looked for the maker of all creation through nature, following in this the example of the patriarch Abraham.'

It is not immediately clear what the Abraham reference is doing in Muirchú's story. Is it supposed to be a biblical example of 'natural religion' in the traditional sense of unaided human thinking about God? If so, Muirchú stretches the idea to breaking point by attributing Monessan's insight to divine revelation: the 'brightly shining counsel of the Holy Spirit.' It is questionable in any case whether Muirchu would have thought in such categories habitually - if at all. Another approach would be to ask: what episodes in Abraham's life does Muirchu have in mind? Where and when did Abraham look for the maker of all creation through nature? The answer is not immediately obvious. Could he have been thinking of Genesis 15, in which Abraham looks up into the night sky and hears Yahweh make certain promises to him?³⁶ Possibly, but the major theophany in Abraham's life is elsewhere:

The Lord appeared to [Abraham] by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the door of his tent in the heat of the day. And he lifted up his eyes and looked and behold, three men stood in front of him. When he saw them, he ran from his tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth and said, 'My Lord...'³⁷

The Oak of Mamre

The oaks of Mamre are sometimes translated as 'terebinths'. For

present purposes, it is enough to say that they were large trees, and this may in fact be the intended meaning of the Hebrew. Interestingly, one of the Irish writers equated 'terebinth' with *bile* in a passing reference to the king's tree at Glendalough: *terebinthus regem in summo montis*.³⁸ He was obviously familiar with the biblical material. De Vaux notes that in the earliest texts, the tree is singular. He suggests that later editors, uneasy about the Mamre sanctuary for whatever reason, merged this 'big tree' with the surrounding group in order to play down its importance.³⁹ In some traditions, the covenant under the stars took place under the same oak or terebinth of Mamre.⁴⁰

Elsewhere we are informed that Abraham called on the name of the Lord under the tamarisk tree at Beersheba.⁴¹ The circumstances of his experience at Mamre were not therefore seen as an aberration by the authors of Genesis. The idea of Abraham praying under sacred trees was quite acceptable to them. He was probably understood to be visiting Mamre in the full awareness of its being a holy place.

The oak of Mamre becomes a place of theophany for Abraham, just as the wells of Lahai-Roi and Beersheba become places of theophany for Hagar and Isaac respectively.⁴² The theophany itself is in human form - like Hagar's angel and the man who wrestles with Jacob among the stones of Bethel. It also appears, in parts of the text, to be triadic - a point which Christian exegetes and iconographers would later find highly significant. This would surely also have struck a chord with Irish listeners whose enthusiasm for the Holy Trinity was paralleled and pre-dated by the large number of Irish triple deities. These two elements - the triad and the oak tree - may well have been what caught Muirchú's attention. Like mountains and wells, trees were to provide

another valuable 'bridge' between the primal imagination of Ireland and the Judeo-Christian tradition with its roots in the primal religions of the Middle East.

In Semitic religion, trees were part of the natural iconography of the 'high places'. The '*asherah*' could be either a wooden pole or a living tree and seems to have represented the goddess or goddesses. In Phoenician religion, the cypress tree was a focus for the worship of Astarte.⁴³ The male counterpart of the '*asherah*' was the *massebah* or standing stone. Often the two stood side by side.⁴⁴ Biblical writers usually associate the '*asherah*' with the worship of Baal. However, altars and *massebôth* dedicated to the El were often accompanied by unnamed sacred trees, as at Mamre.

We have already seen how Hebrews and Canaanites sometimes worshipped on the same sites using the same natural symbols. Mamre was sacred to the Canaanites when Abraham arrived there, and probably continued as a shared place of worship for some considerable time. The historian Sozomenus, writing in the fifth century A.D., mentions 'Abraham's Oak' as a place of pilgrimage and the site of an annual fair where Jews, Christians, and 'pagans' would meet to do business and to worship God each in their own way.⁴⁵ This place of worship and assembly, was associated in the Jewish mind, with an important tribal ancestor - ie. Abraham. There were similar trees in Ireland, as we shall see.

The Oak of Moreh

The oak of Mamre is by no means the only site of a tree theophany in the bible. There are even more references to the oak of Moreh which grew by the ancient *maqôm* - holy place - at Shechem.⁴⁶ Beneath it was

an altar, said to have been built by Abraham after the Lord appeared to him there as well.⁴⁷ Since the holy place was in Canaanite territory, we may assume that this too was a Canaanite sanctuary. Nevertheless, it is a place where Abraham sees God.

The Oak of Ophrah

A third tree theophany, perhaps modelled the story of Abraham at Mamre, takes place at the oak of Ophrah where Gideon meets an angel of the Lord.⁴⁸ (The gradual substitution of angels for direct divine appearances is carried on frequently but inconsistently throughout the Old Testament)⁴⁹ Like Abraham, Gideon brings an offering of food - meat and unleavened cakes - to the place under the tree; he is told to place these on a rock and pour the broth over them; the angel touches them with his staff and fire bursts forth to consume the offering; the angel disappears and Gideon builds an altar.

The Tree theophanies of Zechariah, Elijah, and Moses

From another part of the tradition comes Zechariah's vision of the night in which he sees a man on a red horse standing among the myrtle trees. The text is rather disconnected and has probably been reworked in order to tone down the directness of the theophany; the man and/or the horse seems to be an angel, but Yahweh is also present and Zechariah hears him speaking words of great consolation.⁵⁰ After his contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, Elijah lies down under a broom tree and prays to die. An angel comes with a feshly-baked cake and a jug of water, touches him, and encourages him to go on to Horeb where he experiences an even more direct theophany in the episode of the 'still small voice'.⁵¹

Among the most famous of tree theophanies is the one which often adorns even the simplest of presbyterian churches: the burning bush; In the New Testament, Stephen refers to it as 'Batos' - a thorn bush.⁵² Its sacred character is reinforced by its location on the side of a holy mountain, and the instruction for Moses to take off his shoes is typical of the behaviour expected in early Semitic sacred territory.⁵³ At first we are told that it is an angel who appears to him in the midst of the flames, but the voice is definitely Yahweh's voice: *I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham...* When Moses hides his face, the theophany is confirmed for us: *for he was afraid to look upon God.*⁵⁴

Activities associated with sacred trees:

The oak of Moreh turns up again and again in early Hebrew tradition. Because of the difficulty of dating any of this material we are unable to trace the varying fortunes of the Shechem sanctuary with any confidence. The theophany to Abraham belongs to the Yahwistic tradition. The older Elohist editor tells us that Jacob settled near the oak and raised either an altar or a standing stone there and called it [sic] El the God of Israel.⁵⁵ It was a place of worship with a very long history and respectable ancestral connections.

Burials

When Jacob is forced to flee from Shechem, he buries his 'foreign gods' under the oak of Moreh.⁵⁶ This is probably to be understood as an act of renunciation, but it need not imply any condemnation of the tree. Indeed, he can be seen as burying them as he would bury the dead. The bones of his son Joseph were also said to be buried at Shechem.⁵⁷ DeVaux warns that not every tree in the texts should be

taken as a place of worship.⁵⁸ However, since sanctuaries and burial places often coincide⁵⁹ we should take note of two other possible tree sanctuaries - the 'Oak of Weeping' where Rebekkah's nurse was said to be buried; and the oak in Jabesh which was the burial-place of Saul; it seems particularly unlikely that a king of Israel would be buried under an insignificant tree.⁶⁰

Teaching, prophecy, judgement:

Moreh means 'of the teacher' or 'of the soothsayer.' It has an almost druidical ring to it, and indeed the druids were generally believed to have been the teachers and prophets of Ireland in pre-Christian times.⁶¹ The name highlights another characteristic of sacred trees in the bible. As well as being places where the ancestors had 'seen' God in some way or other, it looks as if certain trees were places of aural as well as visual theophany - where one might go to listen for God's voice in the words of a teacher, or prophet or judge; strictly speaking, I suppose, this is not a theophany, but a slightly more mediated sort of encounter. It may be that with the increasing exaltation and invisibility of Yahweh in the later traditions, words rather than images and symbols came to figure more prominently as the expected medium of revelation. There was probably also the sense that what was possible *in illo tempore* for the ancestors was less so now for ordinary people, who would need the help and guidance of a specialist.

The prophetess Deborah is said to have given judgement under a palm tree between Bethel and Ramah.⁶² There is brief mention of a 'diviner's oak' in Judges 9.37, and in 1.Kings 13.14, a wandering 'man of God' is tracked down to his seat, also under an oak. The oak of

Moreh was the setting for a great assembly at which Joshua read the covenant to the people.⁶³ In this tradition, it was he who set up the *massebah*⁶⁴ as a witness that Israel had heard the Law of Moses and promised to abide by it. This story has been thought to hark back to a regular assembly at Shechem during which the covenant was expounded i.e. taught, and ritually renewed.⁶⁵

The carvings of cherubim and palm trees on the panelling of Solomon's temple are surely not without significance.⁶⁶ They would seem to represent a deliberate intention to remind people a) of the presence of God and b) that the wisdom and judgement which they had traditionally sought in the old tree sanctuaries was now also to be found in the temple on Mount Moriah. The idea of worshipping God indoors, in a special house, had previously been a feature of Canaanite religion.⁶⁷ Here it enters the Judeo-Christian tradition for the first time, but despite later polemic, there is no sense that the temple is to replace all other centres of worship. It seems likely that the same was true in early Christian Ireland. The tiny oratories there could never have held more than a handful of people. The main sanctuaries must still have been the outdoor ones.⁶⁸ Returning to the bible, Ezekiel also has a vision of the temple with palm tree carvings in and around the gates, gates being traditional seats of judgement.⁶⁹ Significantly perhaps, Solomon's temple was lined with wood - *no stone was seen* - and was known as The House of the Forest of Lebanon.⁷⁰ The palm trees probably also symbolised fertility: through their association with oases in the desert, fresh water, oil and dates; other parts of the temple were decorated with flowers and gourds and pomegranates. The great pillars⁷¹ can also be seen as stylised

trees.⁷² The architect was in effect reproducing a sort of tree sanctuary.

The Knowledge of Good and Evil

Trees seem to have had a strong association with the sifting of truth from falsehood, good from evil. The obvious mythological parallel is the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil whose fruit gives Adam and Eve a godlike sense of right and wrong,⁷³ and a corresponding awareness of their own frailty.⁷⁴ Because of the context in which it appears, this tree has often been understood primarily as a tree of guilt, rather than a tree of knowledge. When we compare it with other Old Testament trees however, we can see that it is probably related to the same tradition as Deborah's palm and the oak of Moreh. This is not to deny human frailty, without which there would be no need for judges or teachers, laws or prophets. But the wisdom function of tree sanctuaries acknowledges both the source of wisdom in God, and the problems of discerning that wisdom in everyday life. It is taken for granted that men and women are open to that wisdom and capable of receiving it.

One of the Psalms celebrates this point of view; in a song which seems to be inspired by Solomon's temple: The Psalmist describes the faithful as if they themselves are sacred trees, planted in the house of God and bearing witness to God's uprightness and justice:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree
And grow like a cedar in Lebanon
They are planted in the house of the Lord
They flourish in the courts of our God
They bring forth fruit in old age
They are ever full of sap and green
To show that the Lord is upright;
He is my rock and there is no
unrighteousness in him.⁷⁵

Trees and Kings

As in Ireland, kings were often compared with trees. This is not

surprising given the Old Testament theology of kingship which saw the king as a consecrated person sharing in the holiness of God.⁷⁶ If God could be associated with a great tree, then so by extension could his adopted son, the king. The rite of adoption was part of the coronation ceremonies in ancient Israel: 'Thou art my son, today I have begotten thee'.⁷⁷ Some texts suggest that the king's place during the coronation was 'beside the pillar',⁷⁸ but it is not clear whether this pillar represents a pillar-stone of the outdoor sanctuaries or a stylised tree;⁷⁹ Abimelek was made king 'by the oak of the pillar at Shechem.'⁸⁰ He came to be seen as a particularly bad choice, and a parable is told in which he is compared to a bramble bush. The association of trees with kings is found again in the praise poem which Ezekiel uses to introduce his malediction on Egypt - or perhaps Assyria. He describes a magnificent cedar with deep roots and spreading branches, towering above all the trees of the forest; birds nest in it, animals give birth in its shade, and 'no tree in the garden of God is like it for beauty.'⁸¹ This turns out to be a doom-laden image for the king's over-weening pride. When Nebuchadnezzar dreams of a similarly great tree and of an angel coming to chop it down, Daniel predicts his imminent downfall.⁸² It might seem from these three examples that the tree-like king is always a symbol of arrogance, but this is not the case. Ezekiel compares Israel to a cedar⁸³ and Isaiah constantly uses tree imagery for the restored Israel: 'the branch of the Lord', 'the shoot of my planting', the people who will become 'oaks of righteousness'.⁸⁴ The leader of the restoration is likewise a scion of David, the man called Branch, the shoot from the stump of Jesse.⁸⁵ Being the messiah, the anointed one,

he is also a kind of king, or was certainly expected to be such. It may not be insignificant that Jesus's 'triumphal entry' to Jerusalem is accompanied by a waving of palm branches. In the gospels, he compares the kingdom of heaven, to a great tree with birds nesting in its branches.⁸⁶

Trees sanctuaries condemned:

It is impossible to ignore the fact that parts of the Old Testament tradition, particularly the prophets and the Deuteronomist, sometimes view the tree sanctuaries with disfavour. Generally however, the condemnation is not so much of the tree, as of rituals enacted beneath it. The same sort of accusations fly as were found in the discussion of the (often identical) high places:

Are you not children of transgression and offspring of deceit? You who burn with lust among the oaks, and under every green tree. Who slay your children in the valleys, under the clefts of the rocks.⁸⁷

How are we to understand such verses, given the equally strong tradition that Abraham and many other eminent figures not only resorted to the tree sanctuaries but actually set up the altars and standing stones beneath them? Are we hearing about the same sanctuaries at different periods in their history, or two sides of a contemporary debate? Do these verses express the straightforward horror at atrocities committed in the name of religion, or the far commoner tendency for enemies to accuse each other of depravity? Even if we take these denunciations at face value, it should be noted that they are directed primarily against practices rather than places. It may even be possible to detect a note of outrage that such acts should

be committed in a supposedly holy place. Other writers were equally disgusted by what they saw as the worthless sacrifice of animals in the temple.⁸⁸

These texts may reflect a genuine desire for reform, a rejection of worn-out ideas in order to embrace a wider conception of God. The prophets' frequent protests against idolatry - including the carving of figures from forest trees - can not be easily dismissed. As Paul Tillich has said, any medium of revelation can lose its 'transparency to God' so that it becomes an idol - something which blocks rather than enables.⁸⁹ Tillich had in mind a whole range of ecclesiastical artefacts from devotional objects to doctrines and hagiographies, but the same principle can be applied to trees, wells and mountains.

It is fascinating none the less, to see how powerfully trees continue to occur as positive symbols in prophetic discourse, side by side with preaching against idolatry:

What have I to do with idols?
It is I who answer and look after you
I am like an evergreen cypress
From me comes your fruit.⁹⁰

The Tree of Life

The tree image is found from Genesis to Revelation, where the Tree of Life is described growing by the river of the water of life in the New Jerusalem. With its fruit for every month of the year and its leaves for the healing of the nations, it carries with it the ancient fertility aspect of the tree sanctuaries, and extends it into a broader but at the same time more spiritualised vision of everlasting life in the kingdom of God. It also expresses the New Testament hope of 'paradise regained'.

The biblical Tree of Life made its first appearance in the description of the Garden of Eden, which in turn is probably modelled on a Canaanite *bamah* with its tree of life and spring of water, its

guards at the entrance and its sacred snake.⁹¹ The place of worship can be seen to create and/or re-create the primal paradise in which God and creation are at one with each other. Not surprisingly this image of original harmony is found also in the Hebrew creation myth. From the beginning then, trees have been persistently associated in Judeo-Christian tradition, with human participation in the divine life - on all levels - from the fecundity of the earth to the life of the Spirit.⁹²

The human capacity for recognising truth and goodness can be also be seen (when it *is* seen) as a sharing in the divine life - not just for the benefit of the individual, but for the health of the whole community. There has in fact been a long-standing confusion between the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life - as if myth-makers and commentators were equally unsure of the distinction. This confusion is present to some extent in the texts themselves. The Old Testament scholar Ivan Engell has made the interesting suggestion that the Tree of Knowledge originally conferred not moral insight, but the ability to give life through procreation. He makes a direct link between wisdom and vitality, and observes quite correctly that knowledge and fertility are closely related in these early chapters of Genesis: 'Now Adam knew his wife Eve and she conceived and bore Cain.'⁹³ In the end it is impossible to keep the various aspects of the sacred tree in neat compartments. But they centre around the ancient idea that the mystery of God can be experienced through the tree and/or the tree image - either directly as a theophany, or indirectly through teaching, prophecy and judgement, through the person of the king, and

most basically of all - through the fertility of plants and animals, men and women.

f) The Cross as a Tree

The cross has sometimes been described as a Tree of Life. If there is a biblical source for this idea, it can only be St Paul who quotes an obscure text from Deuteronomy - *Cursed be anyone who hangs on a tree* - in order to explain his theory of redemption to the (possibly Celtic) Galatians.⁹⁴ No other biblical writer describes the cross as a tree, but the image has proved immensely popular in theology, art and hymn-writing. The Irish poem on 'The Harrowing of Hell' sees the atonement entirely in terms of the sickness and recovery of the Paradise Tree, where Christ saves the world in the form of a young child:

It will take trembling and pain from men -
The child's course upon the bare tree.⁹⁵

Trees are occasionally depicted on Celtic crosses, eg. Adam and Eve under the Tree of Knowledge.⁹⁶

In our discussion of water in Ireland and the Old Testament, we saw how practical necessity seems to have been inseparable from a religious attitude towards wells. The same can be said of trees: they provide food in the form of fruit and nuts; many of them have healing properties; other living creatures find shelter beneath them - either from heat or cold; their roots give stability to the soil; their wood was once essential for fuel, as it was for building and many other domestic purposes. The Living God, the giver of life is thus well represented by the tree. These are matters of basic survival, but the symbol is capable of more abstract or spiritual levels of meaning as well. Trees endure from generation to generation. They can grow from

an apparently dead stump. They are strong and upright. At many different levels, they evoke aspects of what we clumsily call the Divine..

THE IRISH TRADITION

The tradition of sacred trees was often present in the minds of the Christian Irish poets and *literati*. They repeated and continued to elaborate, fragments of old myths in which druids gathered under trees, trees sprang up on the night of a certain king's birth and so on.⁹⁷ One of the most celebrated pieces of tree lore has already been touched upon in chapter two - namely, the myth of the hazel trees which overhang the Otherworld well and grow the nuts of wisdom to be eaten by the salmon and washed downstream for the enlightenment of the *filid*. This oft-repeated and unusually coherent cluster of images is no doubt very early and probably enjoyed a certain amount of protection due to its personal importance for the poets who transmitted it. It was translated into Christianity (with some minor but significant adjustments) as a figure for the outpouring of divine life and wisdom into the world - which is basically what it must have meant anyway. If the tree took rather a secondary place in our earlier discussion, as indeed it does in the *dindshenchas*, it was none the less highly significant as a sacred symbol. With its roots in the earth, it reached down into the same Otherworld depths from which the well-water emanated.

Nowhere however do we find anything as specific as the statement that the Celts worship a large oak tree as a symbol of Zeus. Trees may well have been places of theophany in Ireland, as they were in the

Middle East, but it is more difficult to discover which god or goddess was supposed to have been revealed in and through them.

a) Medb and Mary

In the *Táin*, we are told that trees called *bile Medba* sprang up wherever Medb planted her horse-whip.⁹⁸ This suggests that a significant number of ancient trees of Medb were still around at the time of writing, and that the author felt called upon to explain them in some way. It is possible that these trees were once to Medb what the cypress was to Astarte. But the satirical tone which the *Táin* often adopts with regard to Medb makes it unlikely that the author would have given us a serious answer even if he had known it. He does however reproduce for us a little cameo-portrait in which Medb appears with a bird on one shoulder and a squirrel on the other.⁹⁹ This may be a surviving remnant of goddess iconography celebrating Medb's association with trees and their natural inhabitants. I would be surprised however if Medb were the only goddess to have had arboreal connections. One thinks for example, of the name of Oenghus's sweetheart - *Caer Ibhornheith* or 'yew berry.'

The tree metaphors of Mary offered by some later bardic poets may represent a christianisation of this sort of thing. She is: 'a queen, a branch bearing royal hazelnuts', 'our blooming hazel tree'. Jesus is 'a branch sprung from Mary' 'O bright apple...O berry...O branch...O gate of the heavenly palace,' exclaims one author.¹⁰⁰ This series of invocations is reminiscent of the 'litany' of *Eó Rossa* which we shall be examining shortly. 'Gate of the heavenly palace' corresponds closely to the epithet *dor nime* found there. Cf. also the prayers which Philip Bocht O Huiginn addresses directly to the cross.¹⁰¹ There

are no surviving parallels for this in the bible; cultural translation is clearly at work. It is also interesting to note that Christ - 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' in parts of the New Testament ¹⁰² is represented here by that Irish symbol of wisdom - the hazel nut - while the source of his wisdom, the tree on which he grows, is not God the Father (as one might have expected) but Mary. This extremely high-status position tends to confirm her affinities with the goddess or goddesses in their in tree manifestation.

We could spend a great deal of time trying to determine whether the deity who appears in relation to trees in Ireland is masculine or feminine. In Semitic religion she was imagined as both feminine (Asherah) and masculine (Yahweh at the oaks of Mamre. Moreh and so on). In Ireland also, there would seem to be examples of both. This may simply be the result of the medieval compilers' having arranged different strata of the mythology side by side, but it seems to me to be quite fortuitous, since at the human term of the analogy, both the father and the mother are givers of life, wisdom. protection and so on.

Finn, Derg Corra and Suibne

An example in the masculine mode, is found in the story of Finn and Derg Corra 'the man in the tree'. First however, it should be noted that Finn himself is something of a tree dweller, having spent his childhood in the forest of Slieve Bloom; Nagy notes his title 'lad of the hollow' (ie. hollow tree) and a later poem describes how his mysterious foster-mother carried him as a baby to a secret hill and hid him 'in the hollow of a tall ivy-clad tree'.¹⁰³ In the earlier part of the 'Boyish Exploits', Finn's foster-mother is described as a

druidess and is accompanied by a shadowy figure called the Grey one of Luachair. O'Donovan identified the Grey One's territory as Luachair Dedad, the district of the Paps of Anu in County Kerry.¹⁰⁴ Bodbmall and the Grey One are referred to throughout the rest of the 'Exploits' as 'the two women warriors'. They are almost certainly goddesses and combine the qualities of motherly protection and warrior courage. The forest and the mountain are their domain.

It is later in his life that Finn encounters Derg Corra, whose name matches his prowess at leaping back and forth over the fire. One of Finn's women becomes attracted to him and Derg Corra has to flee for his life. Like Finn, he takes refuge in the woods, where Finn eventually discovers him sitting in a tree with a blackbird on his shoulder; in his left hand is a bronze vessel full of water, and in the vessel a trout or salmon. With his right hand he shares his food (nuts) and drink (water) with the fish, the bird, and with a stag who stands at the foot of the tree.¹⁰⁵ This piece of highly-charged symbolism is strongly suggestive of divine or semi-divine status. It is impossible not to be reminded both of the gods of Hindu iconography with their various attributes in their hands, and also of the figure known as the 'Lord of the Animals' on the Gundestrup cauldron.¹⁰⁶

Whether envisaged as male or female, the woodland deity or deities were not forgotten in medieval Ireland. In architecture, it sometimes materialised as the 'green man' and in literature one of its leading rôles is probably that of Suibne: the displaced king of the old order hiding in churchyard yews (many of the called *bile*) and on the wooded mountains. But the sense of divine presence in the vicinity of trees was not always so clearly anthropomorphic. It has been said

that in Celtic Gaul, the trees, wells and stones of native religion only acquired images of gods and goddesses under Roman influence,¹⁰⁷ and there is indeed a sense in which the sacred trees of Ireland, like those of Israel, were seen as sacred symbols in themselves, and required no statues of a deity beneath them.

The Yew of Ross

Consider for example what can only be described as the litany of the Yew of Ross. *Eó Rossa* - the yew of Ross was one of the 'five *biledha* of Ireland'. It appears in the Rennes *Dindshenchas*¹⁰⁸ together with a long list of honorific titles, the form of which is strikingly similar to old Christian litanies like the litany of Loreto and the bardic invocations to Mary. However, it is unlikely to have been modelled on any Christian form, if anything, the influence was the other way round.¹⁰⁹ Among the acclamations of *Eó Rossa* are:

Best of creatures,
door of heaven..¹¹⁰
full of great bounty...
beauty's honour...
diadem of angels...
vigour of life...
Eó Rossa.

It is no longer easy to grasp the meaning of all of these titles,¹¹¹ Some of them clearly refer to the practical value of the wood for boat-building, construction and chariot-making:

a king's wheel...
strength of a building,
good of a crew

Again we see the close connection between what is precious in a practical way, and what is of spiritual value. Among the other titles of *Eó Rossa* are some which, though rather cryptic and bizarre (particularly in translation) refer to a wisdom association of the tree:

prince's right (*recht flatha*)...
a word pure man...
a mind's lord...
judgement of origin,

judicial doom,
faggot of sages..¹¹²
spell of knowledge.

As in the Old Testament, the sacred tree is associated with knowledge, and the discernment of right and wrong - good judgement, mediated by kings and sages, poets and legal experts. Its kingly qualities are further suggested by the epithets:

noblest of trees
glory of Leinster

But the yew of Ross is more than a source of fine timber and a place of kingly or poetic inspiration. It is also a symbol of divinity, and no doubt had been for many centuries before the two formally-Christian invocations were mixed in with the others:

a firm strong god - *dia dronbala*
the Trinity's mighty one,
Mary's Son.

Eó Rossa was also a tree of life. It was said to be evergreen - as indeed yew trees are, hence perhaps their popularity in graveyards. They have a reputation for longevity and their wood is very durable: 'Which are the two trees whose green tops do not fade till they become withered?' - answer, the holly and *Eó Rossa*.¹¹³

The transference of tree symbolism to Jesus (as above to Mary) is found in other places as well. Another of Ireland's sacred trees, *Eó Mugna* is described in the Rennes *Dindshenchas* as 'greatest of sister's sons.'¹¹⁴ It was part of the process of enculturation to locate Jesus and Mary within the Irish kinship system - Mary as our sister, Jesus as our sister's son.¹¹⁵ As late as the fifteenth century Christ was still 'a tree in bloom and fruit' for the Franciscan poet Philip Bocht Ó Huiginn.¹¹⁶ The image persists in Christian art to the present day and is no less biblical for being primal: We have already seen how the Old Testament prophets looked forward to the coming of the messiah as the 'man called Branch' - sprung from the tree of David and his father Jesse. Since earliest times, Christians have applied this imagery to

Jesus with no qualms at all, indeed there has been a great and enduring love of it.¹¹⁷

The 'Five *biledha* of Ireland':

Among the sacred trees of Ireland, five were selected by the tradition for special attention. These were *Eó Rossa*, *Eó Mugna*, *Bile/Craeb Daithi*, *Bile/Craeb Uisnig*, and *Bile Tortan*.¹¹⁸

Eó Rossa

Eó Rossa is thought to have stood at Oldleighlin, Co.Carlow.¹¹⁹ There are various stories about how it eventually fell. In the *Life of St Laserian*, (ie. Molaise)¹²⁰ we hear how the saints of Ireland prayed and fasted for it to fall down, because they wanted to build churches with the wood. It is interesting that they should take this spiritual approach rather than simply chopping it down. There is no hint of hostility or disapproval towards the tree, though a preference for church buildings rather than open-air sanctuaries is clearly implied. It is said that the tree finally succumbed to the prayers of Molaise, who went on to found a monastery on the same site. Among those who came to claim a portion of *Eó Rossa*, was Moling: the famous oratory which Gobbán Saer is said to have built for him, was roofed with this timber.¹²¹ We are reminded of how Solomon chose cedars of Lebanon and cypresses to re-create some aspects of the ancient holy places in his new man-made temple.

Eó/Daire Mugna

Although *Eó* normally means a yew, the term can be applied to other trees as well. *Eó* or *Daire Mugna* is said to have been an oak which grew near the present-day village of Moone, Co.Kildare.¹¹⁴ During the centuries after its fall, its reputation increased and it was credited

with supernatural size - broad as the plain in which it stood ¹²³ - and with prodigious fertility: acorns, apples and hazelnuts in enormous quantities, all on the one tree. It was also said to be evergreen.¹²⁴ Its fall was not the work of clerics, whether prayerful or disapproving, but of Ninine the Poet who 'cast it down in the time of Domnall, son of Murchad, King of Ireland, who had refused a demand of Ninine's',¹²⁵ Here then is another example of a king's close association with a particular tree, and of an insult offered to him by desecrating the symbol of his Otherworld authority and support.

'Mugna' is etymologised in the *Dindshenchas* as *moo-gnia* - 'greatest of sister's sons'.¹²⁶ It matters little whether this is linguistically correct. For present purposes it is interesting enough to see the enculturisation process at work. Stokes suggests that the reference is to Jesus, through our 'sister' Mary. When this is compared with the similar epithets applied to *Eó Rossa* - 'the Trinity's Mighty one, Mary's Son', two of the ancient *biledha* of Ireland are seen in the process of becoming symbols for Christ. This may also be the import of the rather cryptic phrase in the *Dindshenchas* of *Eó Mugna* - 'Upholder put upon his tree.' 'Trefuilngid treorach' - 'strong upholder' - may be as Stokes says, an alliterative kenning for God or Christ,¹²⁷ but I would be very surprised if we were dealing with purely imported ideas. It seems far more likely that what we are witnessing is the grafting of a Christian symbol onto a compatible pre-Christian rootstock.¹²⁸

Bile Tortan

Bile Tortan was said to have been an ash tree of similar proportions to *Eó Mugna*; the men of Tortan could shelter beneath it in 'the

pelting of the storms.¹²⁹ Like the oak of Moreh in the bible, it was remembered as a tribal assembly place, and it too had religious associations. Patrick is said to have visited it, and to have built a church nearby at Donaghpatrick.¹³⁰ Its probable site is somewhere near Ardraccon, Co.Meath.¹³¹ If this is in the area now occupied by Ardraccon House, it is on the outskirts of Navan on the Kells road, near the river Blackwater. Also in the vicinity are a large rath with four tiers of ramparts and the hill of Tailtiu. The seventh-century poet and sage (*eiceas*) Bimudine is also associated with *Bile Tortan*.¹³² This suggests that it was also a traditional centre of sacred learning. From the date, we may assume that Bimudine was also an Irish Christian. He is remembered for an obscure elegy on the drowning of king Conaing mac Aedain - so he was a court poet of some importance, and it is therefore possible that *Bile Tortan* was an inauguration tree.

Craeb Daithi and Bile Uisnig

These were both apparently ash trees. We are told very little about either of them. The first, Daithi's branch, is linked in one text with a group of people called *fir bile* and may therefore have been the inauguration tree of a particular tribe. According to Lucas it stood in Farbill, Co.Westmeath.¹³³ Uisnech appears to have been a major centre of the old religion and probably fell quickly into disuse after the adoption of Christianity. Like Cruachan, its pre-Christian identity may have been too powerful to accommodate within the new ways. Mythologically speaking, it was the navel or centre of Ireland and the home of the Dagda. Geographically, it is also fairly central. The hill of Uisnech is near Kilbeggan in Westmeath. To the south was

the Columban abbey of Durrow. Of the five *biledha*, Uisnech seems to have been the most westerly, not far from the border with Connacht. The first fire in Ireland was said to have been kindled there.¹³⁴ Like many sacred sites, Uisnech was on a hill and was associated with a great assembly, said to have been held at Beltaine.¹³⁵ Bile Uisnig probably played a significant part both in the assembly and in the religious ceremonies.

The 'five *biledha*' including the Yew of Ross had clearly fallen long before the *Dindshenchas* was compiled, but there is no reason to doubt that they were once real trees. The dates of their fall are given in historical time (often during the early part of the seventh century) contemporary with the lives of named kings and saints.¹³⁶ *Bile Tortan* appears earliest in the literature - in the eighth century Book of Armagh - where its Patrician connections are mentioned - but all five probably flourished before the adoption of Christianity, as well as afterwards. Although they were five in number, a myth grew up at some time, linking them all together - as berries from the same branch. The story of their common origin is told in the tenth or eleventh century text, *Do Suidigud Tellaich Temra* - 'On the Settling of the manor of Tara',¹³⁷ - in which the giant *Trefuilngid Tre-eochar*¹³⁸ appears at the feast of Tara on the first Good Friday carrying a 'golden many-coloured branch of Lebanon wood' with three types of fruit on it: 'nuts and apples and acorns in Maytime'.¹³⁹ The branch also has a miraculous fragrance which serves the giant for food.¹⁴⁰

After expounding the 'correct' historical division of Ireland into five parts, *Trefuilngid Tre-eochar* takes from the branch a number

of berries which grow eventually into the five *biledha*. This myth is probably intended to depict the sanctioning by divine authority of five kings or five political units - separate but inter-related - with four provinces to north, south, east and west, and Tara in the centre. The main thrust of this myth is obviously political and of no great antiquity, but it uses at least three motifs - the Otherworld visitor, the Otherworld tree, and the miraculous branch - which occur with great frequency in other tales and are probably part of pre-Christian Irish cosmology. 'On the Settling of the Manor of Tara' relies on a contemporary ability to relate to this traditional world-view, and a continuing willingness to believe in (and be impressed by) the Otherworld origin of the five *biledha*.

Several inconsistencies within this tale suggest that its author was creating a new myth from old material. Listeners were probably intended to think of the 'fifths' of Ireland as Tara plus the four provinces - known today as Ulster, Leinster, Munster and Connaught, though these are never mentioned by name. One would have expected therefore that the five *biledha* would be evenly distributed throughout the country. But this is not the case at all. Unless Lucas and others have been seriously mistaken as to their whereabouts, they were all either in Leinster or in Meath. Secondly, we are presented with three types of fruit - apples, acorns and nuts - for five trees which were either oaks, ashes or yews.¹⁴¹ Thirdly, the closing sequence in which Fintan sets up, on the hill of Uisnech, a stone with five ridges in it (one for each fifth) would seem to make Uisnech the centre of Ireland, rather than Tara. The argument about Uisnech and Tara being 'as two

kidneys in a beast' (§32) looks very like an attempt to redraw the map.

The tenth or eleventh-century author may therefore be re-working several older myths. One of these may have featured an Otherworld character demonstrating the political and religious unity of a particular area (perhaps Leinster) through the common origin of its sacred trees - and therefore of its deities, ancestors and kings.¹⁴² 'On the Settling of the Manor of Tara' is a collection of stories within stories: there are pieces of the myth of Conquest (§16-17) which are synchronised with narratives from the Old and New Testaments (§15-16), as well as a set of chronicles (§24-25) and a myth of the five *biledha* (§29) all stitched together.

The myth of Trefuilngid's branch is full of biblical allusions, as has been recently pointed out. There are tablets of stone, the eclipse on Good Friday, forty days and forty nights and so on.¹⁴³ The giant's curious name, has recently been translated as 'Three-sufferer Three-key'. This has a fine trinitarian (and redemptive) ring to it and later we are told that 'he was an angel of God or he was God himself.'¹⁴⁴ But is he an entirely biblical figure? There is no reason to suppose that he is.

The story is at least as Irish as it is biblical in inspiration. One has the impression that the author is invoking authority figures on all sides in order to back up a territorial claim. We have already noted the Christian elements, but the old religious traditions are carefully retained: for example, the link between *biledha* and tribal territory, their association with the Otherworld and with Otherworld characters; the gigantic stature of the man is particularly Irish.

Nowhere in the bible is God or Christ or the Holy Spirit depicted so clearly as a giant. The Nephilim ¹⁴⁵ were sometimes thought of as giants and fallen angels, but I can think of no reason why the author would want to introduce one of them into the discussion, unless of course he or she were making a comparison (deliberate or unconscious) with the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, who were also sometimes thought of as giants and fallen angels.

Threeness with regard to deities is a feature common to many religions.¹⁴⁶ It is widespread in India for example, where the three-faced figure of Saccidananda appears as a more sophisticated version of the three-faced figures of Britain and Gaul known to archeologists as tricephaloi. Two Irish tricephaloi of the iron-age have been found, one in County Cavan, the other in Donegal.¹⁴⁷ When a similar figure turned up in Scotland earlier this century, it was initially assumed to be a Christian font because of a small depression on the crown of the head - assumed to be for baptismal water. While the object may of course have been adopted as a font - because of the transferability of the triadic imagery - it is in fact too early to be one. It dates from the turn of the Christian era and the depression in the crown is probably a libation cup.¹⁴⁸ Groups of three heads are also found in Urnfield and La Tène art, giving expression to what has been called 'the deep-seated Celtic concept of the triadic nature of divinity',¹⁴⁹ Irish mythology abounds in triads, in triple goddesses and in deities with three sons. It is therefore impossible to assign the 'Trifuilngid Tre-eochar' giant to either the pre-Christian or the Christian tradition. He belongs to both, and that was probably his appeal. Consciously or unconsciously, the author of 'On the Settling of the

Manor of Tara' signals the divine presence in the traditional Irish fashion by use of the number three, which also happened to be a sacred number in continental Christian theology. Trifuilngid Tre-eochar should therefore be regarded as a 'bridge' figure, linking the pre-christian triads with the Trinity.

THE PARADISE TREE

The branch which he carries is equally interesting. On the one hand, it is very likely that biblical references to the 'man called Branch' found their way into Irish thinking about Jesus: 'Let there be no mistrust of me, the Rod of purity and glory - *slatt na gloine 's na glóiri* - Son of Mary.'¹⁵⁰ However, it should not be assumed that Trifuilngid's branch is to be interpreted solely as reinforcing his Trinitarian identity. There are many other branches in Irish mythology, as one would expect from a culture which had long accorded a religious significance to trees.

Trifuilngid's branch, ancestor of the five *biledha*, was believed to have come from the 'tree of Paradise'. This is stated in the ancestry of *Eó Mugna - mac in chraind a parrdus* - 'Son of the tree from paradise.'¹⁵¹ Lucas renders this - 'son of the tree of the Garden of Eden' but inevitably the way in which the Irish Christians imagined paradise (undifferentiated from heaven) was strongly influenced by their own traditions, including that of their own Paradise Tree. We can not expect to recover this earlier tradition in its pure form, but a large number of christianised stories tell of a great tree in an Otherworld paradise which is native rather than biblical in character.

The Paradise Tree, like Trifuilngid Tre-eochar, spans the two traditions.

Much of the material which we are about to look at has already been discussed at length by a great many scholars. The *echtraí* and the *immrama* in particular have received a lot of attention and I have no wish to repeat here what has already been said better by others. However, the tree symbol (including the symbol of the wonderful branch) occupies such a central place in the Otherworld journey tradition that we must now make a limited review of its main Irish appearances.

Baile in Scáil - 'The Phantom's Vision'

A golden tree figures in the story of Conn's journey to the Otherworld. This journey is described briefly at the beginning of *Baile in Scáil*, an eleventh-century text, possibly by an abbot of Armagh.¹⁵³ After travelling through a great mist, losing their way and being accosted by an armed horseman, Conn and his companions (three druids and three *filid*) come to a plain where the golden tree is growing. Next to it is a house which turns out to be the house of Lug ('the Phantom') and a beautiful young girl who is the Sovereignty of Ireland.

*Serqlige Con Culainn - 'The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn':*¹⁵⁵

This story includes what could aptly be called 'The Journey of Lóeg'. It tells of how Lóeg travels to the Otherworld both by water and by land (perhaps as a result of two versions of the story being combined) on behalf of Cú Chulainn. The action begins when a flock of birds settles on the lake at Mag Muirthemni where the Ulaid are holding their Samain assembly. The women express a desire to have 'a bird for each shoulder',¹⁵⁴ and Cú Chulainn reluctantly obliges by killing the

whole flock.¹⁵⁵ When there are none left for his wife, Cú Chulainn swears to make it up to her and later, despite her warnings, attempts to bring down two beautiful birds as they fly, singing, over the surface of the lough. One of the birds is injured by his javelin but they both escape. Soon afterwards Cú Chulainn meets two women who smile at him and proceed to beat him up, leaving him half-dead.

The hero lies bed-ridden for a year, unable to speak. At the end of that time, a stranger appears in the house and tells him that two women of the *Síde*, Fand and Lí Ban, are taking an interest in his case. Fand has fallen in love with him and wishes him to come to her in *Mag Mell*.¹⁵⁸ Cú Chulainn returns to the place of the beating and finds Lí Ban waiting for him. She says that in return for one day's fighting (on behalf of her husband Labraid) Fand will be sent to him, and he will also be healed. At this point Cú Chulainn decides that Lóeg should accompany Lí Ban to *Mag Mell* rather than himself.

Lóeg gets into a boat with Lí Ban and they cross the lough to an island where he is welcomed into a house by three fifties of women and entertained lavishly. On his return Cú Chulainn asks him what the place is like and Lóeg tells him of a long journey overland (from a different version of the story) during which he saw *An Bile Búada* - the Tree of Victories - on the plain of Lúada.¹⁵⁷ He then describes the house which is the *síd* mound of Labraid:

At the doorway to the east,
three trees of brilliant crystal,
whence a gentle flock of birds calls
to the children in the royal fort.

A tree at the doorway to the court
fair its harmony;
a tree of silver before the setting sun,
its brightness like that of gold.

Three score trees there
whose crowns are meetings that do not meet
each tree bears ripe fruit
for three hundred men.¹⁵⁸

The rest of the story need not concern us here. Our interest is in the tree, or trees - the Tree of Victories, and the trees at the entrance to the *síd* mound. They are trees of crystal, of silver bright as gold, fruit-laden trees, full of music and singing birds. They stand around Labraid's house like the golden tree in *Baile in Scáil* and like the *biledha* on the raths of Irish kings.

Conlae and Tadhg

Echtra Chonlai - Conlae's Journey - clearly belongs to the same family of myths.¹⁵⁹ A woman appears to Conlae Ruad one day as he is sitting with his father Conn Cétchathach, on the hill of Uisnech. She comes from 'the land of the living' where there is 'neither sin or death' but endless feasting and great peace: 'We live in a great *síd*, so that therefore we are called the people of the *síd*.' Native and Christian ideas are skillfully interwoven from the start. She declares her love for Conlae and invites him to join the immortals in *Magh Mell*, which is ruled over by a king called Boadach.¹⁶⁰ Before being driven away by druidical singing, she throws him an apple which becomes his only food; no matter how much of it he eats, it remains whole. After a month she returns, saying that Conlae has become a hero for the people of Tetra. She also exhorts Conn not to love druidry and predicts the coming of 'a righteous man' who will one day overthrow it. Then, in a passage reminiscent of *Serglige Con Chulainn*, Conlae leaves with her in a ship of crystal for the *síd* of Boadach where there are 'no people...save women and maidens.'¹⁶¹

Although he is never seen again in *Echtra Chonlai*, his story has its sequel in the *Echtra Thaidhg mheic Céin* - The Journey of Teigue,

son of Cian.¹⁶² This tale is fascinating from a religious point of view, with its four paradises and its three forts - of white marble for the pre-Christian kings, of gold for the saints, and of silver for the Christian kings of the future.¹⁶³ The golden fort is on an island in the middle of a lough, like the island in *Serglige Con Chulainn*, except that this one is given the biblical name of Patmos. 'Patmos' is an island within an island, the larger one being *Inis Derglocha*.¹⁶⁴ The various degrees of paradise here are reminiscent of the seven heavens of continental theology, with the notable difference that here the 'good pagans' are not in hell.¹⁶⁵ The ruler of the island in *Echtra Thaidhg* is not Boadach but two sons of Bodbh: Ruadrach and Dergcroiche.¹⁶⁶ Bodbh appears elsewhere as king of the *Síde* of Munster.¹⁶⁷

Teigue had originally put to sea in order to recover his wife from Otherworld raiders. On the way, they visit several islands, but *Inis Derglocha* is by far the most beautiful. It is thickly wooded and Teigue and his companions feel no hunger but feed on the perfume from the crimson branches of the trees. They come upon an orchard full of apples, oaks and hazel trees. Note the parallels with *Trefuilngid tre-eochar*, who feeds on perfume and carries a branch with the same fruits, which are also the three fruits of *Eó Mugna*. The orchard is full of beautiful brilliantly-coloured singing birds. Eventually, after being welcomed and instructed by two beautiful women (one of whom is Cesair of the first conquest of Ireland) they come upon a young couple who turn out to be none other than Conlae and his sweetheart, who live there together in chaste union.¹⁶⁸

Beside them is the silver fort or 'mansion', and next to it a miraculous 'wine-producing apple tree' with enough fruit to satisfy everyone who will ever live in the house. Its apples confer immortality and it was one of these which Conlae ate, and still eats without its diminishing in size.¹⁶⁹ Before leaving, they meet Clídna Cheinnfiomm, one of the Tuatha Dé Danann, who also lives on the island and eats from the same tree.¹⁷⁰ She summons three multicoloured singing birds, to guide them and keep them from sadness and grief on the way home. She also gives Teigue a cup which turns water into wine.

There is plenty of biblical and theological language in these two tales, but it has been enthusiastically mixed with the native traditions to produce, intentionally or not, a paradise in which much of the old imagery and cosmology survives. The suggestion has been made that *Echtra Conlae* is in fact an allegory of conversion and discipleship, with the woman standing for the church.¹⁷¹ What then are we to make of the woman's statement that she belongs to the *áes síde*? Her references to Boadach and the people of Tetra are also problematical. The *áes síde* were still a living reality to many country-people even in the twentieth century, so unless the author has left these elements in by mistake, it is difficult to understand why anyone would run the risk of being so completely misunderstood.

Given that the literary version of this myth had evolved over at least three hundred years, it is possible that these elements belong to an earlier version. Their presence in this story is perhaps best explained by acknowledging that authors and audience alike still lived to some extent within the horizon of native cosmology. Like many Africans today, they had found a way of accommodating the old

cosmology within their Christian faith. In any case, the world of the *Síde* was probably seen in geographical terms as much as in theological ones. On the Continent too, the Garden of Eden was believed to be a geographical location and is marked clearly on many medieval maps. The phenomenon of one cosmology accommodating another is particularly clear in *Echtra Tadhg*, which envisages four paradises - Adam's in the East and three others at different points of the compass. Teigue visits the Western paradise and finds it inhabited by Irish kings and various ancestral figures, including members of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*. This is not to be understood as a separate paradise for 'pagans'. A special place is set aside in it for the Christian kings.¹⁷²

Echtra Chonlai and *Echtra Tadhg* incorporate a large number of native motifs, which are probably older than the Christian environment in which they were composed. Trees feature prominently in the both narratives: there is an island paradise with beautiful perfumed trees bearing apples, acorns and nuts. Other trees mark the approach to a royal house where human beings live in perfect harmony with the Otherworld powers. There are woods full of birdsong, and an apple tree which bears miraculous fruit.

'The Harrowing of Hell'

Is the apple tree on the paradise island intended to be understood as the Tree of Knowledge from Genesis? The answer has to be yes and no. This can be illustrated from the poem known as 'The Harrowing of Hell',¹⁷³ 'They are the sweetest apples that grow, of the fragrance of Adam's isle,' says the devil, tempting Eve. Later Adam describes how he sent his son to 'the fair-topped bright-stemmed appletrees which no man findeth' but the tree had withered. Underneath it was a child -

'comely, graceful, soft-eyed.' The child shakes the bare tree and it puts forth branches and fresh new leaves. This child's 'course' upon the tree will 'take the trembling and the pain from men' we are told.¹⁷⁴ The Christian theology behind this narrative is clear enough, but so too are the resemblances to *Serglige Con Chulainn* and *Echtra Taidhg*. The island and the fragrance come from one tradition, Adam and Eve from another. The apples do not originate in Genesis either.

Echtra Cormaic - 'Cormac's Journey'.

One of the trees in *Serglige Con Chulainn* is a tree of silver. Is this to be seen as the parent tree of the silver branch which appears in 'Cormac's Journey' - *Echtra Cormaic*? This story opens at dawn on Beltaine on the mound of Tea in Tara.¹⁷⁵ A warrior appears to Cormac carrying a silver branch with three golden apples on it; it is a musical branch which brings delight and amusement to all who listen, and sleep to any who are sick or wounded or in labour. He says that he comes from 'a land where there is nought save truth, and there is neither age nor decay nor gloom nor sadness nor envy...'¹⁷⁶ Here again we have the wonderful fruit, the music, and the paradise place. Cormac is greatly attracted by the branch and when he asks for it, it is given to him in exchange for three boons. The price turns out to be very high: in the space of three years his daughter, his son and his wife are taken away to the Otherworld. Unable to bear the loss, Cormac sets off in pursuit, like Tadhg after Lí Ban, but overland. After travelling through a gloomy region, like Hades or purgatory¹⁷⁷ in which people are performing futile and frustrating tasks, he comes to a shining fountain with five musical streams flowing from it. Nine hazel trees grow beside it, and their nuts fall into the water to be eaten by the famous salmon, while bubbles float away downstream. It is

the Otherworld Well, called here *Topur in fis* - fountain of knowledge. After various trials, Cormac is reunited with his family. The restoration of his wife in particular, would seem to indicate that the kingship is also being restored to him, and this is confirmed by the gift of a magical cup which enables him to tell truth from falsehood. At the same time, he is awarded the silver branch to keep as long as he lives.¹⁷⁸ This too would seem to be a sign that his kingship is approved and supported by the Otherworld. The Christian references in *Echtra Cormaic* are confined mainly to a footnote.¹⁷⁹ They are slightly more frequent in the earlier 'Voyage of Bran' but even here, a number of strong recurring motifs reveal the presence of an older model.

The Voyage of Bran:

In the seventh or eighth-century *Immram Brain* - the Voyage of Bran - Bran is walking alone one day near his *dún* when he hears music behind him; the music is so sweet that it lulls him to sleep and when he wakes up again, he sees before him a silver branch which he takes up and carries into his house. The parallels with Cormac are clear already. There is a dislocation in the text at this point and the story begins again. A woman 'from unknown lands' appears, though the ramparts are closed, and sings the following song to Bran and his fellow-kings:

A branch of the apple-tree from Emain I bring...
twigs of white silver are on it;
crystal buds with blossoms.¹⁸⁰

Emain is the island from which the mysterious woman comes; she calls it the 'land of women'. It also reminds us immediately of Emain Macha. Eleanor Hull pursued this tantalising link, noting that Conchobar's two halls were named after branches - *Craebh Ruadh* and *Craebh Derg* - and that his warriors were the 'Red Branch' heroes. However, the

connection with Ulster (if it exists) remains elusive.¹⁸¹ Emain the island, has as its central feature an ancient tree (*bile*) covered in blossom. Birds perch on it singing psalms, and in the subsequent description, music is everywhere. Hardly a stanza goes by without some reference to 'birdsong and harmony' 'the sweet-voiced plains' 'sweet music' 'choruses of hundreds' 'the voice of music' 'music at night' and 'choruses of little birds from the Very Gentle Land'. There is also a magical stone which sings 'a hundred strains',¹⁸² The woman then predicts 'a great birth' (glossed as 'Christ') and after exhorting Bran to begin his journey, disappears taking the branch with her.¹⁸³ Bran sets off and soon meets Manannán who predicts the birth not of Christ but of Mongán.¹⁸⁴ In a different text, this same Mongán sings about: 'the land of promise of the blessed / Where truth is sung without falsehood.'¹⁸⁵

It is interesting to note that although the woman and Manannán both appear to Bran at various points in his journey, there is no marriage or hospitality scene at the end. The climax of the voyage is the vision of the tree itself.

Snedgus and MacRiagla.¹⁸⁶

The tree is again a central focus in that explicitly monastic text 'The Voyage of Snedgus and MacRiagla.' These two were monks of Iona, sent by Colum Cille to settle a dispute involving the men of Ross. Having sentenced them to trial by 'casting adrift' they decide to try the experience for themselves, and end up visiting a number of islands, on the fourth of which is a great tree: - 'neither trunk nor leaf of that tree decays' - with beautiful birds in its branches: 'melodious was the music of those birds, singing Psalms and canticles and praising God, for they were the birds of the Plain of Heaven.' On

the top-most branch is a great bird with a gold head and silver wings. It tells them how the world began and how it will end, and relates some scenes from life of Christ. As a parting gift, the monks are given a leaf from the 'great tree' to take back to Colum Cille.¹⁸⁷

Trees in the Irish Apocrypha:

An Irish version of the Tree of Life appears in the tenth-century Adam and Eve story from *Saltair na Rann*, where a flock of glorious birds 'sing perfect lively music under the tree (*bile*) of paradise.¹⁸⁸

Although there is no pride of place for the tree in the *Tenga Bhith-nua Annso Sis* - Evernew Tongue Here Below - its author gives special emphasis to the flock of birds which sing mystery, praise, and doom like those on Snedgus and MacRiagla's island: 'If the race of Adam should hear the music of those birds, they would not be parted from the sound gladly or with pleasure, but rather with grief, longing and sadness, until they die from weeping',¹⁸⁹

Another Irish apocryphal piece known as 'The Mystical Tree' describes an upside-down tree growing from heaven to earth.¹⁹⁰ Máire Herbert is probably right in ascribing this image to some external source, since it is hard to think of another single example in early Irish literature. However, some of the other motifs are more familiar, particularly the music and the singing birds. The author provides an interesting 'key' to its interpretation: the tree is Jesus Christ; the branches are the nine orders of angels; the roots are the twelve apostles; the pure white singing birds are the souls of the just; the melody 'represents the perfection of bliss in the mystic depths of the divinity.'¹⁹¹

Cathair's Dream:

A contrasting interpretation is found in Cathair's dream in the

Dindshenchas of Loch Garmun. In his sleep Cathair sees 'a lovely hill higher than every hill' and on it a lovely tree (*bile*) which looked as if it were made of gold. 'In its leaves was every melody' and the wind scatters its fine fruit on the ground beneath. Cathair's druid explains that: the hill is 'thy power over all'; the tree is 'thy power over Banba in its sovereignty'; the music is 'thy eloquence in guarding the judgements of the Gaels'; the wind is 'thy liberality'.¹⁹² After all the foregoing visions of the tree on the paradise island, Cathair's dream returns us to the world of the inauguration tree on the hill.

Plainly, there were two paradise trees - a biblical one and a non-biblical one. Is it possible to disentangle them? If we set aside all the motifs which show biblical or theological influence, can it be assumed that the remainder comes from an original native tree myth? Unfortunately, the matter is not so simple.

Some Classical, Scandinavian and Shamanistic Parallels;

Most of these texts are late enough to have been influenced by the Norse myth of Yggdrasil, the ash tree at the centre of the world.¹⁹³ One late twelfth-century commentator said that the roots of Yggdrasil were in the sky. This is reminiscent of the upside-down tree of the Irish apocrypha.¹⁹⁴

Some striking parallels are found in Classical mythology. Hercules for example, is sent to find the golden apples of immortality which grow in the garden of the Hesperides. The Hesperides are the nymphs of the setting sun, who live on an island in the extreme West near the 'Isles of the Blessed', guarding the tree where these apples grow. The nymphs are constantly singing, while a fountain at their feet pours forth Ambrosia. Hercules' journey takes him by an arduous

overland route, to the island where he eventually obtains the apples by trickery or by force, and returns home with them.

Jason and the argonauts also arrive at the Garden of the Hesperides after a sea voyage which has taken them past an island inhabited only by women, and (interestingly) up the Danube into the territory of the Celts, and thence back to the Mediterranean.¹⁹⁵ The silver branch has classical relatives as well: Aeneas must cut a golden branch from a certain tree and have it carried for him by the Sybil in order to gain safe passage to the Underworld and back.¹⁹⁶ Medieval Irish scholars were undoubtedly familiar with Virgil. It might also be noted that Celtic culture and Greek culture impinged upon each other momentarily, though at a much earlier stage of their development.

While it is impossible to rule out the possibility of some influence from either Greece or Scandinavia, such resemblances might simply be due to the independent workings of the primal imagination. This is surely the only possible reason why Siberian shamanism should also describe visionary journeys involving an Otherworld tree. According to Eliade, the initiatory dreams of future shamans often involve a 'mystical journey' to the seat of the 'cosmic tree' and the 'universal Lord'. The shaman would be given a branch from this tree, with which to make the shell of his drum.²⁰² One candidate dreamed of coming an island, in the centre of which was a birch tree rising to the sky.²⁰³ Among the Yakut, the children of the supreme being are represented as bird-spirits perching in the branches of the 'world tree'. In some initiatory dreams, the souls of future shamans are seen perching there as well,²⁰⁴ while other tribes think of the tree as a

'reservoir of souls' with unborn children perching in it, 'like little birds'.²⁰⁵

SINGING BIRDS AND MUSICAL BRANCHES

It is possible that none of the features of the Paradise Tree are unique to Ireland, but the 'tree with birds' stands out as being important in the Irish tradition and either unimportant or absent in the biblical and classical tradition. The Irish Otherworld tree is almost always a musical tree. Singing birds are usually perched in it. Whether they are singing psalms or sweet healing music is of secondary importance - indeed such a distinction is of doubtful value. It would probably not have been made by the biblical writer who depicts David curing Saul of his 'evil spirit' by playing to him on the lyre.²⁰¹

Where the tree appears in partial form as a branch, the music is often still present. It enchants both Bran and Cormac and signals an Otherworld visitation which is both attractive and extremely demanding.

Craeb Sída - The Branch of Peace:

Several stories centred on the Irish court mention a branch in the hands of either poets or kings. Presumably this was thought of as a branch from the Paradise Tree, and represented the good relations which its bearer had with the Otherworld powers, as well as their authority vested in him. In *Aided Guill Maic Carbada* - The Violent Deaths of Goll and Garb - it is called *cráeb sída* - branch of peace, and its effect is demonstrated in the same tale when the Ulaid begin fighting amongst themselves, and Sencha the chief poet, restores order by standing up and waving the *cráeb sída*.²⁰² It will be remembered

that *craeb* is used elsewhere as a synonym for *bile*, and that *síd* means not only peace, but also the home of Otherworld beings. The term *craeb sída* clearly evokes the peace and harmony of the blissful Otherworld.

It is said that the king of Ulster used to call for peace by striking a bronze post with a 'wand' of silver.²⁰³ Elsewhere, we are told that above Conchobar was 'a rod of silver (*slatt argait*) with three golden apples on it for instructing the host, and that when it shook, or the sound of his voice rose, the host was silent.'²⁰⁴ Is this another version of the 'branch of peace'? Its function would seem to be the same. The golden apples suggest that it too was thought of as a branch of the Paradise Tree.

According to the *Acallam an dá Shuadh* - Colloquy of the Two Sages - an *ollam* or chief poet would carry a gold branch, a middle-grade poet a silver one, while ordinary poets carried branches of bronze. Such insignia would be in keeping with the early Irish fondness for degrees of honour, but they are not borne out consistently by the texts: Sencha carries a bronze branch though he is chief poet of Ulster, and it seems unlikely that a poet would carry a branch of gold when kings like Cormac, Bran, and Conchobar carried one of silver.²⁰⁵ The description of poets' branches with bells on them sometimes appears in the secondary literature.²⁰⁶ The intention here was probably to explain the branch's musicality.

It is not always clear whether it is primarily the king or the poet who carries the silver branch and enjoys kinship with the Otherworld. The tradition surrounding *Echtra Cormaic*, is sometimes distinctly cool towards the *aes dána*. We are told of the unsound judgements of two sages and how the poets' juridical power was taken

from them; the *aes dána* appear in the misty plain among the people engaged in futile tasks.²⁰⁷ Could it be that Cormac is given the silver branch because none of his poets are judged worthy of it? If so, he is not the only ruler in this position: Bran also holds the silver branch, and Conchobar has his *slatt argait*. Is it that we have insufficient evidence to clarify this situation or - just as likely - do the texts reflect time-honoured differences of opinion over whether it is the political or the intellectual leaders of society, who have the keenest insight, the truest vision. In a society where spiritual power was traditionally vested in both groups - in the sacred king and in the teachers of sacred knowledge - this conflict must sometimes have been acute.

In his discussion of the relative rôles of the king and the court poet as king-maker and guardian of sacred knowledge, Alden Watson identifies a very interesting and relevant feature of a king's inauguration.²⁰⁸ In a number of accounts of this event, the poet ceremonially gives 'the rod of kingship' into the hand of the new king. This is described in the fifteenth century Inaugural Ode by Torna Ó Maol Chonaire to Féilim Ó Conchobhair.²⁰⁹ In the West of Scotland, the Lord of the Isles was inaugurated on a special stone, wearing a white robe (which afterwards belonged to the poet) and received into his hand a white rod indicating that his rule was based not on tyranny and partiality, but on discretion and sincerity. And the Irish Life of St Maedóc insists that whenever a king of Bréifne is inaugurated, his wand (*slatt*) should be cut from the hazel tree at the supposed site of Maedóc's hermitage and handed to him by one of the O'Duffeys - presumably his court poets.²¹⁰

It would seem that both the king and the poet had a right to hold the branch. The poet guards it and the king exercises it. This is as close as I can get to understanding the various trees and branches of the *echtraí* and the *imramma*. They are the mythological ancestors of the royal sceptre, and represent the Otherworld/divine source of good leadership.

The Birds:

It is tempting to see some connection between the branch and that other sign of poetic office: the feathered coat. Could it be that the *filidh* represented in this world, the birds of the paradise tree? In a story from 'Cormac's Glossary' a boatload of poets sets out for a competition on the Isle of Man. Their leader in all his finery wears the *tuigen* - etymologised in the Glossary as *tuge én* - thatch of feathers. Such etymologies are often fanciful, but here the bird-poet comparison is reinforced almost at once. When a young fellow of loathsome appearance also tries to board the boat, the poets cry out that he is 'not a bird fit for their flock'.²¹¹ Elsewhere, Mog Ruith the blind druid of Munster is described calling for his *enchennach* - his bird dress ²¹² - and flying through the air. The early poem *Cétamon* - Finn's poem on Mayday - can be read as a riddle or extended metaphor in which poets and bards appear in the guise of various birds.²¹³

By Christian times, the feather-coat may have been little more than a convention. However, it seems likely that at one time the *filid* saw themselves as being somehow related to the Otherworld birds round the Paradise Tree. This bird-affinity of the poets accords well with the general 'liminality' of the *aes dána* - with their character of

social and metaphysical mobility, which took them to the brink of the human world in search of knowledge and inspiration.²¹⁴ The possibility of an Irish shamanism leaving traces in the literature of the Christian period, is obviously strengthened by some of these stories of a journey to the tree with birds.²¹⁵

Some birds are obviously Otherworld personages in disguise. In *Serglige Con Chulainn*, Fand and Lí Ban first appear to the hero in bird form. Both the Morrigan and the Badb appear as ravens. ²¹⁶ Oengus and Caer take the form of Swans.²¹⁷ On the night of Conaire's conception, Mess Búachalla's bird-lover flies in through the skylight and leaves his feather-hood on the floor.²¹⁸ Later in the same tale, the young Conaire pursues a flight of strange birds as far as the ocean, and finally overtakes them:

The birds left their feather hoods then, and turned on him with spears and swords; one bird protected him however, saying I am Nemglan, king of your father's birdtroop. You are forbidden to cast at birds, for by reason of birth, every bird here is natural to you.²²⁴

Some of the birds which we meet in early Irish literature can be understood as souls of the dead, others as Otherworld personages in disguise, while the wearing of feathers by poets can be seen as the ceremonial expression of their traditional status as spiritual leaders. All three categories can be translated into Christian terms: as souls of the righteous, angels, and saints.

Christian feathered figures include Oengus the Culdee, as described in a poem in the *Lebar Brecc*, and an island-dwelling anchorite whom Brendan meets in the land of promise.²²⁰ Both of these are hermits, people of spiritual power, ascetics. As such they can be seen as Christian equivalents of the poet-prophet-seer. Oengus was

also a poet. Suibne Geilt may also be included here, though 'the saintly madman' is a very reluctant Christian. His life in the wilds is not unlike that of an anchorite, and his state of mind also qualifies him as 'one who transcends the boundary between worlds'. He is also a sort of marginalised poet.

Bird metaphors were occasionally applied to Colum Cille: the 'dove of the Church', the 'crane cleric'. Exactly why Colum Cille was called the 'crane cleric' is unclear. A suspiciously wide range of explanations is on offer: that it was an insult offered to him, that he changed two women into cranes; that he welcomed an exhausted crane which landed on Iona. There is both hostility and friendship here.²²¹ Another text has been interpreted as Colum Cille's rejection of bird-prognostication - 'I adore not the voices of birds, nor sneezing, nor lots, ...nor a boy, nor omens, nor women...'²²². But Colum Cille was also famous for his defence of the poets, his prophetic powers, his hymn-writing and his wonderful voice. This odd mixture of hostility and friendship towards birds and poets in the Columban tradition probably reflects an uncertainty over the extent to which the old ways of thinking could be retained. The name 'Dove of the Church' is in many ways a perfect compromise. The bird comparison gives him spiritual status, but the species chosen has no particular native connotations, and clearly signals the Holy Spirit. There may also be a hidden reference to Noah's dove which sets out over the waters into the unknown.²²³

It is not difficult to see how the Tree with Birds could be carried forward into Christianity. The tree image was already present throughout the bible, in particular as the Tree of Life and the Tree

of Knowledge - both belonging to the biblical paradise. There were trees with kingly associations, trees of judgement, prophecy and so on. A branch from the rootstock of David was the Messiah, the Christ. As for the birds, at first sight they have less significance in the bible than in Ireland. They are present in the parable of the mustard seed - a tree-kingdom image which would have been readily understood in Ireland. But one bird in particular has taken up residence at the very heart of Christian doctrine: 'the Holy Spirit...in bodily form like a dove.'²²⁴ In the Old Testament there is also a strong tradition of comparing God to a great bird or birds.²²⁵ But the biblical winged-creatures who appealed most to the Irish imagination were none of these.

The birds in and around the Paradise tree translated most easily into angels - indeed, to angel choirs around the throne of God: in the Voyage of three brigands-turned-monks, the Uí Corra,²²⁶ one of the brothers has a vision, first of hell and then of heaven:

I beheld the Lord himself on his throne and a birdflock of angels making music to him. Then I saw a bright bird and sweeter was his singing than every melody. Now this was Michael in the form of a bird in the presence of the Creator.²²⁷

We have seen above many similar examples of the interweaving of native and biblical imagery, but here the synthesis is particularly clear. The Life of St Brendan from the Book of Lismore also features a Land of Promise island with birds, and among them an old man who gives the voyagers spiritual instruction. He wears no human raiment 'but all his body was full of bright white feathers like a dove or a sea-mew.' His preaching is the same as that of various saints and pontiffs, but the

suggestion is that the old man himself is Elijah preaching 'to the souls of the righteous under the Tree of Life in Paradise.'²²⁸

The following poem appears as a marginal note in the *Martyrology of Tallaght*:

The birds of the world, power without ill,
(Come) to welcome the sun
On January's nones, at the different hours,
The cry of the host from the dark wood.²²⁹

In contrast to the ambivalence of the Columban tradition, this Culdee poet sees nothing sinister or unchristian about bird lore. He or she imagines their song as a kind of prayer ('at the different hours') and goes on to describe the passing of the seasons through the arrival of the swallows, the cuckoo, the wild geese. As in the liturgical year, the seasons can also be understood as ages of the world, and the poem closes with a scene from the end-time (already present in some way - 'Hark from afar') with birds like angels round the throne of God:

Melodious music the birds perform
To the King of the heaven of the clouds
Praising the radiant King
Hark from afar the choir of the birds.²³⁰

When Patrick's angel comes to him in bird-form in the valleys around Slemish, he is indistinguishable from a native Otherworld personage. The same could be said of his appearance on Croaghpatrick (though his wings are not mentioned here) and of the other birds - good and bad, white and black - who visit Patrick there during his fast.²³¹ Some of them 'sang unceasingly in a holy choir'.²³² The 'holy choir' has clear ecclesiastical connotations, but in another version of the same *Dindshenchas*, Patrick is welcomed to the mountain by 'a flock of birds from the Land of Promise' who have come to sing for him.²³³ Singing birds are not a prominent feature of the biblical Promised Land. These can only be the birds of the Paradise Tree, whether we call them 'Otherworld visitors' or 'angels'.

Birds are not always angels in the Christianised mythology. They can also be human souls.²³⁴ The upside-down 'Mystical Tree' was inhabited by 'the souls of the just' in the form of birds.²³⁵ Patrick on the Rock is visited by yet another group of birds - a bird-flock so thick that it obscures the sun - and these, we are told, are all the saints of Ireland, past, present and to come.²³⁶ Again the mythologies are fused. If anything, the input comes more from the Irish side where certain human beings sometimes acquire bird-form. Contrary to popular belief, there is no biblical source for people acquiring wings and harps at the gates of heaven. Like the apples on the Tree of Knowledge, this image has entered Christian art from another source.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR - TREES

1. Throughout this chapter, I am greatly indebted to A.T.Lucas's extensive survey 'Sacred Trees of Ireland' from the *Journal of the Cork Historical and Archeological Society* LXVIII, 16-54 and to Professor Breandán Ó Madagáin who drew my attention to it. Lucas gives far more examples than I have been able to use here. In order to keep this chapter within any kind of bounds, I have had to exclude a lot of fascinating material from the folk tradition. There will therefore be no discussion of May Bushes, memorial bushes, trees associated with funerals or trees which were supposedly indestructible or whose bark might protect the bearer from death.
2. Lucas, *Ibid.* 40
3. *Annals* XIV,xxx.
4. Ross, *PCB*, 36
5. Ross, *Ibid.* 33
6. For illustrations, see Roger Cook, *The Tree of Life*, London, 1988.
7. The analysis, undertaken by Lucas, produced the following results: Whitethorn (103) ash (75) oak (7) willow (6) elder (5) holly (4) alder (3) elm (2) yew (1) and fir (1). He dismisses the smaller numbers as chance growths, but ash, oak and yew are very important in the older texts as we shall see. *Ibid.*, 42.
8. Ross, *PCB* 33.
9. *Betha Adamnáin* ed. Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Riain, Dublin, 1988, \$14.
10. Lucas, *Ibid.*, 16. Lucas gives other variations and all the relevant counties.
11. Mac Neill, *Duanaire Finn* I, ITS 7, London, 1908, XVI, 34-36, 135-137
12. Macalister, *LG* 4, ITS 41, 131.
13. Lucas 22 from MacNeill, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 27c, 366. MacNeill translates *Mac* as 'son of' but I am advised by Professor Gillies that th sense is not so much of sonship as affinity. Cf. the 'étroit rapport' suggested by J. Vendryes in his article 'Manannán Mac Lir', *EC* 6, 248.
14. O'Keefe, *BS*, \$40
15. The Old Irish Tree list from the law tract *Bretha Comaithchesa* ed. Fergus Kelly, *Celtica* 11-12, 1976-77, 107.
16. *Auraicept na n-Éces* ed. George Calder, Edinburgh, 1917, 88-93,274-289.
17. Calder, *Ibid.*, 273-4.
18. Lucas, *Ibid.*, 25-26
19. *Ibid.* 20-21, 25-26.
20. L. McKenna, *Aithdiogluim Dána*, Irish Texts Society 37 & 40, Dublin, 1939-40, 4,\$6; 9,\$1.
21. Vendryes, *Airne Fíngéin*, Dublin, 1953, \$111.
22. Lucas, *Ibid.*, 26, citing *Ancient Laws of Ireland*, ed. W.N. Hancock and J. O'Donovan, trans. E. O'Curry, Dublin, 1865, vol.1, 170 footnote.
23. *Táin*, ed. O'Rahilly, 151.
24. Lucas, *Ibid.*, 27, citing the eighth-century *Book of Armagh*.
25. *Trip.* I.157.
26. Lucas, *Ibid.*, 32, citing the Bollandist *Acta Sanctorum* 4,160.

27. *Féilire Oengusso*, ed. Stokes, Henry Bradshaw Society 29, London, 1905, viii, lxxxiv.
28. For example, *BS*, ed. O'Keefe, §17.
29. Lucas, *ibid.*, citing *Chronicum Scotorum* 257, *Annals of the Four Masters*, 2,1147, *Annals of Ulster*, 1,599, and *Lismore* 176.
30. Lucas, *Ibid.*, citing *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*, ed. J. Dimock, London, 1867, Vol.5, *Topographia Hibernica*, LIV,152; *Expugnatio Hibernica*, XXXVIII, 280.
31. Lucas, *Ibid.*, citing *Annals of the Four Masters*, 2,735; *Annals of Ulster*, 1,503.
32. Lucas, *Ibid.*, 27. *DIL*, s.v. *fid.*
33. Lucas, *Ibid.*
34. Lucas, *Ibid.*, 34
35. Muirchú, 'Life of Patrick', §27.
36. Gen.15 *passim*, esp. vv.1-5; cf. 26,4; 13,16.
37. Gen.18,1-3; cf. 12,6-7.
38. Charles Plummer, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, Oxford, 1910, I, 253.
39. *Ancient Israel*, 292-3.
40. *Jubilees*, 14,2.
41. Gen.21,33.
42. *vid.sup.* Ch.2.
43. DeVaux, *AI*, 278.
44. DeVaux, *ibid.* 285-6
45. De Vaux, *ibid.* 292, citing Sozonimus, *Hist.Eccl.*, II,iv.
46. De Vaux argues convincingly that the oak of Moreh and the oak of Shechem were one and the same, *AI*, 279.
47. Gen. 12,6-7.
48. Judges 6, 11-12.
49. See Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures*, 345-6.
50. Zech.1, 7-13.
51. 1 Kings 19, 1-19.
52. Acts 7,30. Cf. Lk.6,44.
53. DeVaux, *AI*, 276.
54. Ex.3,1-6.
55. Gen.33,18-19. De Vaux, *AI*, 290.
56. Gen.35,2-4.
57. Josh.24,32.
58. DeVaux, *AI*, 278.
59. *Ibid.* 287,290.
60. Gen.35,8; 1Chron.10,12.
61. *Vid.sup.* Ch.1.
62. Jg.4,4-5.
63. Josh.24,1-29.
64. Not Jacob, unless we are to understand that there was more than one standing stone at Shechem - which is quite possible.
65. DeVaux, *AI*, 291.
66. 1 Kings 6, 29-36.
67. The building of a house for Baal is described in some of the Ugaritic myths. Previously he was believed to have lived on top of a mountain - Mount Zaphon. See John Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, Edinburgh, 1978, 8-14.
68. St Brigit's church at Kildare is one of the few which is described as being of any great size, and there is reason to expect some exaggeration in Cogitosus's account. Most of the stone churches are very small, and the special wooden church which Moling is said

- to have had built, was small enough to be lifted with tackle and turned upside-down. 'Life of Moling', Stokes, RC, 27,1906,\$47.
69. Ezek.40, verses 16,22,26,31,37; De Vaux, AI, 152-3.
 70. 1 Kings 6,18; 7,2.
 71. 1 Kings 7,6,15.
 72. Kirsten Nielsen, *There is Hope for a Tree*, Sheffield, 1985,80.
 73. Gen.3,4,22.
 74. This has been the commonest interpretation. There is however some doubt as to whether the ethical question was present at all in the minds of the myth's creators. *Vid.Inf*, I.Engell 'Knowledge and Life'
 75. Ps.92,12-15.
 76. DeVaux, AI, 104. The similarity with Ireland is striking in this respect too: there the king was sanctified by entering into an intimate relationship with the goddess.
 77. Ps.2,7.
 78. 2 Kings.11,14; 23,3.
 79. De Vaux, AI, 112-113;102.
 80. Jg.9,6.
 81. Ezek.31 passim.
 82. Dan.4, 4-27.
 83. Ezek.17,1-10,22-24.
 84. Is.4,2; 60,21; 61,3.
 85. Is.11,1,10; Jer.23,5; 33,15; Zech.3,8; 6,12.
 86. Mk.4,31; Mtt.13,31; Lk.13,19.
 87. Is.57.4-5; cf.Is.1.29-30; Ezek.6.13; Hos.4.13.
 88. Amos 5,21-24. Ps.50,7-15.
 89. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, I.
 90. Hos.14,8.
 91. Flemming Hvidberg, *Genesis I-III*. 254.n.26 quoted by Nielsen in *There Is Hope for a Tree*, Sheffield, 1985, 81. Hvidberg does not discuss DeVaux's point that the high places were the sacred territory of several Semitic religions including that of the Hebrews.
 92. This may also have been one reason for burying the dead in the vicinity of trees, or in the trunks of oak trees.
 93. Gen.4,1; Ivan Engnell, 'Life and Knowledge in the Creation Story' *Vetus Testamentum Supplement* 3, 1955, 114-115.
 94. Deut.21,22-23; Gal.3,13.
 95. Ed. O. Bergin, *Eriu* 4, 1910, 116-117, \$22.
 96. For example, on the cross of Muiredach at Monasterboice: Francoise Henry, *Irish Art during the Viking Invasions*, plate 81. Also on base of a broken cross from Iona: John Stuart, *Sculptured Stones of Scotland*, Aberdeen, 1856-67, vol.2, plate XLIV (1). A later cross from Tiree shows Christ crucified on a tree. *Ibid.* plate LII.
 97. Vendryes, *Airne Fingéin*.
 98. *Táin* ed. Kinsella, 167.
 99. *Ibid.* 96.
 100. McKenna, *Aith.Dána*. 60\$4; 72\$5; 61\$27; 97\$26-30.
 101. McKenna, *Philip Bocht O Huiginn*, Dublin, 1931, 5, \$24,45,50,28, 35-40. During the early twelfth century, devotion to the cross prompted Turlough O Conna to commission a reliquary for his fragment of the 'true cross'. Made of oak, overlaid with bronze

- and decorated with rock crystal, it is known as the Cross of Cong and is on display in the National Museum in Dublin.
102. 1 Cor.1,24.
 103. Meyer, 'The Boyish Exploits of Finn', *Eriu* 1, 1904-5,181, §4; Nagy, *WO*, 98. See also fourteenth-century poem edited by Eoin MacNeill in *DF*, I, XV,33,133.
 104. Meyer, 'Boyish Exploits', 184n.3.
 105. Meyer, 'Finn and the Man in the Tree', *RC* 25, 1904,
 106. Vendryes mentions a man called Fer Fí - 'man of poison' - son of Eogabul - 'yew fork' - who appears in *Cath Maige Mucrime* and *Táin Bó Fraích*. He hides in a yew tree, and also plays the harp. See *RC* 13, 439 and 464§73. Also, *EC*, 13,§73.
 107. 'It is more than likely that the interpreters of the sacred mysteries willed that deities should remain half-enshrouded in their matrices of stone or wood. It is not until the Romans dominate Gaul and reduce her to a province that her gods are reduced to the simulacra of men and women.' Ian Finlay, *Celtic Art*, London, 1973, 70.
 108. Stokes, *RC*, 16,277-282.
 109. The Rennes *dindshenchas* was compiled during the eleventh or early twelfth century from material which is in many cases much older. The earliest portions of the litany of Loreto are found in manuscripts from twelfth century Mainz and Paris. The *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* suggests an eastern origin, but according to the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, the earliest Marian litany is an eighth-century example - in Gaelic. *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 790.
 110. *Dor nime* cf. *ianua caeli* in the Litany of Loreto and 'gate of the heavenly palace' in the Bardic prayer to Mary above.
 111. I have taken the liberty of omitting some of the more obscure ones, and of grouping them thematically. They are not quoted in the original order.
 112. This epithet seems particularly bizarre. However, *brosna* can be understood either as a bundle of firewood or as a type of poetic metre.
 113. Lucas, 'Sacred Trees' 18, citing *Transactions of the Ossianic Society*, 5,258.
 114. *RC*, 15,420.
 115. For examples among the bardic poets see McKenna *Aith.Dána*. 64. §16 by Diarmuid Ó Cobhthaigh and 71§14-15 by Tadhg Ó Dálaigh. On the cultural significance of sister's sons see Ó Cathasaigh, 'The Sister's Son in early Irish Literature' *Peritia* 5, 1986, 120-160.
 116. McKenna, *Philip Bocht Ó Huiginn*, Dublin, 1931,11a§33.
 117. For example in the fifteenth-century German carol, 'Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen'. *Oxford Book of Carols* 76. Christmas and Easter hymns are often a rich source of such Primal-Christian imagery.
 118. Rennes *Dindshenchas*, ed. Stokes, *RC* 16, 277-279.
 119. Lucas, 'Sacred Trees', 18. Also from *Cath Maighe Léna* ed. Kenneth Jackson, Dublin, 1938,102. Oldleighlin is about 3 km. west of Leighlinbridge, on the river Barrow, 10km. from Carlow
 120. Lucas, *ibid*, citing John O'Hanlon's *Lives of Irish Saints*, Dublin, 1875, vol.4, 218.
 121. Stokes, 'The Birth and Life of Moling', *RC*, 27,1906,257-312,§34.
 122. Vendryes, *Airne Fíngéin*, 34
 123. Stokes, *Rennes*, *RC*, 15,420.

124. Ibid.
125. Ibid. Cf. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III, 147: 'it was overthrown by the poets'
126. Stokes, *Rennes, RC*, 15,420.
127. Ibid.420,n.2.
128. vid.inf.
129. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* 4,241.
130. Lucas, 'Sacred Trees' 17, citing *Book of Armagh*, 30; *Trip.*185.
131. Lucas. *ibid.*
132. Alden Watson, 'The King, the Poet and the Sacred Tree' *EC*, 18, 1981,167, citing *Annals of Tighernach*, in *Chronicles of the Picts and Scots*, ed. William F.Skene, Edinburgh, 1867.
133. Lucas, 18. I have been unable able to find the exact location of this place, but it is still within the old province of Leinster.
134. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* II, 42-45. *Rennes*, ed. Stokes, *RC* 15,297.
135. D.A. Binchy 'The Fair of Taitiu and the feast of Tara', *Eriu*, 18-19, 113.
136. Lucas, 'Sacred Trees', 17-18.
137. Ed. R.I. Best, *Eriu* 4, 1910,121f.
138. Cf. 'Trefuilngid Treorach' in the *Dindshenchas* of *Eó Mugna*. The story appears again in *Airne Fíngéin* §3. ed. J.Vendryes. 1953 and in *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts* ed. Best, Begin, Meyer & O'Keefe, 1,33-35, a partial translation of which appears as 'Fintan and the Hawk of Achill' ed. Eleanor Hull, *Folklore*, 1932,386-409.
139. Best, *Do Suidigud Tellaich Temra*, 151,\$14, and Hull, *ibid.* 397, where the branch bears nuts, apples and sloes.
140. Best, *ibid.* §19. In 'Fintan and the Hawk of Achill', the miracle is extended so that the fruit satisfies the cold, hunger and thirst of all men and women. Old people who eat it become young, and it also banishes pain and disease: 398, §79-80.
141. 'The Hawk' version, §84, is slightly more consistent: three fruits grow into three trees - *Eó Rossa*, *Eó Mugna* and *Bile Tortan*. But again the fruit is of the wrong type. An alternative group of three sacred trees appears in a poem edited by Kuno Meyer, *ZCP* 5,21. They are named as: *Ibhar Asnat*, *Ibhar a n-Druim Tuama*, and *Dos na rígh a Sídh Aedha*.
142. There is for example, a tradition that *Eó Rossa*, *Eó Mugna*, *Bile Tortan* and *Craeb Dathi* appeared for the first time in the time of the sons of Ugainé, legendary ancestors of the Leinstermen. *Rennes, RC*, 15, 445. A. Watson, 'The King, the poet and the sacred tree', 169.
143. Best, *Do Suidigud Tellaich Temra*, §14,15,20. McCone, *PPCP*, 75.
144. *Ibid.*§31; McCone, *PPCP*, 76. Other translations have been offered: 'Trefuilngid' may be from the elements *trí* - three - and *fulang* - upholder, supporter. 'Tre-eochar' can be interpreted as 'three-edged'. Elsewhere we find mention of a Tre-eochair Tigh Lir and a De-Eochair Tigh Cathbad, both of whom seem to have 'Sackings' named after them. *Airec Menman Uraird Maic Coisse*, ed. Mary Byrne, *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, II. 45, §6.
145. *Gen.*6,4.
146. Raymond Pannikar, *The Trinity and World Religions* Madras, 1970. Pannikar's main focus is on threeness in Hindu theology.
147. Ross, *PCB*, 74-75.
148. *Ibid.*

149. Ibid.78.
150. 'The Harrowing of Hell' ed. O. Bergin, *Eriu* 4, 1910,116-117,\$27.
151. Vendryes, *Airne Fíngéin*, §3.
152. *Baile in Scáil*, - 'The Phantom's Frenzy' - §6. Myles Dillon, *Cycles of the Kings*, London, 1946, 13.
153. Jeffrey Gantz, *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, London, 1981, 155-178. The contents list of the *Book of Drum Snecht* shows that a written version of this story was already in existence by the early eighth century, but we do not know what that version contained. Ibid.21; Today's version has been compiled from twelfth and fourteenth century texts.
154. Ibid.156
155. His reluctance stems from pride rather than gentleness: 'Have the sluts of Ulaid nothing better for us than to hunt their birds?' Ibid.
156. The identification of the birds with the two women is complete at this point, the javelin being like a more robust version of the arrows of Eros; Lí Ban is also the name of Tadhg's wife in *Echtra Tadhg*. She has been captured by raiders and carried off to an Otherworld island. *SG* II,386,396.
157. Gantz, 166,169
158. Ibid.168.
159. Hans P.A. Oskamp, *EC*, 14, 205-214. Like *Serglige Con Chulainn*, a version of this story was present in the early eighth-century *Book of Drum Snecht*. The surviving manuscripts belong mainly to the twelfth century)
160. The word 'Boadach' seems to have presented a problem. It has been glossed 'nomen' indicating a proper noun, but it could also be an adjective. Ibid. 225-6, §1-2.
161. Ibid.§5-6.
162. O'Grady, *SG*, II,385-396.
163. Ibid. I.348-349; II.390-392
164. Ibid. I.348; II,391.
165. Ibid. II,390-391.
166. Ibid. I,348; II,390.
167. 'Dream of Oengus', *ETMS*, ed. Gantz, 109.
168. That is beautiful, says Teigh, and comical. *SG*, II,393.
168. Ibid.
169. Ibid.394.
170. This is the Clídna of 'Clídna's wave' in Munster. She appears again in the Rennes *Dindshenchas* where *Tond Clídna* in the Bay of Glandore, Co. Cork, is said to be the place where she was drowned in one of the great mythical floods. *RC* 15,437-8. In the *Acallam* 'Clíodhna' is the name of one of the three daughters of the 'arch-ollave' of the Land of Promise. O'Grady, *SG*, II,200.
171. James Carney, 'The Deeper Level of Early Irish Literature' *Capuchin Annual* 1969.160-71, quoted by Kim McCone *PPCP* 80-81
172. The author may have been thinking of the verse 'In my house there are many mansions' - Jn.14,2. The house of Conla and his bride is described at one point as a mansion, and *mansiones dei multae sunt* is quoted in the 'Life of Brendan' when he and his companions fail to gain access to a particularly beautiful island and are instructed to sail on elsewhere. *Lismore*, 256.
173. Bergin, *Eriu* 4, 1910,113-119.
174. Ibid.§18-22

175. Another version of the myth of the five *biledha* may be at work here, with different provinces claiming to have received a branch from the same Otherworld tree.
176. Stokes, *IT* 3, 211-221, §25-27.
177. But in fact dissimilar to either in that Cormac sees people who are still alive, eg. the poets of Ireland. It is as if he is being given a true insight into the nature of things, a prophetic vision.
178. *Echtra Cormaic*, §29-53.
179. 'The wise declare that whenever any strange apparition was revealed of old to the royal lords ... it was a divine ministration that used to come in that wise and not a demoniacal ministration. Angels moreover would come and help them for they followed Natural Truth and they served the commandment of the Law. Finit. Amen.' §80.
180. *The Voyage of Bran, Son of Febal*, ed. K. Meyer and Alfred Nutt, London, 1895. §1-2
181. Hull, 'The Silver Bough in Irish Legend' *Folklore* 12, 438.
182. *Voyage of Bran* ed. Meyer & Nutt, §7, 8, 9, 13, 17, 18, 20, 24.
183. *Ibid.* 26, 30-31.
184. The prediction of a 'great/wondrous/mighty birth' is found in many texts relating to kings, heroes and saints. For example, the birth tales of Conchobar and Brendan: *Scéla Conchobair Maic Nessa*, Stokes, *Eriu* 4, 1910, §4; Stokes, *Lismore*, 248.
185. *The Voyage of Bran*, ed. Meyer and Nutt, 88-89.
186. 'The Voyage of Snedgus and MacRiagla' ed. Stokes, *RC* 9, 1888, 14-25.
187. *Ibid.* §17-18. In Welsh tradition, Lleu takes the form of an eagle after his death and perches in the top branches of a marvellous oak. Ross, *PCB*, 34, citing *The Mabinogion*, ed. G. & T. Jones, London, 1949, 71.
188. *The Irish Adam and Eve Story*, ed. D. Greene and F. Kelly, 22-23, lines 1017-20. For dating see *Ibid.*, 7.
189. 'The Evernew Tongue', *Irish Biblical Apocrypha*, ed. M. Herbert & M. Macnamara, Edinburgh, 1989, 117, §42. I particularly like the birds of Sabes who 'in their slumbers ... sing gentle music like the sound of the wind.' *Ibid.* 117, §38.
190. *Ibid.* 55. An upside-down tree is used extensively as a model of the universe in the Upanishads and in the Kabbalistic tradition where it is called the Tree of Life. *Ibid.* 177. The main Kabbalistic text, the *Book of Zohar*, dates from the thirteenth century; its earliest predecessor was the *Book of Bohar* - 1180 - from Southern France: Cook, *The Tree of Life*, 18. There was also an upside-down tree in Norse mythology. *vid. inf.* n.198.
191. Herbert & Macnamara, *Ibid.*, 55, §2.
192. Stokes, *Rennes*, *RC* 15, 430-431.
193. Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols of Pagan Europe*, Manchester, 1988, 24, 170-1
194. The Icelander Snorri Sturluson in his account of Norse mythology. As with the Irish material, the date of writing may bear little relation to the actual age of the tradition. Davidson *op.cit.* 11.
195. Paul Grimal, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, Oxford, 1986. The children of Tuirenn are sent to fetch the apples of the Hesperides in *Oidhe Chlainne Tuireann*, but only in the late-medieval version of this tale. See Cross & Slover, *AIT*, 65.

196. Aeneid 6,137-149.
197. Eliade, *Shamanism*, 168-9
198. Ibid. 39. Eliade gives many examples in which the 'cosmic tree' is birch; see *ibid.* xiv,117,270.
199. Ibid. 70.
200. Ibid. 272-3.
201. 1 Sam.16,23.
202. Stokes, *RC*, 14, 426-7, §47. This episode with Sencha also occurs in *Mesca Ulaid - The Intoxication of the Ulaid - Gantz, EIMS*, 193.
203. Hull, 'The Silver Branch' 440, citing *Mesca Ulaid*.
204. *Scéla Conchobair Maic Nessa*, ed. Stokes, *Eriu* 4, 1910,30-31,§21.
205. Sometimes the branch is called *craebh ciuil* - which should perhaps be understood as *craebh ciúil* - musical branch. On the other hand *ciuil* seems to be a latin loan word from *civilis* - the civil law, and this would also be quite appropriate. Hull, 'The Silver Branch', 439.
206. Hull, 'The Silver Branch', 439. Caitlín Matthews *The Celtic Tradition*, Longmead, 49. Matthews refers to P.W.Joyce *A Social History of Ireland* 1903, 586, where we read of a musical branch 'on which were suspended a number of diminutive bells which produced a sweet tinkling when shaken'. Joyce gives no source reference.
207. *Echtra Cormaic*, §5,§32.
208. Watson, 'The King, the Poet and the Sacred Tree', 165-180.
209. Francis John Byrne, *Irish Kings and High Kings*, London, 1973,15-16.
210. Ibid. 20,22, citing Martin Martin, *Description of the Western Islands*, and Charles Plummer, *Irish Lives of Saints*.
211. From the story of Senchán Torpeist in 'Cormac's Glossary'. See P. Ford 'The Blind, the Dumb and the Ugly', *CMCS* 19,1990,30-32.
212. M.-L. Sjoestedt, 'The siege of Druim Damgair', *RC* 43, 1926, 110. Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe*, Manchester, 1988, 150-151.
213. See Chapter 1, n.37.
214. Nagy, *WO*, 35-37.
215. See discussion of 'ecstasy' at the end of chapter one. For more on the 'bird soul' see P.L. Henry. *EECL*, 25, 137-140.
216. See Ross, *PCB*, 243-256.
217. 'Dream of Oengus', Gantz, *EIMS*, 112.
218. 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel', Gantz, *EIMS*, 64. Feather hood - *énchendaich* - this term is used elsewhere with reference to Icarus and Mercury. See *DIL*.
219. Gantz, *Ibid.* 66.
220. P.L.Henry, *The Early English and Celtic Lyric*, 26, citing *Lebar Brecc*, 106b25. Stokes, *Lismore*, 260.
221. See discussion by Ross in *PCB*, 286-88. *Liber Hymnorum*, ed. Atkinson and Bernard, 1898, 187; Stokes, *Amra Choluimb Cille*, *RC* 20, 1899, 40f.
222. Lorica attributed to Colum Cille from *Transactions of the Ossianic Society* IV,173.
223. Gen.8,6-12.
224. Lk.3,22. The dove is still a favourite item of Christian iconography, and the Holy Spirit is often presented by scholars

of the Trinity in a medial rôle: eg. John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God*.

225. For example, Ex.19,4; Deut.32,11; Ps.17,8; 36,7; 91,7. Is.31,5.
226. Stokes, *Iomramh Churraig Hua Gcorra Annso* (known as 'The Voyage of the Uí Corra') RC 14,22-69.
227. Ibid.§14
228. Stokes, *Lismore*, Oxford, 1890, 259-260.
229. *Martyrology of Tallaght*, ed. R.I Best and H.J. Lawlor, Henry Bradshaw Society 68, London, 1931, 94-97. Peter O'Dwyer dates this poem to the beginning of the ninth century. *Céli Dé Dublin*, 1981,140-141.
230. Ibid.
231. *Trip*. ed. Stokes, II.414, 'Notes on Fiacc's Hymn' and I.114-115. *Met.Dind.* ed. Gwynn, 3,378.
233. *Edinburgh Dindshenchas*, ed. Stokes. 4, 1893,68. Máire MacNeill, *The Festival of Lughnasad* 72-3.
234. Henry, *EECL*, 140.
235. Herbert and Macnamara, *IBA*, 55.
236. *Met.Dind.* ed. Gwynn. Ibid.

CHAPTER FIVE

POETRY OF THE WOODS

The early peoples of Ireland, Christian and pre-Christian, saw nature as a place of spiritual power. We have already noticed how certain hills, caves, loughs, islands, wells, rivers and woods were associated with supernatural beings. Some of these were figures from the old cosmology - the *aes síde*, the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, the 'sovereignty goddess' and so on. Others were angels or saints who demonstrated the power and presence of God through miracles or other famous exploits.¹ In many cases, Christian pilgrimages to mountains, islands or holy wells coincided with the old seasonal festivals - suggesting a degree of continuity between Christian and pre-Christian attitudes to the rôle of nature in worship. Certain trees also continued to be regarded as sacred: inauguration trees, churchyard yews, fairy thorns. All of this strongly suggests a sense of the 'sacramental universe' - one of the characteristics of primal world-views as described by Turner.

The present chapter is in effect a continuation of chapter four. It examines a number of texts, mainly poems, in which trees, woods and/or singing birds seem to be significant features. The imagery of water, hills and islands is also present in some of them and this is noted with reference to other traditions already presented. Background material is introduced where relevant, eg. in the section on Colum Cille's woods. The discussion is prefaced by a general examination of two biblical/theological factors which could have provided some of the inspiration for the some of these texts. These are the *Benedicte* and the doctrine of Creation.

Robin Flower remains a *locus classicus* of modern commentary on this tradition: we have already noted his observation that the nature poems are in a sense 'first in Europe' ie. there is nothing like them in other European literatures of the period.² He also identified a visionary quality in them, and attributed it to the spirituality of the authors: 'They first in Europe had that strange vision of natural things in an almost unnatural purity..,[their eye]...washed miraculously clear by a continual spiritual exercise.'³

Flower's idea that most of these poems were written in hermitages by members of the *Céli Dé* is no longer defensible. Ó Corráin's objections are serious ones, and one does not have to read many of these 'hermit poems' to notice a strong atmosphere of nostalgia, and a tendency to idealise. Sometimes the author states quite openly that he or she is not presently living the hermit life: in these cases the poem expresses a wish or a day-dream rather than an immediate experience. I would however, be wary of the proposition that these poets are simply fantasising. In Ireland, as in other parts of the world, the hermitage could be a place of temporary withdrawal for the purposes of formation or renewal. It is possible that some of the authors were scribes or abbots, even members of the *Céli Dé*, drawing on the memory of lived experience. Other 'hermit poems' give little clue as to authorship and have come to be associated with the Culdee movement, rather precariously, on grounds of date alone. Some even appear critical of the hermit life.

Cétamon - Finn's poem on May Day - is one of the earliest examples. It is also one of the least ecclesiastical, being free from any direct Christian reference. It is ascribed to a mythical fore-

runner of the traditional *filid*, rather than to any hermit or founding abbot. The question arises whether the subject matter and approach might not owe at least as much to pre-Christian as to Christian tradition. As for 'continual spiritual exercise' - some of the prophetic and ecstatic techniques associated with traditional *filidecht* might legitimately be included under this heading.

That is not to say that the poetry which has come down to us is a pristine native form. All of it was composed in the language of the Christian period, and the influence of latin verse on the previously rhythmic and alliterative modes of composition has often been noted.⁴ Many of the *filid* would also have been familiar with the nature poetry of the bible, particularly as it appears in the Psalms. These were recited daily in the monasteries. The 'Canticle of the Three Young Men', also known as the *Benedicte*, would have been familiar as well.⁵

This Canticle calls on the whole of creation to praise God, appealing first to the angels and the 'powers', and then to sun and moon, rain and winds, fire, snow, lightning and clouds, mountains, springs, the sea, animals and birds, human beings, and finally to the spirits and souls of the just. The cosmology here is probably a primal one similar to that of early Ireland. We should not make the anachronistic assumption that the elements in the Canticle were as spiritually inert as they are for readers today. Far from being the inanimate forces of modern scientific thought, they were probably connected with the mysterious 'powers' mentioned above. It is a feature of some primal religions to see the elements as spiritual powers or signs of divine activity. In Canaanite myth as in the Rig Veda, wind, air and lightning were signs of divine activity; so too

were rivers and seas, the sun, and so on.⁶ It may be part of the subtext of this Canticle that foreign deities and elemental spirits are being called upon to acknowledge the greater power of Israel's God. Such is the message of the surrounding story in which Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego are protected from the flames.

Early Irish Christians seem to have been particularly fond of the *Benedicte*. Many of them would have heard or recited it at least once a week. It occurs in the seventh century *Antiphonary of Bangor* as a hymn to be sung either before or during the communion of the people, and is followed by seven collects and three antiphons. It occupied a central position in the mass.⁷ The eighth century *Céli Dé* community at Tallaght recited it every day between the evening meal and vespers.⁸ The *Benedicte* is a lengthy piece and must have made a lasting impression on those who recited it so frequently, but there is no reason to suppose that it alone provided the inspiration for the tradition of Irish nature poetry.

The Lord of Creation

Gerard Murphy thought that this poetry began in response to the doctrine of creation.⁹ However, this is to discount the possible influence of the Irish primal traditions. Since, according to Turner, belief in a 'sacramental universe' is a basic characteristic of primal religions, Murphy's oversight is a serious one. The fact that *Cétamon* - 'Finn's poem on Mayday' - is among the earliest Irish nature poems, also calls into question the view that it was Christianity alone which inspired them.¹⁰ On the other hand, some of the early nature poems do

seem to include a great upsurge of wonder, praise and adoration offered to Creator.

Let us adore the Lord
with his wonderful works
great bright heaven with its angels
the wave-white sea on earth.¹¹

There are in fact some grounds for believing that the myth of creation - by one God, in the beginning - came to Ireland as something new and appealing. Could it be that they had no creation myth of their own? No Irish creation myth has ever been found intact. However, we have already noted that Ireland had an ancient and deep-rooted sense of the Divine as 'giver of life', which would be a suitable title for many of the early deities: the 'Sovereignty goddess', to the Dagda 'All Father'. A deity who gives life is very similar to a creator, if not exactly the same. A number of texts exist which seem to preserve fragments of a myth of origins which is not specifically a creation myth. Not all cosmogonies employ the image of creation: the first existents, who are usually simply 'there' without explanation (as Yahweh and the Elohim are in Genesis) may give rise to subsequent existences in a number of other ways, eg. by begetting or giving birth, by hatching, or by sacrifice.

In some cosmogonies, the world is formed from the dismembered body of a supernatural being. The Babylonian creation story *Enuma Elish*, describes how Marduk made the world from the body of Tiamat 'the Old Hag, the first mother',¹² There are parallels here with the Irish metaphor of the land as the body of the goddess, especially where various parts of her are scattered over a wide area.¹³ In the *Rig Veda*, the world is made through the willing sacrifice of Purusha, the cosmic person.¹⁴ The male-female giant Ymir fulfills a similar function in Norse mythology.¹⁵ Another Irish version of the

dismemberment myth may underlie the closing sequences of the *Táin*, where the two great bulls tear each other apart and their bodies become various features of the landscape.¹⁶ The wonders of the night of Conn's birth may also represent fragments of a myth of origins.¹⁷ It would be wrong to assume that pre-Christian Ireland was totally devoid of a cosmogony.

It is from the *Tenga Bhith-Nua Annso Sis* - 'The Evernew Tongue Here Below' - that we get the strongest sense of the Christian creation doctrine as something new and attractive:

Now everything was obscure to the eyes of Adam's race except for their seeing the motion of the constellations, the moon, sun, and stars, which circulated each day without ceasing. They saw moreover that the springs and rivers of the world never stopped flowing at any time. They observed the depression on the earth, the debility and sleep afflicting the light, and crops at the coming of winter. They saw also the revival of the earth, with heat and light, flowers and fruit, at the reawakening of summer. Yet they did not know who was responsible for this until there came, as God arranged, the account of the creation of the world, its forms and motion. All this was obscure until the story was related, until the Evernew Tongue revealed it, speaking from the height of heaven above the assembly of Mount Sion.¹⁸

'The Evernew Tongue' is one of the many Irish Apocrypha. This passage introduces an imaginary dialogue between the Hebrew sages and the apostle Philip. The author goes on to describe the universe and its origins, elaborating freely on the biblical version, after the fashion of Jewish midrash. Indeed 'midrash' might be a better term than 'apocrypha' for this sort of Irish writing, since it is comparatively free of negative connotations: the ancient rabbis often embellished the scriptures as they studied them. So did the apostle Paul. Parts of Genesis are midrash on earlier parts.¹⁹

Various suggestions have been made as to the source or sources of 'The Evernew Tongue', but no definite conclusions have been reached.²⁰

Whatever the external stimuli, there is no reason to suppose that Irish writers were disinclined to write 'midrash' of their own, and the 'Evernew Tongue' may be an example.

Who are these people for whom everything is obscure (Stokes translates their situation as 'head in a bag') but have nevertheless noticed and wondered at the ceaseless energies of nature? They are presented simply as 'Adam's race', but the author may well have been thinking of the pre-Christian peoples of Ireland, with their seasonal festivals, sacred waters, and so on. They are presented as people living in darkness, waiting for the light: already fascinated by the numinous in nature, they require a revelation from 'The Evernew Tongue' in order to understand the world as God's creation. The comparison could be made with Romans 1, 18-23, - a passage with which the author may have been familiar - but Paul's accusations of 'wickedness' and being 'without excuse' are not repeated here.

Another text which deals at length with the subject of creation is the *Saltair na Rann*.²¹ This too is a midrash on Genesis. The story is retold with great enthusiasm, complete with free-handed alterations and additional material from other sources. The poem known as 'The Harrowing of Hell' also emphasises Christ's rôle as Creator and re-creator.²² It will be remembered that when Muirchú told the story of Monesan some time during the seventh century, he placed special emphasis on the moment when she first thinks of the sun as being created by God.²³ This is presented as her moment of enlightenment, at the end of what is clearly a spiritual quest: it brings her faith into line with that of Patrick. Muirchú implies that a recognition of the Creator is the main stepping-stone from the primal religions to

Christianity. Indeed, in Monesan's case, he presents it as the only stepping-stone - which must surely be an over-simplification - but why should Muirchú single out this particular doctrine, if he did not regard it as both innovative and important?

From the same manuscript as the *Saltair* comes a tenth century poem in which God is addressed repeatedly as - *A Dé Dúilig*. Literally this means 'Oh God of the elements/creatures/everything', and can be translated: 'Oh Creator God.'²⁴ Other prayers of the period use the same or similar forms.²⁵ *A Dhe nan dul*, survived as an invocation in the Hebridean prayers collected by Alexander Carmichael during the nineteenth century.²⁶ Carmichael translates the phrase as 'God of all' but it could equally be 'God of the Elements.' Elements, creatures, the universe - are all *dúile*.

I am told that the Old Irish term *dúilem* - creator - may have nuances which are lost in translation. *Dia dúilech* can be rendered 'Creator God' but the adjective *dúilech*, suggests rather - something 'pertaining to elements or creatures' and could be taken to describe something *imbuing* them rather than creating them in an external craftsman-like way.²⁷ Could it be that the term *Dia dúilech* retains something of the primal world-view in which the Divine is perceived in and through nature? It undoubtedly comes to mean 'Creator', but there is also a sense of intimacy and immediacy - as if God is still involved with the material world, rather than remote from it in time and space.

Some of the stress laid on the doctrine of creation, by writers like Muirchú and the author of *Tenga Bhith-Nua* - 'The Evernew Tongue' - may have had an apologetic purpose. Given the persistence of so much

of the old cosmology - *síd* mounds, sacred trees, even prayers to Mongfind at Samain - it could be that the emphasis on the Creator was intended to gather all of these other worlds and supernatural beings under the authority of the *Rí nan ndúl* - the King of the elements,²⁸ cf., the henotheism of of Psalm 82:

God has taken his place in the divine council;
In the midst of the gods he holds judgement.²⁹

Other texts, like the *Saltair*, recount the creation-story with so many elaborations that the author would seem to be telling the story at least partly for pleasure.

It can not however be demonstrated that the doctrine of creation resulted in a greater appreciation of the natural world. If the people of Ireland already had a sense of the 'sacramental universe', then the new teaching may have been received precisely because it engaged with something familiar. If nature had not been a matter of ultimate concern in pre-christian times, would anyone have been interested in a new version of how it began and how it was controlled? The impact of the change in theology should not of course be under-estimated: if the doctrine engaged with something familiar, it also transformed it; but it does not seem to have brought about a dramatic change in attitudes, at least not in the short-term. In the period covered by these poems, there were re-dedications of sacred sites, but people often continued to worship in the same places, or in similar places nearby - on mountains, beside wells, under trees - seeing these now as a focus for the presence and activity of the Creator, or his 'divine household' of angels and saints. There were of course a number of significant losses. The image of the male creator God displaced a rich vein of feminine imagery for the Divine and undermined the centrality of the

image of sacred marriage. The impact of these losses is only now coming to be realised. However, the nature sanctuaries remained, and to some extent continue today.

POETRY OF THE WOODS

Some early Irish nature poems are explicitly religious. They refer directly to Christ or a saint or to some aspect of the Christian life. Others only take on a potentially religious colouring when viewed against the background of the fore-going chapters. In the light of the traditions which we have been examining - particularly the sacredness of certain trees and woods - it is possible that some early Irish nature poetry touches on the sacred, without using any obvious religious terms - the imagery being more suggestive than the language. This is not to claim definite religious status for all such poetry, and we shall not be examining the whole tradition as if it were all relevant to our thesis.³⁰ However, where a poet deliberately makes use of such loaded images as the hill, the well, the tree with birds, and so on - it is necessary to ask whether such a choice is purely accidental?

The Fort of Fiacha:

The fort whereon I am
in which there is a little spring with a bright cup
melodious was the sound of the wood of blackbirds
about the fort of Fiacha mac Monche.³¹

This quatrain is quoted in *Sanas Cormaic* - 'Cormac's Glossary' - and is attributed to Moccu Cerdda, Munster's wild man of the woods. It includes the images of a spring, a wood, singing birds. It would be an exceptional *rath* that was not built on a hill, and in fact the Glossary names it in the preceding lines as Cnoc Raffand. So there is

every sign that the fort of Fiacha is a holy place, or a formerly holy place to Moccu Cerdda.

This poem is cited in the Glossary to illustrate the meaning of the term *ána* - a cup. The cup in the hand of the 'sovereignty goddess' is a favourite mythological motif. Its brightness suggests an Otherworld quality. The association of the bright cup with the 'little spring' and the wooded fort suggests a royal site of some significance. Fiacha was an ancestor of the Eoganacht, who were Munster's ruling family for generations. This is an Eoganacht fort, perhaps even an inauguration place. The poet remembers its *biledha* which have since disappeared, uprooted perhaps by enemies. He may also be lamenting Fiacha's poets - represented by the singing birds; or the birds may denote the former presence in the wood of friendly Otherworld spirits.

The author of this quatrain is unlikely to have been anything other than a Christian; but the subject is not the Christian God. It is mainly on the glory of the Eoganacht, with furnishings from the sovereignty myth. The work has some affinities with poetry of the 'hermit' ideal, but the author is presented as a wild man like Suibne, or like Caoilte lamenting the golden age of Finn and his companions. This is interesting, because in general, the Glossary is unsympathetic to 'paganism' - whenever it is aware of it. But the Fort of Fiacha is very much within its own family territory, and Moccu Cerdda, (like Suibne) is 'crazy' enough to voice the secret thoughts of others.

'The Blackbird' - Ach, a luin, is buide duit

Ah Blackbird, it is well for you where your nest is in the bushes; a hermit that clangs no bell, sweet, soft, and peaceful is your call.³²

This has sometimes been categorised as a hermit poem, but the author's attitude towards the hermit-life is really quite ambivalent. The hermit functions mainly as a foil for the blackbird, whose song is so much sweeter and more peaceful than the tiresome clang of the bell. This poem belongs to the twelfth or thirteenth century, but it may not have been the first of its kind: Suibne too preferred the cuckoo's call to the 'grig-graige' of the monastery bell.³³ Is there perhaps a note of envy in the opening line? The identity of the author or protagonist remains a matter of conjecture, but could this be the complaint of a mildly anti-clerical poet, constrained by circumstances, and envying the blackbird its apparent freedom? Or might we even envisage a self-deprecating hermit? Another possible candidate would be someone from the 'wild-man' or *fiana* tradition - a poet living on the margins of society, sharing in many ways the lifestyle of a hermit. Similarities have often been noticed between the two traditions, as in the 'Fort of Fiacha' above.³⁴ Perhaps what we find in the opening line is not so much envy as praise, and a primal sense of 'kinship with nature'.

The poem would seem to be saying that when it comes to making music and living in harmony with nature, the blackbird is pre-eminent. The author recognises the difference between art and nature, discipline and inspiration. One can imagine this poem as coming from either a traditional or a clerical background. It uses imagery common to both: the relationship between birds and poets was part of the myth of the Tree with Birds which belonged by this time both to primal and

to Irish Christian iconography. The intended contrast can not be between piety and secularity, since both the poet and the hermit belonged to Ireland's religious tradition. Either might have chosen a blackbird's song to express something of the ever-present Otherworld, whether they called it *Magh Mell* or paradise or the Kingdom of God. This would seem to be the real point of the comparison: the 'everydayness' of the bell and the 'Otherness' of the song. The bird's song also has a healing quality - 'sweet, soft and peaceful' - as Otherworld music often has. It is inspirational and apparently effortless. In comparison, the hermit's austerities (or for that matter, the poet's discipline) appear as laboured assaults on a world which here pours itself out freely and naturally.

What about the bell? Irish Christians had an enthusiasm for bells before they became a normal feature of churches elsewhere.³⁵ The richly ornamented shrine of 'St Patrick's bell' was made in the twelfth century to house a bell said to have belonged to the saint himself, and bells are a standard item of saintly 'kit' in the hagiographies. But they may be older than that. Bells are not specific to Christianity. They were widely used in other religions: in ancient Greece and Rome, in the Middle East and still today in Hinduism and Buddhism.³⁶

Bells are sometimes used simply to attract attention, but this is unlikely to have been their purpose where hermits were concerned. More often they had a protective function, banishing evil spirits, and creating a sacred space.³⁷ This is surely what the bell is doing in this poem. Was there once a similar tradition in Ireland? If so, the author of this poem is unsympathetic to the practice. He prefers the

voice of the birds, which in this poem can be seen as little epiphany: the Otherworld revealing itself in nature. The blackbird is a medial creature - calling from the thicket like the singing birds in the branches of the Otherworld Tree.

Int én bec - 'The Little Bird'

Int én bec uses no overtly religious language but it employs some by-now familiar images:

The little bird has given a whistle, from the tip of its bright yellow beak, the blackbird from the yellow-tufted bough sends forth its call over Loch Laoígh³⁸

Jackson's translation gives the literal sense, but the original is full of chirps and flourishes:

Int én bec
Ro lec fet
do rind guib
glanbuide
fo-ceird faíd
ós Loch Laíg
lon do chraib
chranmuige³⁹

The blackbird, the branch, the lough, the music - all have mythological resonances. Many of the same elements are present in a third poem featuring a singing-bird: *Int én gaires asin tsail*:

The bird that calls from the willow
lovely is its little beak with its clear call
the melodious yellow bill of the jet-black hardy bird
a lively tune is sung, the blackbird's note.⁴⁰

Uainebhuidhe and the birds of the Land of Promise

A prose version of the singing bird motif occurs in the *Acallam*. Caeilte, accompanied by Cascorach the musician, has been undergoing a cure in the *síd* mound of Elcmar's daughter. Suddenly:

they heard a sound, a gush of music, draw near from the water of Assaroe: melody for which one would have abandoned the whole world's various strains.

The síd folk hang up their harps and go outside. Caeilte is too weak to follow, but as soon as they return he asks for an explanation:

It was *Uainebhuidhe* out of the *sídh* of *Dorn buidhe* from Cleena's Wave in the south with her the birds of the land of promise, she being minstrel of that entire country. Now is her turn to visit this *sídh*, and every year she takes some other one.

By this time the visitors have entered the house:

the birds as well coming in and perching on the cornices and couches of the dwelling. Thirty of them penetrated into *teach na narm* where Caeilte was, and there within struck up in concert. Cas Corach handled his timpan and to every piece that he played the birds sang him an accompaniment. 'Many's the music we have heard,' Cascorach said, 'But music so good as that, never.'⁴¹

Beautiful music was to be expected among the *aes síde*; Cascorach himself was a musician of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*⁴² but Uainebhuidhe - literally 'Green-yellow' - outshines them all. She comes from the *síd* of *Dorn buidhe* and is accompanied by the birds of the Land of Promise. She is also connected with the mouths of rivers - at Assaroe and 'Cleena's Wave' - like a 'water deity'.⁴³ Music, singing-birds, water, and the *síd* mound all combine to signal the appearance of an Otherworld visitor.

St Brendan and the bird Michael

Some of these elements are also present in the tenth-century story of St Brendan and the harper. According to the hagiographer, Brendan used to stuff his ears with wax in order not to hear 'the music of the world'. On one occasion however, he was persuaded to make an exception for a young harper who was particularly keen to play for him. Brendan listens patiently but after three tunes, blesses the student and

stuffs the wax back in his ears. The following explanation is given: one day after communion, Brendan was alone in the church filled with a great longing for God:

Trembling and terror came upon me; I saw a shining bird at the window and it sat on the altar. I was unable to look at it because of the rays which surrounded it like those of the sun. 'A blessing upon you, and do you bless me, priest,' it said. 'May God bless you,' said Brénainn, 'Who are you [...]?' 'The angel Michael,' it said, 'come to speak with you [...] and to make music to you from your Lord.' The bird set its beak on the side of its wing, and I was listening to it from that hour to the same hour the next day.⁴⁴

Brendan explains that no worldly music sounds sweet to him since then. There is a greater contrast in this story between the music of this world and the Otherworld, and the deity does not appear in person - though the bird-angel belongs to the same family of symbols as the dove of the Holy Spirit. Again however, the Otherworld reveals itself in the everyday world through the medium of birdsong.

'The Lark'

Consider also the two quatrains presented together as 'The Lark' - *Congair an fuissi eolach*:

The skilled lark calls
I go outside to watch it
That I may see its gaping beak
above against the dappled cloudy sky. /

I will sing psalms
For holy bright heaven
that I may be shielded from harm
for the purging of my sins.⁴⁵

The first verse uses nature imagery, the second uses none. The metre also changes in the second verse. Were they perhaps composed separately, as Ó Corráin suggests? They are quoted together as a gloss on Culdee calendar, *Féilire Oengusso*, in order to illustrate the

meaning of an unusual word. ⁴⁶ They also express the idea of 'common praise' offered to God by all creation. This was a favourite theme of Celtic Christianity, and is also found in the *Benedicte*. Peter O'Dwyer cites further two examples in which white blackbirds sing the hours, and birds sing the responses with Brendan's monks. ⁴⁷ In the poem *Meallach liom bheith i n-ucht oiléin* - known as 'St Columba's Island Hermitage' - the waves sing eternally to God:

St Columba's Island Hermitage'

Delightful I think it to be in the bosom of an isle,
on the peak of a rock, that I might often see there
the calm of the sea.

That I might see its heavy waves over the glittering
ocean as they chant a melody to their Father on their
eternal course.

That I might see its smooth strand of clear headlands,
no gloomy thing; that I might hear the voice of the
wondrous birds, a joyful tune.

That I might hear the sound of the shallow waves
against the rocks; that I might hear the cry by the
graveyard, the noise of the sea. /

That I might see its splendid flocks of birds over the
full-watered ocean; that I might see the mighty whales,
greatest of wonders. ⁴⁸

This poem, only half of which is quoted here, probably dates from the early twelfth century. It describes a longed-for island paradise, either remembered or imagined. With its high place ('the peak of a rock'), and its 'wondrous' singing-birds and 'splendid' bird-flocks, it is reminiscent of the island paradises of the voyage literature and may be a conscious echo of that tradition. Hosts of angels appear, along with the image of the 'Lord of Creation', whose power extends to all times and conditions, places and orders of beings:

That I might bless the Lord who has power over all,
Heaven with its pure host of angels,
Earth, ebb, flood-tide.

This is a monastic poem from beginning to end: in subsequent verses,

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the island is described as a place of prayer, study and physical work - 'labour not too heavy' as the author puts it. A reference to almsgiving suggests that total isolation is not envisaged. But it still belongs very much to the Celtic world, with its time-honoured belief that nature is a powerful point-of-contact with the Divine.

'The Scribe in the Woods'

The same could be said to some extent of the poem known as 'The Scribe in the Woods' - *Dom-farcaí fidbaide fáil* - whose author has been much mocked for the astonishing number of first person references in the poem and for appearing so naïvely pleased with himself. There is no denying the poet's egocentricity, but it should be noted that his intrusive ego is nevertheless moved (one might almost say overwhelmed) by the consciousness of something other than himself - an external reality which excites him, causing the elated mood and even a *frisson* of danger:

The woodland thicket overtops me
the blackbird sings me a lay, praise I will not conceal
above my lined little booklet
the trilling of birds sings to me

The clear cuckoo sings to me, lovely discourse
in its grey cloak from the crest of the bushes;
truly - may the Lord protect me!
well do I write under the forest wood.⁴⁹

There are three references to the woods and at least three different kinds of singing-birds. Imaginatively speaking, the poet is in heaven. No wonder he feels inspired!

'Manchán's Wish'

Another author adopted the persona of Manchán of Liath to describe his idea of the perfect religious community: at first sight it looks like

a hermitage - 'a secret hut in the wilderness' - but as the poem progresses we discover a community of twelve, plus Manchán himself.

(§6) The surroundings have both a practical and a mystical character:

A very blue shallow well to be beside it
a clear pool for washing away sins through the
grace of the Holy Ghost.

A beautiful wood close by around it on every side
for the nurture of many voiced birds
to shelter and hide in.....⁵⁰

Little is known of the historical Manchán who died in 665. The remains of his monastery at Lemanaghan, some fifteen miles east of Clonmacnoise, include a tiny oratory, a holy well, and a stone associated with the saint and a female figure said to be his mother, St Mella.

The poem also describes a little stream and a fertile garden. The church with its linen, its bright candles and its 'holy white scriptures' is beautiful, but does not occupy a particularly prominent position in the poem or receive any special emphasis: it fits quietly into the woods around it. There is no rivalry between the two.

Although Manchán's settlement is not a hermitage, it is modelled on the idea of one. The natural features around which the community is built, form an enclosure in the tradition of the primal temenos or sacred space. Flower quotes a similar description from the 'Life of Declán of the Deisi':

For he was in his own dear cell which he had built for himself. It was between wood and water in a straight and secret spot on the sea's brink, and a clear stream flows by it from the wood to the sea and trees gird it beautifully round about, and it is called the little hermitage of Declán.⁵¹

Marbhán and Guaire

The image of the hermit at one with nature is elaborated at length in

the famous dialogue of Marbhán and Guaire. In fact King Guaire's part is minimal. After asking his brother why he does not sleep on a feather quilt, he remains silent throughout the next twenty-five stanzas while the supposed hermit waxes eloquent on the delights of living in the forest. Marbhán's hut is protected by a *bile* ⁵² with an ash on one side and hazels on the other (§§1,7,15,19) ⁵³ a yew holds up the sky (§6) ⁵⁴ Oak trees give shelter from the storm (§6); there is an apple tree loaded with apples. (§7) The description of it 'like a mansion - stout' is reminiscent of the apple tree by the mansion in *Echtra Taidhg*.⁵⁵ There are also rowans and blackthorn (§12) ivy (§8) and a pine (§33) as well as general references to the wood and to evergreen bushes (§§2,11,22).

It comes as no surprise to find flocks of birds among the trees. Many of them are singing: a blackbird (§3), a cuckoo (§17), a thrush' (§17) the songs of the 'red-breasted folk' (§17) wild geese and ducks (§18) a wren (§19). There are also some woodpeckers (§19) - and a group of white water-birds: seagulls, cranes, and a swan. (§§20,22) Further music is provided by bees and other insects, tumbling water, the lowing of heifers, the wind in the trees. (§§18,21,22,23.) Marbhán contrasts nature's musicians with those at court: Guaire must pay for his, but 'the beautiful pine makes music to me that is not hired.' (§23)

The poet's main intention to show the abundance, indeed the luxury, which God provides freely through nature to those who serve him: salmon and trout (§11) eggs, honey, wild onions - 'God has sent it' (§13) - strawberries, beer (§14) (with a little help from the brewer, no doubt), young corn, blackberries (§15) cresses or leeks and

wild marjoram (§16). No king could be better supplied. Ó Corráin draws attention to the extended comparison between Marbhán's lifestyle and that of Guaire.⁵⁶ The closing stanzas spell it out:

Though I sing to Christ, I fare no worse than you do
Though you delight in your own pleasures
greater than all wealth,
For my part I am thankful for what is given me
from my dear Christ.
Without an hour of quarrel, without the noise of strife
which disturbs you,
grateful to the prince who gives every good
to me in my hut.⁵⁷

Marbhán's life is presented as being supremely blessed. He lives in an earthly paradise and enjoys all the benefits which might have attributed elsewhere to a good relationship with the 'sovereignty goddess' ie., peace, harmony, fruitfulness and so on. The message would seem to be that the great provider, the giver of life, showers favours on Marbhán the hermit to a greater extent than upon Guaire the king; or alternatively, that Marbhán serves a better 'prince' and that it is through the *fír flathemon* of Christ that all these blessings come about.⁵⁸

Is Marbhán to be taken as representative of the church or the religious life? If the poem marked a simple rivalry between throne and altar, one might have expected the protagonist to be the abbot of a wealthier more powerful foundation. The hermit ideal is probably not in this poem simply as an excuse for lavish descriptions of nature's bounty, though that is surely a consideration. In the background, are numerous biblical invitations to live simply, trusting in the providence of God. The 'Sermon on the Mount' is a prominent example, part of which figures in that influential classic of the hermit-life, Athanasius's 'Life of Antony.'⁵⁹ One could also point to the promise

One could also see Marbhán's hermitage as in some ways a rural equivalent of the 'New Jerusalem'. The image of heaven as a great city would have meant little in medieval Ireland. It is an image from the Mediterranean world, for people familiar with urban civilisations. In Ireland, the paradise grove carries a similar meaning.

The rhetorical hyperbole of this poem does nothing to reduce its effectiveness as an image. One need only think of the extremely unrealistic images presented today by the advertising industry. Whether one is actually inspired by this particular piece of hyperbole is another matter. For all its lyricism and its kinship with the paradise visions of the Bible and the 'sovereignty' myth, there is no obvious interest in the well-being of the rest of the tribe. Like the 'scribe in the woods', Marbhán has no companions in paradise, other than his animal courtiers, not does he pray or give alms. The horn of plenty is poured out for him alone.

Of course, not all religious poetry has to have a social dimension. Most of the poems in this chapter concern the experiences of one individual and are collective only to the extent that the listeners are invited to enter the poet's world. However, 'Marbhán's Hermitage' with its deliberate comparison of two lifestyles, would seem to be offering a serious opinion about how one ought to live. Were it not for this apparent element of debate, one might simply enjoy it as a pleasurable diversion. As a celebration of nature and a praise-poem to Christ the generous prince, it succeeds well; but as a treatise on the spiritual life, it fails to improve on its sources.

The Woods of Colum Cille

Parts of the Colum Cille tradition retained a reverence for trees and remained in touch with their primal associations:

This is the yew of the saints
Where they used to come with me together
Ten hundred angels were there
Above our heads, side close to side.⁶⁵

This late poem occurs in a sixteenth century life of Columcille, but it is quite in keeping with earlier Irish tradition and with the biblical traditions of angels or appearances of God in the vicinity of trees. Two poems of the twelfth century describe Derry (the name means oak wood) as the 'noble angel-haunted city' and 'full of white angels from one end to the other'.⁶⁶ It was in this angelic grove that the saint is said to have built his oratory facing north-south instead of east-west in order to minimise the damage to the trees.⁶⁷ We also find a ruling that trees which fell of their own accord were to be left lying for nine days and then divided among 'all the folk of the place, good and bad,' a third going to the guesthouse and a tenth to the poor. The twelfth century annalists included the trees of *Doire Choluum Chille* alongside the battles and obits of 1146, when sixty of the ancient oaks were blown down. A further hundred and twenty are recorded as having fallen in the gales of 1178.⁶⁸

It was said to be dangerous to cut them down:

Though I am afrighted truly
By death and by hell
I am more affrighted frankly
By the sound of the axe in Derry in the West.⁶⁹

Similar taboos for the woods of St Kevin and St Forannan were noted in chapter three, along with examples from the folk tradition.

It is more difficult to reconcile Colum Cille's respect for the oakwood with the story, from the *Book of Lismore*, that he deliberately set fire to Derry before building on it: Aed son of Ainmire, had

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offered his fort to the saint, who accepted and then proceeded to burn it 'with all that was therein.' Lucas sees this as a kind of exorcism - but is it? The fort is burned certainly, but the trees are protected: /

Now the fire was like for its greatness to burn the whole oakwood: so Colmcille made a hymn to protect the oakwood, to wit, 'Noli Pater indulgere'; and it is sung against every fire and every thunder from that time to this.⁷⁰

Could this burning of the fort be an action similar to the desecration of an inauguration tree? This seems unlikely, since it is the fort of a friend, rather than an enemy. There is no mention of the fort in the *Liber Hymnorum* version of the story, where the action takes place 'at the door of the hermitage of Daire Calcaig'.⁷¹ When the 'place' - presumably a building of some kind - is set on fire, Aed is standing by. He protests mildly about the waste, 'for if it had not been burnt, there would have been no want of garment or food therein till doom'. Colum Cille replies that there will be something else (Warren supplies the word 'people') in it instead from now on, and that there will be 'no night of fasting' for whoever lives there.

Could this perhaps be a fire-ritual connected with new beginnings? In the story of the consecration of Cashel, Aed king of Muscraige meets a swineherd who describes to him a vision of a yew bush 'on a stone' ie. on a rock, the Rock of Cashel:

'I perceived a small oratory in front of it and a flagstone before it. Angels were in attendance going up and down from the flagstone.' 'Verily,' said the druid of Aed, 'That will be the residence of the king of Munster for ever, and he who shall first

kindle a fire under that yew, from him shall descend the kingship of Munster.⁷²

Are we perhaps seeing glimpses of a ceremony in which a fire was lit on a high place under a sacred tree to signal the beginning of something new - a ceremony of foundation or inauguration? In this story, the Éoganacht dynasty is established at Cashel as a consequence. In the Derry, the consequence of a rather similar action is that the *familia* of Colum Cille is established there in perpetuity. One instance involves a king and the other an abbot, but throne and altar were both sacred institutions. The distinction between the two was often blurred: Colum Cille was an aristocrat of the royal line; and during the late ninth century, the ruler of Cashel was the king-cleric, Feilimid mac Crimthainn. In the following century the bishop of Munster, Cormac mac Cuilennáin, was also its king.⁷³

Another yew of Colum Cille appears in the quatrain: *Atá sund os chind in tsluaig* -

There is here above the host
a tall pale glistening yew
a sweet bell rings out a clear note
in the church of Colum, descendant of Niall.⁷⁴

Here is another bell, sweet and clear this time, creating a sacred space around the church. Next to it stands a sacred yew under which the people are gathered. The location is unknown, but it was noted in chapter four how many monasteries were surrounded by trees or sacred woods, often associated with their founder; Lucas believed that such trees were not just sacred by association, and that it could have been the traditional sacredness of the tree which attracted the church-builders in the first place.

The last poem in this chapter makes little or no distinction between the sacred tree and the place of worship: *M'airiuclán hi Tuaim Inbir* -

'The Ivied Tree-Top'

My little hut in Tuaim Inbhir, a mansion would not be more delightful, with its stars as ordained, with its sun, with its moon. It was Gobán that has made it (that its tale may be told you); my darling, God of heaven, was the thatcher who has thatched it. A house in which rain does not fall, a place in which spears are not feared, as open as if in a garden without a fence around it.⁷⁵

Every time I read this poem, I find myself thinking of a tree-house. What other 'little hut' is skilfully constructed, open to the sky, 'thatched' by God (with a canopy of leaves) sheltered and secure, with an open outlook?

The *airiuclán* - 'little hut' is often translated 'oratory.' It is similar to the huts of Marbhán, Manchán, and the would-be ascetic of *M'óenurán* - 'All alone.'⁷⁶ *Airiuclán* is not however an exclusive term for the hut of a Christian hermit. It is simply a little room, though the word has prayerful connotations. Marbhán's hut is not *airiuclán*, but *uarboth* and Manchán's is *bothán*. This word, which gives us the English 'bothy', is also used for a poet's hut, the 'place of resort for poetic composition.'⁷⁷ Huts of various kinds are mentioned in the 'Lives' of some early saints: Declán, has already been mentioned, and Colman also 'had an oratory in the woods and a refectory'.⁷⁸ Through the *airiuclán*, 'The Ivied Tree-Top' can be related both to poems on the hermit life and to the work of the traditional *filid*. One glossator ascribed it to Suibne Geilt.

A sense of cosmic order surrounds the *airiuclán* - 'with its stars as ordained, with its sun, with its moon.' The orderliness of the celestial bodies has been interpreted by peoples all over the world as

a sign that the universe is governed by a divine being or beings. Many biblical writers shared this outlook, rejoicing in the work of the Creator:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
And the firmament proclaims his handiwork...⁷⁹

'Cormac's Glossary' states that in pre-Christian Ireland, the shapes of sun and moon were carved on the 'pagan' altars.⁸⁰ One priest continued to use such symbols, to the dismay of his superiors.⁸¹ In this poem however, the physical (as opposed to the symbolic) sun, moon and stars, add to the poet's delight, without threatening his Christian faith.

'It was Gobán who has made it': Goibniu is the smith or craftsman of the gods, who makes the weapons for the battle of Magh Tuired.⁸² Gobán Saor (Gobán the wright) appears mainly as a builder of churches - notably that of Moling. Carney suggests that 'Gobán' should be translated as 'a Gobán' ie., a craftsman. But the divine connotations of the name are not forgotten if, as Carney suggests, the reference is to a divine craftsman - to God the thatcher who has thatched it.⁸³ 'Gobán' here acts as a bridge-symbol between the primal traditions and Christianity.

'My darling God of heaven' - *mu chridecán, Dia du nim* - ⁸⁴ is a diminutive of affection and might almost be rendered 'my dear little God'; such expressions are not unusual in Irish spirituality: another example would be the poem on St Íde and the baby Jesus - *Ísucán*.⁸⁵

The protectiveness of trees is familiar from the previous chapter and has both a practical and a mystical dimension. This tree has leaves which give shelter from the rain and help to hide the poet from

passing enemies. Was there perhaps a tradition of seeking sanctuary in a *bile*, as in a church? Suibne scuttles from tree to tree and feels safe nowhere else, till he entrusts himself cautiously to the hospitality of Moling. In the end however, the monastery proves no sanctuary at all; he is killed there by a swineherd. A different part of the Suibne tradition, from the 'Battle of Magh Rath', tells how Suibne leaps for safety into a sacred tree - *bile buada* - from which a crowd of spectators were watching the battle. They scream at him and push him back into the fray.⁸⁶ Derg Corra also climbs a tree to hide from Finn, and there is no attempt to injure him when he is discovered. The tree at Tuaim Inbhir is also 'a place where spears are not feared.'

There is a great sense of relief in this poem: an end to hardship and the fear of sudden death.⁸⁷ The poet seems to know what it is really like to live in the wilds. He or she has not always been protected from spears and knows that nature too is not always gentle. This gives an edge to the expressions of delight and thankfulness. The garden image hints at a feeling of paradise regained. The tree is a tree of life in a very practical sense.

The literary background to this poem has been the subject of detailed discussions.⁸⁸ In the St Paul Codex, it is glossed 'Suibne Geilt' and appears next to one ascribed to Moling.⁸⁹ The editor clearly thought that they belonged together. Stokes and Strachan suggested that 'The Ivied Tree-Top' might also be a Moling poem: there is after all, a tradition that Moling's church was built by Gobán Saor.⁹⁰ But the poem does not appear to describe a church-building. A

second gloss, *barr edin* - an ivied tree-top - suggests the ivy-covered trees which are one of Suibne's favourite hide-outs:

A proud ivy bush which grows through a twisted tree
If I were right on its summit, I would fear to come out.

and a little later we find a place-name very similar to Tuaim Inbhir: 'I have reached lovely Tuath Inbhir'.⁹¹

Since the central character of *Buile Suibne* is largely fictional, and Moling lived some two hundred years before 'The Ivied Tree-top' was composed,⁹² we are not of course dealing with actual authorship, but with *personae* adopted by poets of later times. The same poet (or group of poets) could even have developed the characters of the saintly Moling and the wild Suibne, to express different aspects of contemporary experience. This would go some way towards explaining the similarity of the two traditions and the confusion between them. Whoever they were, the anonymous authors of these poems were thoroughly at home both with the tradition of sacred trees and with Irish monastic culture. As far as 'The Ivied Tree-top' is concerned, the two are a seamless garment. The sacred tree is too basic a symbol to belong exclusively to either tradition.

Jackson believed that this poem 'with its strong religious cast' could not possibly be part of the Suibne cycle, and must therefore be attributed to Moling.⁹³ Like many commentators, he seems to equate 'religion' with Christian monasticism, and therefore looks for a monastic author. Sensing the need to reconcile the Christian and wild-man elements within the poem, he cites the example of a 'wild-man-hermit' - Maelodrán of Tuaim or Druim Inbhir, who is mentioned twice in the *Féilire* and may therefore have had some connection with the *Céili*

Dé.⁹⁴ Maelodrán is an interesting figure, in that he spans the monastic and the wild-man traditions perfectly. In 'Cormac's Glossary' he is cited as the possible author of the lines: 'Let none hold dear the wood of Fuirmhe where it grows about Tuirbhe; its leaves wound me, its thicket does not shelter me.' The affinities with the Suibne character are clear. According to the Glossary, these lines might also have been written by somebody called Mac Samain, an unknown figure with a distinctly unmonastic-sounding name.⁹⁵

'The Ivied Tree-Top' can therefore be associated with Suibne, Moling and Maelodrán. From a religious point of view, the fact that there has been so much controversy over it, is extremely interesting. It reveals the difficulty of placing this poem within either the 'Christian monastic' or the 'pagan wild-man' categories, and calls the categories themselves into question. The image of the tree belongs both to native primal tradition and to the monasteries with their *biledha* of the saints. The little hut belongs to the hermit tradition, but it could also belong to the poets, as a place of poetic composition. The Suibne character may be a wild-man, but his praise of the 'God of heaven' shows that he is also a man of faith. Like the other poems in this chapter on the poetry of the woods - it has developed out of the often-unconscious enculturation process which was at work in Irish Christianity from the beginning.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

1. Direct Christian theophanies are almost unknown in Ireland. Christ appears as a leper and also as a child, in the 'Life of Moling' §38-39 but nature plays no significant part in the event.
2. I see Welsh nature poetry as a later part of the same tradition. For examples see the poems of Dafydd ap Gwilym in Jackson's *C.M.* 75-87.
3. *The Irish Tradition*, 42.
4. Eg., M. Dillon & N. Chadwick, *The Celtic Realms*, 231; Kathleen Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, London, 1966, 186.
5. Many of the Psalms contain passages which celebrate nature as God's handiwork. See especially Ps.104 and Ps. 148 which (together with Tobit 8.5) may have provided some of the inspiration for the *Benedicte* of Daniel 3.51-90. Carey Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah, the Additions*, New York, 1977. G.S. MacEoin sees a connection between the *Benedicte* and three early Irish protection prayers or loricae: the Leyden 'lorica' (in fact a love charm), Patrick's lorica, and the lorica *Ateoch friut an dechmad* - translated by Plummer as the 'Litany of Creation'. MacEoin suggests that 'in form at least' all three were 'derived from a list which was based on that of the Canticle but had introduced some additions' and that 'it is unnecessary to postulate an independent source.' MacEoin is particularly sceptical of Plummer's view that the loricae show traces of 'nature worship'. ('The invocation of nature in the Loricae', *Stud.Hib.* 2, 1962, 212-217.) However, the influence of native primal religions and the rôle of the primal imagination can not be ruled out simply because a biblical parallel exists. If Turner is right in seeing primal religions as 'the most basic or fundamental religious forms' and 'a common religious heritage' of humankind, then similar-looking Irish and Middle-Eastern texts could be connected at this primal level as well as (or instead of) at the level of medieval Christian literature. The fact that the common elements (sea, earth, fire, sun, moon and stars) do not occur in exactly the same order in the loricae as they do in the *Benedicte* weakens the case further. MacEoin himself points out that lists of elements occur in many Irish tales, often in connection with contracts and sureties. (*Ibid.*, 217)
6. See Philippa Bayliss, *An Introduction to Primal Religions*, Edinburgh, 1988, 18-19; J. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, Edinburgh, 1978, 3-23 and *passim*. *Rig Veda*, throughout, see especially the hymns to Agni, the Maruts, the Ashvins, Surya, the water goddesses et al.
7. F.E. Warren, *The Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*, Oxford, 1881, second edition, J. Stevenson, Oxford, 1987, 190-191. The *Benedicte* was also prominent in the Gallican and Mozarabic (Old Spanish) liturgies where it was sung after the gospel or the epistle respectively. Warren *Ibid.* 111. Stevenson suggests that the Canticle was sung every day at the dawn office: every day (presumably) because there are seven collects; and at dawn because, as she notes, this was the Hour recommended for it in the Rule of Caesarius of Arles, though Caesarius only recommends it for Sundays. *Ibid.*, lxxviii - lxxix; Peter O'Dwyer says simply that it was sung 'at the monastic offices' citing the *Antiphony of*

- Bangor: AB, ed. F.E. Warren, Henry Bradshaw Society, X,II, ed. J.H. Bernard and R. Atkinson, London, 1895, 8-9.
8. Peter O'Dwyer, *Celi Dé, Spiritual Reform in Ireland*, Dublin, 1981, 184
 9. 'The Origin of Irish Nature Poetry' *Studies* 20, 1939, 87-101.
 10. In his article 'Three Old Irish accentual poems', James Carney dates *Cétamon* to the early-seventh or even sixth century, seeing it as genuinely old, rather than archaïsing, as previous scholars had suggested. He concludes that early Irish nature poetry did not originate in the monasteries. *Eriu*, 22, 1971, 40-41
 11. The original Irish text is found in the poet's primer edited by R. Thurneysen as *Mittelirische Verslehren* 2. \$54, in *Irische Texte*, eds. E. Windisch & W. Stokes, 3. The translation is Ó Corráin's from 'Early Irish Hermit Poetry?' *SSS*, 255. See also Murphy, *EIL* 4-5, where it is entitled 'The Lord of Creation'. This poem may contain a faint echo of Psalm 117 - 'Praise the Lord, all you nations'. However, a close comparison shows few similarities beyond the opening exclamation and the four-line structure. The Psalm contains no references to nature at all. It celebrates Yahweh's love and faithfulness rather than his 'works' or his rôle as Creator.
 12. *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia* trans. N.K Sanders, London, 1971, 90-94, 83.
 13. Eg., two reaches of the Boyne were known as 'the arm of Nuadu's wife, and her leg.' Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* III, 26-27, 15. Parts of her little dog also become features of the landscape.
 14. *Rig Veda*, 10, 90.
 15. Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Myths and Symbols of Pagan Europe*, Manchester, 1988, 173.
 16. Kinsella, *The Táin*, 252-3; Bruce Lincoln, *Priests, Warriors and Cattle*, Berkeley, 1981, 87-93. Lincoln sees the trampling of Bricriu in the same passage, as belonging to the creation myth as well.
 17. These wonders are described in *Airne Fíngéin*, ed. J. Vendryes, Dublin, 1953.
 18. M. Herbert and M. McNamara, *Irish Biblical Apocrypha*, Edinburgh, 1989, 109.
 19. Sandmel, *The Hebrew Scriptures*, 344 -347
 20. See Herbert and McNamara, *IBA*, notes to 'The Evernew Tongue'.
 21. This early-middle Irish *Saltair* refers to events and persons of the tenth and eleventh centuries, and can not therefore have been written by Oengus Céli Dé despite the attribution in line 8009. Stokes, *Anecdota Oxoniensia*, 1883, b.
 22. Stokes, *Eriu* 4, 1910, 112-119, \$20, 29.
 23. Muirchú, 'Life of Patrick', \$27.
 24. Pádraig Ó Neill, 'Airbertach Mac Cosse's Poem on the Psalter', *Eigse*, 17, 19-46, \$1, 36, 40; Murphy *EIL*, 36-37.
 25. B. Ó Cuív, 'Some Early Devotional Verse in Irish.' *Eriu*, 19, 1-24, II, \$7, III, \$16.
 26. *CG* I, \$5, 6.
 27. Conversation with Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, April, 1989.
 28. The title *Rí na nDúl*, and a similar one *Día dúileach*, appear in the Finn cycle poem known as 'The Men from Sorcha'. Patrick also uses it in his attempts to convert Oisín. *DF*, I.76/186.

It may be significant that the creation-story in the hymn *Altus Prosator*, - 'High creator' - begins not with Genesis, but with the creation of the angels, archangels, principalities, thrones, authorities and powers (Cf. Col.1,16, where all things are created in Christ, and Eph. 1.21). God creates Lucifer in line 16, the fall of the apostate angels is then described in line 27, we finally reach the creation of heaven and earth. The author indicates that this part of creation had taken place earlier, but for some reason it was felt necessary to explain, as a matter of priority, that the angels and other spiritual powers were created by God. *Liber Hymnorum*, I,62. The same priorities are evident in the apocryphon, 'Creation and Fall'. Herbert and McNamara, *IBA*, 2.

29. The term 'henotheism' is often used by scholars of the Hebrew Bible to describe the view that while other gods might exist, only one God matters: see Exodus 15,11; 20.3; Deut.6,14-15; Also the 'sons of God' in Job,1,6, and the 'sons of gods / heavenly beings' in Psalms 29,1 and 89,5-7; These and other examples are discussed by John Gibson in 'Language about God in the Old Testament', *Polytheistic Systems*, ed. G. Davies, Edinburgh, 1989, 43-50. A New Testament example might be the 'stoicheia' - elements or 'elemental spirits' - of Galatians 4, 3-9.
30. For example, we shall not be dealing at length with many of the seasonal poems, which often seem to be mainly descriptive. However, their possible relationship to the seasonal festivals and to the Old Irish prophetic tradition, is discussed by Kenneth Jackson in *ECNP*. Vid.inf. chapter seven.
31. Jackson, *ECNP*, 14, translated from *Sanas Cormaic* §48.
32. Translation by Jackson, *CM*, 125, citing Meyer, *Bruchstücke der älteren Lyrik Irlands*, Berlin, 1919, 66. It occurs in the margin of the *Lebor Brecc*, 36: Ó Corráin, *SSS*, 256.
33. *BS*, §22. *Buile Suibne* is a twelfth-century text, but Suibne traditions go back at least to the ninth century. The comparison between bird and bell is found again in the last verse of a fifteenth or sixteenth-century poem attributed to Oisín: 'While Finn was living and the Fiana / dearer to them was the mountain than the church / sweet they thought the note of blackbirds / tinkling of bells they did not think sweet.' Jackson, *ECNP*, 21-22.
34. For example, Jackson, *ECNP*, 121-123.
35. Bells would make an interesting short study of their own, but constraints of time have permitted only a brief consultation of various Dictionaries and Encyclopaedias: there is a tradition that bells were first introduced into Christian worship by Paulinus of Nola, but the first continental writer to mention them frequently was Gregory of Tours at the end of the sixth century. They were already much used in Ireland (and in Scotland) by that time. They only came into general use on the continent during the eighth century. *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 'Bells'.
36. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, 14, 58d-59.
37. Bells have been rung in various cultures with the intention of inducing rain, dissolving storm clouds, lifting spells, invoking curses, and generally communicating with the spirit-world and with God. They have also been used to make announcements (fire, plague, the approach of enemies) and to mark special occasions - the celebration of mass, the consecration of the host, births, deaths, marriages. But these uses may derive from an underlying apotropaic

function. According to Bede, the tolling of the death-knell wards off evil spirits from the soul of the dying person. In medieval times, the ringing of handbells was part of the ritual of exorcism. Christian leaders have not always favoured the use of bells however: John Chrisostom (d. 407) objected to the practice of sewing them onto children's clothes to protect them from demons; but when Lanfranc was consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury in 1070, there were fifty-one bells on his cope. It is said that it was the sound of metal which was supposed to put demons to flight. Such a belief could have found a ready reception in Ireland, where smiths were often credited with supernatural powers. Were there perhaps bells in Ireland in pre-Christian times? P.W. Joyce describes the poets' branch as having bells on it, but he gives no source reference and I have found no other examples, either in literature or archeology. *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, 259-263; *Enc.Brit.*, *Ibid.* *A Social History of Ireland*, 1903, 586.

38. Jackson, *CM*, 125
39. Gerard Murphy, *EIL*, 6; For a free translation which captures some of the spirit of the Irish, see Máire Cruise Ó Brian, 'The Rôle of the Poet in Gaelic Society', *The Celtic Consciousness*, ed. R. O'Driscoll, Port Laoise, 1982, 243-253. Ó Brian uses a later manuscript with a variant last line.
40. Jackson, *ECNP*, IX; *MV*, 1, \$53 and *MV*, 2, \$75, *II*2, \$75. Probably ninth century.
41. O'Grady, *SG*, 252-253.
42. Earlier in the *Acallam* he introduces himself as the son of the *Ollam* of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* from the *síd* of Bodhb Derg. Interestingly, he wears a green mantle and a yellow shirt - the same colours as Uainebhuidhe's name. *SG*, 187-8.
43. These places are at opposite ends of Ireland: Assaroe is where the river Erne enters Donegal Bay; Cleena's wave is in County Cork, and is associated both with the tidal estuary at Glendore, and with Ross Carbery nearby. Cleena or Clíodna is a Munster goddess. Cf., Clíodna Cheinnfionn, who gives Tadhg three beautiful singing-birds to guide him on his journey, and protect him from sadness and grief. *Echtra Tadhg mac Céin*, ed. O'Grady, *SG*, II, 394.
44. Jackson, *CM*, 282-3; Stokes, *Lismore*, xiii-xv. Cf., Michael as a 'bright' bird with a song 'sweeter than every melody' in 'The Voyage of the Hui-Corra', ed. Stokes, *RC*, 14, 22-69.
45. *Félire I.lxvi* for 31st March; O'Dwyer *CD*, 186.
46. Ó Corráin, *SSS*, 256.
47. British Museum manuscript Eg.92.fol.27b; *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. Charles Plummer, Oxford, 1910, II, 277, xxi. O'Dwyer, *CD*, 184. O'Dwyer gives a third example of chanting birds from the Harleian Ms.1802: 'The chanting of birds I hear / Good to draw men's tears / each of them answers the other / does the whole church do so?'
48. For Irish, see T.F. O'Rahilly, *Measgra Dánta*, II, 120-121. English translation by Jackson *CM*, 279.
49. Jackson, *ECNP*, II; Notice the bird-poet comparison again in the words 'lay' and 'discourse.' This poem is probably ninth century and occurs in the margin of the St Gall manuscript *Codex Sangallensis*, 904, 203-4. According to Ó Corráin, it probably came from Leinster originally. *SSS*, 257.

50. Jackson, *CM*, 1951,280. *Eriu* 1,38. The poem has been dated to the ninth or tenth century and is found in the same manuscript as 'The Spiritual Direction of Manchán of Liath - *Anamchairdes Mancháin Leith* - a metrical monastic Rule. O'Dwyer sees the Manchán poem as having roughly the same purpose as the *Anamchairdes* - ie., to outline a monastic ideal. *CD*, 188.
51. Flower, *I.Trad.* 75, from Plummer, *VSH*, II,58,\$38. Also noted by Jackson, *ECNP*, 97.
52. Biledha marked all kinds of different sacred sites: the king's house, inauguration places, churches and perhaps also at one time, druidical groves. Others were unassociated with any human settlement. *Vid.sup.*, chapter 3.
53. In numbering the stanzas, I have omitted Guaire's opening and closing comments and followed Jackson's 1935 translation.
54. A rare Irish example of what Eliade calls the *axis mundi* function of the sacred tree.
55. *Echtra Tadhg Mac Céin*, ed. O'Grady, *SG*, I,351; II, 393-4.
56. *SSS*, 257-261.
57. §23-25
58. Cf., the stanza in 'Manchán's Wish' - 'My fill of clothing and of food from the king of good fame' and in some versions of 'St Columba's Island Hermitage' - 'May the king whose servant I am not desert me, may he not deceive me.' Jackson 1935. The latter is omitted in some editions, but it occurs in both of the original manuscripts. O'Rahilly thought that it was probably added later. *Measgra Dánta*, II, 120-121. There is an ambiguity in both these examples as to whether the king in question is the King of Heaven or the local ruler. But when Marbhán uses kingly language of God, he seems to be asserting his independence rather than asking obliquely for patronage.
59. *Mtt.*6.24-34; *Lk.*12.32-31; 'Life of Antony', §3.
60. *Lk.*18.28-30; Cf.*Mk.*10.28-31; *Mtt.*19.23.
61. One approach to this paradox is that of the seventeenth-century Japanese poet, Matsuo Basho, himself a master of nature poetry. He writes: 'All who have achieved real excellence in any art, possess one thing in common, that is a mind to obey nature, to be one with nature, throughout the four seasons of the year. Whatever such a mind sees is a flower, and whatever such a mind dreams of is the moon. It is only a barbarous mind that sees other than the flower, merely the animal mind that dreams of other than the moon. The first lesson of the artist is therefore, to learn how to overcome such barbarism and animality, to follow nature, to be one with nature.' *The Records of a Travel-worn Satchel* translated by Nobuyuki Yuasa, London, 1966, 71-7.
62. Ó Corráin, *SSS*, 261.
63. 'A Song of Winter', Meyer, *AIP*, 57-58. Perhaps tenth century. Sean O' Faolain was partially inspired by this poem in his short story 'Fugue'. There is also the extended gloss known as 'Summer is Gone' in the *Amra Cholaim Chille*. See Meyer, *Ibid*, 56. Probably ninth century
64. *Is.*11.6. The passage extends to verse 9.
65. From Manus O'Donnell's compilation *Betha Colaim Chille*, ed. A. o'Kelleher and G. Schoepperle, Illinois, 1918; Lucas, 31.
66. Murphy, *EIL*, 68-69; from the Oxford manuscript Laud 615.36 and *Leabhar Breac* 32a.

67. O'Donnell, *BCC*, 83-85; Lucas 28.
68. *Annals of the Four Masters*, ed. O'Donovan 1856.2.1081 and 3.39. *Annals of Ulster* ed. William M. Hennessy 1887.2.193. Lucas 28
69. O'Donnell, *BCC*, 83-85; *The Annals of Ulster*, 1188, record how a man who had been chopping wood in Derry, died after cutting his own foot 'in consequence of the curse of the familia of Colmcille.' *FM*, 3.81; *AU*, 2.213; Lucas, 28. It could be argued that such stories served an economic purpose - preserving the woodland for the sole use of the abbey. If this is true, the abbey may have benefited from or taken advantage of an older religious taboo; in the folk tradition, such stories were also told of trees with minimum economic value, eg., 'fairy thorns'.
70. *Lismore*, 305; Lucas 30.
71. Preface to the hymn *Noli Pater, Liber Hymnorum*, I,28.
72. *Longes Chonail Chuiric* - 'The Exile of Conall Corc', ed. Vernon Hull, *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 56,949; Lucas 31. The story, in old-middle Irish, comes from the *Book of Leinster*. Hull dated it to the ninth century, or possibly the eighth.
73. Ó Corráin, *Ireland Before the Normans*, Dublin, 1972,5,113.
74. Probably ninth century, from *MV*, 1, §53 and *MV*, 2, §75. Translation by Ó Corráin, *SSS*, 257. See also Jackson *ECNP*, 10.
75. Jackson, *CM*, 72-73; from the ninth century St Paul Codex; *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, ed. W. Stokes and J. Strachan, II.,294,11; *IT*, 1,318.
76. Translated by Jackson as 'The Hermit', *CM*, 281-2; Meyer, *Eriu*, 2, 55-56.
77. *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, entry for both.
78. For Colman, see 'Three legends from the Brussels manuscript 5100-4', ed., W. Stokes, *RC*, 26, 372; Jackson, *ECNP*, 97.
79. Psalm 19; Cf., Ps.8,3; 136.7-9; 147.4. Apocalyptic writers often reversed this imagery when describing cosmic disasters, eg., Dan.8.10; Mtt.24.29; Rev.6.13; 8.12; 12.4.
80. *Cormac's Glossary*, trans. O'Donovan, 94.
81. *Amra*, ed. Stokes, *RC*, 20, 1899, 428, Ap.E; The man is said to have been 'released from demons' at the council of Druim Cett.
82. *Cath Maige Tuired*, ed., E. Gray, Irish Texts Society, 52, 1982, 54-55, §122.
83. Many churches are attributed to Gobán, including Holy Cross Abbey, Co.Tipperary. See also references to Petrie and Reeves in Plummer, *VSH*, I, clxiv n.1; Peter O'Dwyer notes that the Culdee monastery of Daire na Flann is known locally as 'the Gobbán Saor', *CD*, 193,n.4 - 194. A number of monks called Gobán appear as minor figures in the lives of Maedoc and Abban: See Plummer, *VSH*, I,27,§42; II.159,§46-48; *Bethada Náem nÉreann*, II, 9-10,§37; 182,§34; 226, §148; 231, §164; 234, §179 and corresponding passages in vol.1; Cf. Life of Moling, *BNE*, §34. James Carney, 'Suibne Geilt and the Children of Lir', *Eigse*, 6, 1948-52, 87-88.
84. For Irish text, see Stokes and Strachan, *Thes.Pal.*, II.294-14.
85. Murphy, *EIL*, 26-27. Probably ninth century, attributed to the sixth century saint.
86. *The Banquet of Dun na n-Gedh and the Battle of Magh Rath*, ed. J. O'Donovan, Dublin, 1842, 234-5; Nora Chadwick, 'Geilt', *Scottish Gaelic Studies*, 5, 1941, 116.

87. Cf., Psalm 91,1-5.
88. See J.G. O'Keefe, *Buile Suibhe*, Irish Texts Society, 12, London, 1913, i-xviii; Jackson, 'The motive of threefold death in the story of Suibne Geilt', *Essays and Studies Presented to Professor Eoin MacNeill*, ed., J. Ryan, Dublin, 1940; Carney, 'Suibne Geilt'; Jackson, 'A further note on Suibne Geilt and Merlin', *Eigse* 7, 1953-55, 112-116.
89. *Thes.Pal.*, ed. Stokes and Strachan, II,294.
90. Ibid. See also *Anecdota from Irish Manuscripts*, ed. Best, Bergin, Meyer and O'Keefe, Dublin, 1908, 2, 20, and O'Keefe, *BS*, xvii-xix. For the tradition re. the building of Moling's church (with timber from *Eó Rossa*) see 'The birth and life of St Moling' ed. W. Stokes, *RC*, 27, 1906, 257-312.
91. *BS*, ed., O'Keefe §40.75; Cf., §40,27; 40,31; 40,38; §27.39. Other 'sanctuary trees' occur in §12,20,33,35,42. Usually Suibhne is unhappy in the tree, but he loves the trees in Glen Bolcain - §17,53,73, and 40 as above. For 'Tuath Inbhir', see §32,49.
92. The traditional date for the death of Moling is 697; The language of 'The Ivied Tree-top' is probably ninth century.
93. 'Suibhne Geilt and Merlin', 115.
94. Jackson, *ECNP*, 113,n.1, and 123. Compare Maelodrán's lines with *BS*, §18,23-24; §21.31: 'Grey branches have wounded me...'
95. Jackson, *op.cit.* 113,n.1. According to Flower, Mac Samain was another wild man of the woods.

CHAPTER SIX

SUN AND FIRE

Some five thousand years ago, the people of the Boyne valley built a series of stone mausoleums and covered them with earth. The most famous of these artificial mounds is the passage-grave at Newgrange, circular in plan, with one narrow entrance to the south-east. Inside, under a corbelled roof, is a chamber with three small anterooms in which the ashes of the dead were laid, in three great flat stone basins, after having been cremated outside. These basins are empty today, and the floor is covered with a fine dust. The chamber is windless and windowless, pitch dark and (when the tourists have gone) totally silent.

Thousands of people visit Newgrange every year. The fascination is partly with its antiquity, but also with a cosmic drama which links them, in their deepest hopes and fears, with those nameless men and women who built the *tumulus* some five thousand years ago. On the morning of the winter solstice, the rising sun sends a beam of light through a specially-designed roof-box, and travels up the narrow passage to the inner chamber. For seventeen minutes, the house of the dead is filled with light, before the beam recedes again.¹

All kinds of interpretations are possible - none verifiable. Was this seen as a divine visitation to the spirits of the ancestors? Was it an annual blessing on the tribe, or perhaps a liberation of the

newly-dead? The dead were not forgotten, that much is certain. And the timing of the event must also be significant. At the turn of the year, just as the sun seems to be about to disappear forever over the southern horizon, it stops and begins to draw back, saving the world from permanent darkness and extinction. The builders of Newgrange seem to have made a link between this phenomenon and the human condition. We can never know exactly what that link was, but they arranged their funeral rites and indeed their whole lives, around it.² They linked the 'death' of the sun at the dead time of the year with the death of individuals and of the tribe - Newgrange is a communal burial place. When it rose again on that dark morning of the turn of the year, did the dead also rise?

The original purpose of the present chapter was to examine the rôle of the sun in early Irish religion. However, solar imagery is often indistinguishable from fire imagery. Adjectives such as 'bright' 'shining' 'red-gold' 'sparkling' et al., are common to both. Sacred / Otherworld beings are often described in such terms in early Irish literature. It is possible that the sun and fire were once associated with separate divinities in Irish primal religion, but the two types of imagery are so closely related in the surviving texts that it was decided to treat them together here, pending a more detailed study.

The chapter begins with a presentation of biblical parallels and proceeds to a discussion of relevant material from the Irish primary sources. A review of some of the secondary literature introduces the

primary material. This review was not strictly necessary, but scholars are in disagreement as to the existence or non-existence of 'sun worship' in pre-Christian Ireland and it is helpful to be aware of possible causes of misunderstanding. In this instance, these include divergent understandings of the terms 'sun worship', 'solar deity' etc., *a priori* arguments based on comparative material and an under-use of available Irish texts.

Solar imagery in the Israel and the Bible

Among the many possible symbols for the giver of life, the sun is one of the most powerful. Primal peoples all over the world have honoured the sun as representing a deity of the highest importance. Many religious festivals coincide with ancient celebrations of the solstice and equinox. Sacred spaces were often aligned in some way with the sun. The oldest calendar in Israel was a solar one, and the festivals of Hanukkah and Christmas still take place around the time of the winter solstice.

The Canaanite festival of Matzoth (ie. of unleavened bread) originally took place at the spring equinox, and marked the beginning of the new year. It was preceded by seven days of mourning during which the last grain of the previous year was burned. According to Sandmel, the revival of vegetation signalled the revival or resurrection of the deity who gave life to the grain, and who was symbolised by the first ray of the rising sun. The deity was greeted by the eating of cakes, baked freshly from the new grain. Elements of this Canaanite festival survive in the Jewish Passover and in the

Christian Easter and eucharist - new myths and new interpretations developing from the ancient symbols.

Canaanite temples were built in such a way that on the morning of the equinoxes, (ie., the morning of the festivals) the rising sun would enter through a gate to the east. It was believed to bring with it sacred fire which would kindle the fire on the altar.³ The early Hebrews seem to have had a similar tradition: in *Leviticus* 9,23-24, Moses and Aaron come out of the tent of meeting and bless the people: then - 'the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. And fire came forth from before the Lord and consumed the holocaust on the altar.'

When Solomon's temple was built on the holy mountain in Jerusalem, the architects made sure that Yahweh, represented by the sun, would be able to visit his people in the time-honoured way. On the morning of the spring and autumn equinoxes, the first rays would enter through the east gate without casting a shadow and the sanctuary would be filled with a fiery radiance known as the 'glory of the Lord.' The event is described in one of Ezekiel's visions:

Afterwards he brought me to the gate facing east. And behold, the glory of the God of Israel came from the east; and the sound of his coming was like the sound of many waters; and the earth shone with his glory...and I fell upon my face. As the glory of the Lord entered the temple by the gate facing east, the Spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and behold, the glory of the Lord filled the temple.⁴

Later, the east gate was permanently closed and the calendar changed, as Yahwistic religion tried to separate itself from the religion of the peoples round about.⁵ But the sun symbolism of the equinox was once a source of wonder and delight to those who worshipped Yahweh on Mount Zion.

It is hardly surprising that the sun should have moved people in this way and caused them to reflect deeply on matters of cosmic and personal significance. Like water, it is one of those basics without which no life would be possible. It is also powerful, and completely beyond human control, giving rise to that strong sense of dependency which Turner identifies as a feature of primal religions. The sun also gathers other levels of meaning: in Israel it came to represent 'righteousness and justice' - the searching clarity with which Yahweh looks upon human relationships.

There is another reference in the book of Amos to the 'Day of the Yahweh.' For Amos, this was not some remote day of judgement, but the autumn equinox, when the sun again entered the temple through the east gate and filled the sanctuary with the 'glory' of the Lord. This gate was also called the 'gates of righteousness'. Amos warns that because of the injustice of Israel's leaders, the event will not turn out as expected this year:

Woe to you who are fond of the Day of Yahweh.
What is the Day of Yahweh for you?
It is darkness and not light,
Thick darkness with no brightness in it.⁶

The sun phenomenon at Newgrange differs from year to year, depending on the amount of cloud cover. It is easy to see how this could have been taken as a sign of divine favour or disfavour, as seems to have been the case here in Amos's prophecy. Newgrange is of course much older. It was built during the third millenium B.C. whereas the monarchy in Israel - and therefore the Jerusalem temple - appeared towards the beginning of the first. The main purpose of this chapter is to investigate the rôle of the sun and fire in early Irish religion, but I would like to dwell a little longer on the biblical material, since there is so much of it, and it is often overlooked. Ezekiel and Amos are not isolated examples.

The imagery of sun and fire pervades both the Old and the New Testament. An interesting association of Yahweh with the sun is found in the story of how Joshua enlisted his help against the Amorites:

Then spoke Joshua to the Lord...and he said in the sight of Israel, "Sun, stand thou still at Gibeon, and thou Moon in the valley of Aijalon." ... The sun stayed in the midst of heaven, and did not hasten to go down for about a whole day. There has been no day like it before or since, when the Lord hearkened to the voice of a man.⁷

A similar association is hinted at in the story of Jacob with the 'angel' who begs to be released at daybreak. Jacob extracts a blessing from him and lets him go:

So Jacob called the name of the place Peni'el [face of God] saying 'For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved.' The sun rose upon him as he passed Penu'el.⁸

Is it a coincidence that the sun rises and shines on Jacob after he has released the man and received a blessing? Is it a coincidence that the sun's light fails during the crucifixion or that on the morning of the resurrection, the women go to the tomb at dawn 'when the sun had risen'?⁹ It would be easy to dismiss these references as mere embellishments if it were not for the strength of the tradition:

God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran. His glory covered the heavens...his brightness was like the light, rays flashed from his hand.¹⁰

To one of the Psalmists, 'the Lord God is a sun and a shield',¹¹ and the request for God to 'shine' upon Israel is frequent throughout the Psalms. It is also found in the old Aaronic blessing;

The Lord bless you and keep you
The Lord make his face to shine upon you.¹²

Psalm 118 seems to be, or to incorporate, parts of a processional hymn for the 'Day of the Lord:'

Open to me the gates of righteousness...
This is the gate of the Lord;
The righteous shall enter through it...
This is the day which the Lord has made...
The Lord is God, and he has given us light.
Bind the festal procession with branches
Up to the horns of the altar.¹³

It may be that a procession, probably led by the king ('he who enters in the name of the Lord') also entered through the east gate on those equinoctial mornings, following the path of the rising sun. Parts of the tradition extend sun-light imagery to the king himself, as Yahweh's representative:

When one rules justly over the people ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning.¹⁴

Eventually, the old cyclical calendar was deliberately overlaid with the idea of sacred history, and the 'Day of the Lord' was reinterpreted as a single climactic event in the future - a day of wrath.¹⁵ Against this horizon, people began to look for a Messiah, and prophecies arose concerning the messianic age. But for all the efforts of the prophets to separate Israel from its primal past, they carried with them consciously or unconsciously, the old sun-light imagery, just as they carried the imagery of trees and water, mountains and the promised land. The Isaiahs in particular, transfer sun-light imagery freely to the Messiah and to the people whom he will save:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
For behold, darkness shall cover the earth,
And thick darkness the peoples.
But the Lord will arise upon you,
And his glory will be seen among you.¹⁶

Many New Testament writers took up the tradition and applied it to Jesus. In Luke's *Benedictus*, Zechariah foresees the coming of the Messiah as the 'dawn from on high'.¹⁷ Matthew quotes first Isaiah: 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light'.¹⁸ Jesus is described as the 'light of the world' and as the light of life.¹⁹ When he is transfigured, his face shines like the sun.²⁰ The writer of Ephesians quotes an early Christian hymn:

Awake sleeper, rise from the dead
And Christ will shine on you.²¹

Although the sun is only implied in this verse, the metaphor clearly rests on the same traditions as Psalm 118: just as the sun was

formerly the sign of God's presence in the temple, so now the divine radiance is present in Christ. Symbol has given way to metaphor; the 'light' of God is now the risen Christ.²²

In summary, Israel had a long and ancient tradition of sun symbolism in liturgy and poetry. God was not only compared to the sun, but on certain occasions, the sun was seen as sacramental of the divine presence. The timing of the main sun liturgies - at the spring and autumn festivals - suggests that God's presence was desired to bless the growth of crops and the ripening of grain, but there was also a moral and spiritual dimension to the day, in that the sun could also symbolise Yahweh the righteous judge.

Alongside all of this sun symbolism, the apophatic tradition was also at work - denying that God can be compared to anything we presently know or experience. The inner sanctuary and the 'most holy place' remained in darkness:

Then Solomon said, 'The Lord has set the sun in the heavens, but has said that he would dwell in thick darkness.'²³

In the past there has been a tendency to assume that 'primitive' people worship natural objects (stones, trees, the sun etc.) in themselves and that the apophatic tradition develops later - as something more sophisticated and more spiritual. However we are slowly discovering, through dialogue with living primalists, that the invisible or spirit-world is very real to them, and nowhere more so than in the vicinity of their sacred sites: earth shrines, rivers and

so on. It would therefore be unsafe to assume that the sun liturgy in the temple is a more primitive symbol than the darkness of the 'most holy place'; For the early Hebrews, Yahweh was like the sun - was perhaps even mediated by the sun - but was not in fact the sun. To confuse the two was seen as idolatry, but an outsider at their equinoctial liturgy might not have discerned these different levels of meaning simply by observation.

Sun-worshippers in pre-Christian Ireland?

In view of all this, how are we to understand the statement that the early peoples of Ireland - from the megalith-builders to the Celts - were 'sun worshippers'? How are we to distinguish between their faith and the faith of those who attended the equinoctial liturgy in Solomon's temple? On what grounds can we say that the Irish worshipped the sun, whereas the Hebrews did not?

In one of the earliest Irish texts, the *Confession*, Patrick mentions the punishment which awaits people who worship the sun. This occurs as a post-script to a passage in which sun imagery has been used to very positive effect. Patrick has been describing the future resurrection when 'we shall rise ... in the brightness of the sun, that is, in the glory of Jesus Christ'. Following a number of New Testament writers, he takes the Hebrew imagery of the sun as the glory of God, and applies it to Christ and his followers. Does he use the sun image deliberately, conscious of its power and drawing on years of missionary experience? Or does he use it unconsciously and then

realise the possibility of being misunderstood? One might prefer the former suggestion - were it not for the fact that the *Confession* seems to be addressed not to an Irish audience, but to ecclesiastical critics, possibly abroad. In the next paragraph, Patrick clearly condemns 'sun worship' but reasserts the comparison between Jesus and the sun:

For that sun which we behold, at God's command, rises daily for us - but it shall never reign, nor shall its splendour continue; but all even that worship it, miserable beings, shall wretchedly come to punishment. But we who believe in and adore the true sun, Jesus Christ ... shall continue for ever.²⁴

In another text, Cormac is distinguished from his contemporaries because 'he said that he would not worship stones or trees.'²⁵ Contemporary comments of this kind require careful interpretation. On the one hand, they provide clear evidence of the ritual importance of the sun, trees, and stones in pre-Christian Irish religion. On the other hand, it would be risky to assume that the Christian authors of these texts knew (or were even willing to consider) exactly what was going on in the minds of those pre-Christian worshippers. Like visitors to Jerusalem on the 'Day of the Lord', would they have understood what they were seeing? It is possible that they did understand and that what they saw was worthy of condemnation, but there is no one to put the other side of the case.

Celtic scholars are divided on the importance of 'sun worship' in early Irish religion. Opinions range from enthusiastic affirmation of

its existence to emphatic denial. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a wave of interest in Indo-European solar mythology included widespread discussions of 'the Celtic sun god'. Henri D'Arbois De Joubainville presented the Lug-Balor confrontation as part of a great Indo-European sun myth. John Rhyss, Alfred Nutt, Eleanor Hull and Charles Plummer also wrote in their various ways of the 'sun god' and the 'solar hero' whom they believed they could identify quite precisely - as Lug.²⁶ Plummer even spoke of the 'pre-eminence of the Celtic sun and fire god', detailing a large number of early saints who seemed to have inherited 'sun god' characteristics. Sun-fire imagery is in fact extremely common in the hagiographies, as we shall see.

Several decades later, T.F. O'Rahilly returned to the subject in key chapters of his *Early Irish History and Mythology*. He disagreed with the identification of Lug as either 'sun god' or 'solar hero' and presented instead a wide range of male and female deities who display supposedly solar characteristics. He also believed that many of these same deities could be linked with other aspects of nature as well as the sun.²⁷

Marie-Louise Sjoestedt would not accept even this modified version of the sun myth. She based her objections on the fact that the four major festivals of the Celtic year - Imbolc, Beltaine, Lughnasad, and Samain - are not solar festivals. None of them coincide with either the solstice or the equinox. Instead they are linked with the

condition of the land, marking seasons in the agricultural year when various kinds of work should be done. Time, like the land, she said, was governed by fertility and by the so-called earth goddesses - 'one looks in vain for solar deities'.²⁸

If there is any connection between the four festivals and the sun, it is far from obvious. A further problem is raised by the fact that the only pre-Christian Celtic calendar in existence - the Coligny calendar from first century Gaul - reckons time according to the moon rather than the sun. Kevin Danaher observes that there is little moon-reckoning or moon lore in the Irish folk tradition. He concludes that the festivals must have been calculated according to the sun (or perhaps the stars) by experts and in some unknown way. He suggests that the festivals are not in fact Celtic in origin, but pre-Celtic, possibly even neolithic. He cites Newgrange as an example.²⁹ Whatever their origin, the link between the quarter-day festivals and the sun remains obscure.

There is in fact no firm evidence as to how the festivals were calculated. To confuse matters further, the summer solstice (St John's Eve) was indeed widely celebrated, within living memory, as was the midwinter festival. Bonfires were a feature of nearly all the festivals and quarter days. It is possible that the calendar changed on at least one occasion, as it did in Israel. But the solar-lunar-sedereal element is so elusive, that Sjoestedt's objection remains unanswered.

At first sight, Anne Ross appears to share Sjoestedt's scepticism about solar deities:

... to speak of sun gods and sun goddesses is to attempt to imbue the religion of the pagan Celts with concepts which were completely alien to it.

However, Ross is mainly appealing for a more accurate use of terms:

The Celts indubitably likened their deities to the power and glory of the sun, but we have no reason whatsoever to suppose that they worshipped the sun ... The powers of the solar orb provided a fitting and obvious parallel to the supposed but unseen powers of the gods, in whom all the qualities of the sun allegedly resided.³⁰

This statement is not quoted as a substitute for primary evidence, but Ross's careful distinction between 'sun-worship' in the crude sense and a more symbolic or sacramental view of the sun is worth noting. Ross was not the first scholar to make this distinction,³¹ but many of her predecessors seem unaware of it. Her intuition is supported by Turner's observation that primal religionists live in a 'sacramental universe' where the 'physical' acts as a vehicle for the 'spiritual'.

Since 'sun worship' suggests a crude worship of the sun in itself, the more neutral term 'solar deity/deities' has been adopted here. Epithets and names suggestive of sunshine, brightness, light, radiance, heat, fire etc. may indeed reveal the presence or influence of a former solar deity. However, this usage should not be taken to imply a departmental view of divine activity. 'Sun worship' either in the crude sense or the departmental sense may never have existed.

T.F. O'Rahilly's discussion of Irish solar deities is still perhaps the most scholarly contribution to the subject. His work was

received with some scepticism at the time and is still open to criticism, but it would be difficult to write this chapter without reference to some of his research. The following section reviews key chapters of his *Early Irish History and Mythology* with critical observations and some additional examples.

'The Traveller of the Heavens'?

The relevant chapters of *Early Irish History and Mythology*, are (III) 'The *Gaí Bolga* and its Kin' and (XV) 'The Traveller of the Heavens.' This begins with an etymological study of the goddess name - *Án/Áine* whom we have already met in connection with a hill and two wells. *Áine* appears in 'Cormac's Glossary' as the daughter of Eogabal and *Cath Maige Mucrama* - 'The battle of Mag Mucrama' tells how she and her father lived in the *síd* of Cnoc *Áine*, Co. Limerick. They emerge one Samain, *Áine* playing a copper timpan, and are promptly ambushed by Ailill Ólomm, who kills Eogabal but encounters the violent resistance of *Áine*.³² An *Áine* daughter of Eogabal appears again in the *Acallam*, this time with a brother called Aillén. She eventually becomes the wife of Manannán. The second *Dindshenchas* of Bend Etair describes how Etar died for love of 'radiant *Áine*' - *Aine imglaine* - daughter of Manannán.³³

The name *Aine* [sic] occurs in the following northern-based tale from the *Acallam*. Eochaid 'Red-Edge', king of the Ulaid, asks Caeilte to explain the origins of a place called *rath Aine*. He is told that *Aine* was the daughter of Modharn king of Alba. She refused all suitors

and announced that she would have no man but Finn. Finn sends for her and she bears him two sons: 'Illan of the Red Edge' and Aedh Beg.³⁴ O'Donovan found a *ráith Áine* in Co. Down and other similar place-names in counties Derry and Tyrone.³⁵ Although female figures called Áine or Aine predominate, O'Rahilly also found some masculine versions of the name, eg. Ailill Áine and Áine mac Imchada or mac Ambri.³⁶

Not far from Knockainy, Co. Limerick, is a hill formerly known as Cnoc Gréne. This was traditionally the burial place of Grian, whose name means unequivocally 'Sun'. She was said to be the daughter of Fer I son of Eógabal and is also described as *Grein gruadhsoluis* - bright-cheeked Grian.³⁷ Since Grian and Áine are both descended from Eogabal, O'Rahilly assumes that they are one and the same, but this seems to me to be questionable. He also notes the existence of a Loch Gréne and a Tuaim Gréne nearby. Another Grian, daughter of Finn, is mentioned briefly in the second *Dindshenchas* of Sliab n-Echtga. The name Grian Banchure - 'sun of women' is given in the *Rennes Dindshenchas* as an alternative name for Macha who races the king's horses.³⁹

O'Rahilly notes that the adjective *án* can mean fiery, glowing, or bright (hence also 'brilliant, splendid, delightful') while the noun *áine* denotes brightness, radiance, and also speed, the combined sense of the two words being one of light, heat and movement. It is used to describe fire in 'Patrick's *lorica*' where *áne thened* - 'splendour of

fire' is invoked as a protective power. The phrase *Áne in teined* is used of the fires of hell in *Tenga Bhith-nua* - 'The Evernew Tongue'.⁴⁰

According to O'Rahilly, the *síd* people are occasionally described as *án*. Unfortunately he gives no early examples of this usage. He cites the *aes án* of O'Davoren's sixteenth-century 'Glossary' and the *aois áin* who repeatedly destroy the king's sons in the third Irish 'Life of Coemgen' which exists only in an eighteenth-century manuscript.⁴¹ He also sees *án* as 'a traditional epithet of Ériu'. For example, the fair of Tailtiu is described as *prím oenach hÉrend áine* - which Gwynn translates as 'chief fair of noble Erin'. Unfortunately, the personal content of the proper noun Ériu is not particularly clear in this context.⁴² However, O'Rahilly has identified a number of figures whose names are directly evocative of sun and/or fiery brightness. Most of them are rather minor figures, though the significance of this is unclear.

There is a common association in the mythology between horses and deities. O'Rahilly takes this to be indicative of a solar myth. He notes two figures known as 'horse-head' one of whom, Eochaid Mairccend, has horses called *Gaeth* and *Grian* - 'Wind' and 'Sun'. Manannán also has horses which could run over land and sea. A goddess is cited whose name *Láir Derg* means 'Red Mare'. She is listed as a foster mother of Corc of Cashel and also of Nial Noígiallach. We have already noted that one of the Machas (otherwise identified as 'Grian Banchure') can run faster than horses. One of Étaín's epithets is

Echraide - horse-riding Étaín. She is a daughter of Ailill and spends part of her life in a crystal 'sun house'.⁴³

The sun-horse image is certainly found in other parts of the world: in the Greek tradition, Helios and his sister Eos (Dawn) both ride in horse-drawn chariots, as do Surya (Sun) and the goddess of Dawn in the *Rig Veda*; in the Hebrew Bible, Josiah removes the 'horses of the sun' from the temple precincts and burns their chariots.⁴⁴ O'Rahilly assumes, perhaps correctly, that such a widespread myth must also have been known in Ireland. But one would like to have seen more explicit local connections between earthly horse-figures like Láir Derg and the 'sun-horse'. Horse-racing Macha *alias* Grian provides one tantalising link, but the alias is mentioned only as an aside and occurs in only one of the Macha stories. O'Rahilly's projection of so many horse-figures into the sky as 'the horseman of the heavens' is difficult to justify. He does not discuss the various saints who drive fiery or flying chariots.⁴⁵

Then there is the question of *dessel* and *tuaithebel* - the custom of walking round things 'sunwise'. This custom, which is known from Ireland to Tibet, involves keeping a sacred person, place or object always on one's right when passing it. When making the circuit of a holy well, for example, the custom in Ireland is still to keep it on one's right, moving always in a clockwise direction i.e., *dessel*. To go in the reverse direction (i.e., *tuaithebel*) would be literally a 'sinister' act, and would invite misfortune. The custom is the same

when circumambulating the 'beds' of saints at Lough Derg, Croabh Patrick and other centres of pilgrimage. O'Rahilly has no trouble here in finding local examples: Cú Chulainn's horse puts his head in Emer's lap and moves around her *dessel*. In 'Cormac's Glossary' Senchán Torpeist is circumambulated sunwise by 'a young hero, kingly radiant' with 'golden-yellow hair'.⁴⁶ Colum Cille sets a rock in the middle of a river and goes round it sunwise before setting off for Scotland. Other examples are found in the latin lives of Abban (§52) Cronan (§24) and Laserian/Molaise (§10). In one of the *Dindshenchas* of Boand, she goes *tuathbel* around the forbidden well and is drowned.⁴⁷ O'Rahilly also includes a number of examples from the Hebridean folk tradition as described by Martin Martin: fishermen arriving on the Flannan Isles, visits to a holy well, processions leaving a church, greeting a visiting clergyman - all might involve making a *dessel* circuit.⁴⁸

Dessel means literally 'right' or 'righthand-wise'. O'Rahilly links this with the sun through etymology: *án* he says, comes from the Italo-Celtic *Jānos* - 'travelling' - which in turn supplies the Welsh for 'right' - *iawn* - and hence to the Irish *dessel*, righthand or sunwise.⁴⁹ An easier explanation derives from the observation that a person facing the rising sun (in the northern hemisphere) always sees it appearing to move from left to right. Whatever, the origin of the 'sunwise' circuit, its practice is both widespread and tenacious. A

recent traveller in Tibet heard it described as 'the way of the heavens'.⁵⁰

O'Rahilly goes on to give several examples in which the sun is invoked as the guarantor of an oath. We have already discussed the passage in *Cáin Adamnáin* where 'sun and moon and all the other elements of God' are invoked alongside Peter, Paul, Andrew and the other apostles as guarantors of a new piece of ecclesiastical legislation. This guarantor-list is reminiscent of the henotheism which we discussed briefly in chapter five with reference to the *Benedicte*. Elsewhere, Loegaire swears by the sun and moon, water and air, sea and land, day and night, to extract no further tribute from the people of Leinster. He breaks this oath and subsequently dies 'of the sun and of the wind'.⁵¹ According to the *Dindshenchas*, the sun was one of the guarantors which brought about the drowning of Aed Ruad at Ess Rúaid after Aed had broken an agreement with one of his champions.⁵²

O'Rahilly could also have cited the oath of the *aithechthuatha* - the 'unfree people' at the end of their unsuccessful revolt. They swear to return to their subject status and give as guarantors 'the sky, the earth, the moon, the bright sun...'⁵³ In the Finn Cycle, Donn from the *síd* of Slieve Mis swears by wind, sun, sea, and land, to ignore the pleas of his wife. She turns him into a stag and the *fiana* unwittingly hunt him down.⁵⁴ On the other hand when Conchobar takes an oath, it is by sea, sky, and earth - with no mention of the sun or

moon.⁵⁵ P.L.Henry points out that in oaths like these, the elements play the rôle of arbiter. In Loegaire's death-tale, they are called *Duli Dé* - the elements of God - as if to make it clear that God, the *Dé nan Dúl*, has ultimate authority over them.⁵⁶ There are many signs that at one time the sun represented a spiritual power in its own right - less powerful than the Creator, but perhaps more powerful than the apostles, who come after it in the *Cáin Adamnáin* list.

O'Rahilly's chapter goes on to discuss the word *Áinne*, (a diminutive of *án* which he takes to mean 'a sunlet' - ie. a small representation of the sun, and therefore a ring, particularly a gold ring.⁵⁷ Another item of jewelry - the type of brooch known as *roth*, ie. 'wheel', is also taken to represent the sun, and the term *roth gréine* - 'wheel of the sun' is cited to strengthen the sun-wheel connection - though it has to be said that no examples are given of a brooch being compared directly to the sun.⁵⁸ In the *Saltair na Rann*, God is both *ard Rí gréine*, - 'high king of the sun' and *ArdRuirí ind roith* - 'high king of the wheel' - epithets which can be taken as synonymous.⁵⁹ The sun-wheel connection is perhaps better established than that of the brooch, but various figures wearing gold rings and brooches are seen by O'Rahilly as 'solar deities'.⁶⁰

He may have been right about the gold jewelry. He may also have been right about the goddess names, the sun-horse, and particularly the oaths. But some of O'Rahilly's arguments fail to convince absolutely. This is particularly true of parts of the chapter on the

Gaí Bulga, which he translates as the 'lightning weapon'. Making no distinction between lightning and the sun, O'Rahilly sees almost every figure who carries a shining weapon, (particularly a spear or a sword) as a form of the Hero, who kills the 'sun god' with the god's own weapon. Consequently he finds 'sun god' associations almost everywhere.⁶¹

Additional Material

Can anything be done to put Irish sun-symbolism on a firmer footing? I believe that it can, though probably not in one chapter. We should not assume that we will find deities whose exclusive sign or sphere of influence is the sun. Áine, Ériu, and others may indeed be described in terms of brightness and radiance, but they are no less strongly associated with the earth or with water. O'Rahilly realised this, but perhaps did not give it sufficient emphasis:

The sun goddess ... was also *and primarily*, the goddess of earth and its springs, often gave her name both to tracts of country and to rivers.⁶²

Far more material exists than O'Rahilly was able to use. The remainder of the chapter will discuss some of this material.

Brigit:

Áine, Grian and Macha are not the only female figures associated with the sun. Although Áine is remembered over a large area, Brigit has a higher profile than any of them, both in terms of dedications and in the mythology.⁶² There are of course a number of different Brigit.

One recent attempt to distinguish them is found in McCone's chapter on 'Fire and the Arts,'⁶³

The Brigits all tend to have some association with the sun and also with fire. The brightness and movement of the word *áine*, could in fact be characteristic of fire without reference to the sun. In Brigit's case however, it becomes clear that sun symbolism and fire symbolism are very closely connected. This partnership is repeated in examples of other gods and goddesses, as we shall see. Sometimes the fire symbolism predominates to the extent that one wonders whether the hearth and the bonfire were not perhaps commoner signs of the sacred than the sun in the sky. Since I have found no satisfactory way of separating the two images, it seems best to treat them together: the great fire in the sky, and the little fire on the hearth. They were also linked together in Israel, as we have already seen - the rising sun of the equinox and the 'Glory of the Lord' in the sanctuary.

Brigit's mythological father is the Dagda, also known (like many other gods, kings and saints) as Aed - which means fire. Aed is the name of Macha's father in the story of Macha Mong-ruad, whose red hair could be taken to represent flames. Another member of the Macha triad is the woman, sometimes identified with Grian (ie. Sun) who races Conchobar's horses. There was clearly some link in the minds of the myth-makers between Brigit, Macha, Grian, and Aed. Whether this link was ever worked out formally in terms of a 'family' of deities, is impossible to tell. The running-together of functionally-equivalent

goddesses and gods, is sometimes ascribed to the activities of the medieval *literati*, but is it really such a late phenomenon? Such syntheses often take place within religions as they develop (eg., El, Yahweh and the Elohim) and there is no reason to suppose that Irish primal religions were immune from this tendency. However, Brigit, Macha, Grian and Aed are clearly united in their association with fire and the sun, whatever the history of their relationship.

Brigit is a pan-Celtic deity with dedications in Britain and other parts of Europe as well as in Ireland. It is possible that the thermal springs at *Aquae Sulis* (Bath) were sacred to Brigit, under the name of *Sul* which means sun. Notice again the sun-water association.⁶⁴ A perpetual fire burned in the temple at *Aquae Sulis*, and we are reminded of a number of perpetual fires said to have burned in Ireland in Christian times, notably in St Brigit's abbey in Kildare.⁶⁵

According to 'Cormac's Glossary' the three Brigits, daughters of the Dagda, were three sisters - a triple goddess invoked by smiths, physicians, and poets.⁶⁶ The work of the smith, often a semi-religious activity in the ancient world, was presided over by Brigit *bé ngoibnechtae* - the woman of smithcraft. Smithing of course, involves the transformation of rocks into metals through the medium of fire.

McCone suggests that the relationship between Brigit *bé legis* - the woman of leechcraft - and fire, may have arisen from the 'heating of brews.' He quotes an Old Irish legal tract which mentions the boiling of 'anything good of herbs and prescriptions for someone who

is sick.⁶⁷ The connection between healing and the sun (also noted by Ross and Green) is more difficult to establish from the texts. Relevant considerations may include the fact that the sun brings out the essential oils in medicinal herbs. Sunlight is also necessary for healthy growth and can be a healer of wounds, skin conditions and depression. Were the early physicians aware of factors like these? The lifting of the spirits in sunshine is expressed in the famous gloss of an early Irish scribe: 'Pleasant is the glittering of the sun today upon these margins, because it flickers so.'⁶⁸

Brigit, patroness of poets was (according to the 'Glossary') a poetess, a seer or woman of insight - *ban-file*, *ban-éces nó bé n-éicsi*. Sun-fire imagery is found in connection with many of the arts, but perhaps most of all with the art of *filidecht*. One of the techniques used in seeking inspiration - *imbas forosnai* - uses a metaphor of light and fire: 'great knowledge which lights up, kindles.'⁶⁹ A gloss on the word *imbas* in the 'Cauldron of Poesy' describes it as 'a bubble which the sun causes on the plants (ie. on the hazels of Segais) and whoever consumes them will have an art (*dán*).'⁷⁰ The glossator saw the sun as contributing to the process of inspiration - as one of the symbolic sources of the poets' art. The mysterious bubbles which it raised on the hazel bushes, made possible the 'enlightening' or 'kindling' of the soul. It has been suggested that the Irish, like Greeks, saw fire as the promoter of all the arts - the great *pantekhnnon*.⁷¹ On the evidence of the gloss, we could amend

this to 'fire and the sun'. Another Greek parallel is to hand in the figure of Apollo - god of light and the sun as well as patron of music and poetry, prophecy, medicine, and law.⁷² Continuing the metaphor, the 'Cauldron' also says that everyone has poetry within them, but that 'in every second one it does not *shine forth*.'⁷³

Although the 'cauldron' text makes use of the myth of *imbas* and the sun, its central image - the cauldron, belongs to a more domestic setting i.e., the hearth. The author would seem to be saying that there are three inner 'cauldrons' which are the source of knowledge and poetry. Could there be some connection between this cauldron and the rather obscure figure called *Bríg briugu* - provider of hospitality? ⁷⁴ If McCone is correct in his observation that the names *Bríg* and *Brigit* are 'prone to interchangeability' then there might even be some relationship between *Bríg briugu*, and *Brigit ban-file*. The *Dagda*, father of *Brigit ban-file*, was famous for his 'cauldron of plenty'. This may be coincidental, particularly if the 'Cauldron of Poesy' represents a rather individual treatment of *filidecht*. However, it is interesting to note that the cauldron on the hearth could serve as an image for both generosity and poetic inspiration.⁷⁵

We face the same sort of fragmentary evidence with another figure mentioned by McCone - *Bríg ambue* - 'the female expert of the men of Ireland in wisdom and prudence' - particularly legal wisdom.⁷⁶ Is she connected with the 'cauldron of judgement' which appears in the law tract *Bretha Nemed* as 'the womb cauldron of judges'...the 'udder' from

which false judgement is not borne, and 'into which he milks truth'?⁷⁷ These questions are probably unanswerable, but it is clear enough that goddesses called Bríg or Brigit are often associated with fire and the sun and that these symbols have both a material and a non-material dimension.

Brigit the abbess inherits a great deal from Brigit the goddess, including a large number of sun-fire motifs. Before she is born, a druid prophesies that she will be 'a daughter conspicuous and radiant, who will shine like the sun among the stars of heaven'.⁷⁸ In the same text, she is born at sunrise as her mother is stepping over the threshold with a bowl of milk. The women also wash her in milk - an action said by the hagiographer to be in keeping with 'the brightness and sheen of her chastity' (line 1192). The hut in which she was born catches fire, but the infant is miraculously unharmed. With her first prayers, a column of flames is seen above the house, rising from earth to heaven (1203-4).⁷⁹ We are reminded of the pillar of fire in *Exodus*, the burning fiery furnace, and the flames of Pentecost: Brigit's would-be rescuers find her 'full of the grace of the Holy Spirit.' (1210-11) However, these flames do not descend on her from above, but rise 'from earth to heaven'. The pillar of fire does not guide her as it does the Children of Israel, nor does it threaten to engulf her like Nebuchadnezzar's furnace. It appears to emanate from the child herself. This 'child in a burning house' motif is only partly biblical in inspiration. The Christian audience would certainly have understood

the reference to the Holy Spirit, but the miracle seems to have drawn on native images of holiness as well.

A fire miracle of Brigit involving cow-dung has, as far as I know, no biblical source: 'the cow dung which lay before the girl they beheld ablaze.' The people who witness this phenomenon stretch out their hands towards it, but the flames disappear (1212-4). Brigit has a strong affinity with cows - particularly white cows with red ears - and with milk. There may also be an association between white cows and Boann.⁸⁰ In another Brigit story, the sun's rays support her wet cloak.⁸¹

St Brigit's sun-fire attributes are particularly clear in the first verse of Ultan's early hymn:

Brigit ever-excellent woman
Golden sparkling flame,
Lead us to the eternal kingdom
The dazzling resplendent sun.⁸²

Ultan uses the sun image to denote either the 'eternal kingdom' or God. He thinks of St Brigit as a 'flame' - a little sun on earth, burning with the divine light. Because of her affinity with God, she knows the way to the eternal kingdom (described here with a sun metaphor) and is able to act as a guide on the spiritual journey. In subsequent verses, she is also able to grant protection from demons and disease, and set people free. This fiery St Brigit is reminiscent of the sixteenth-century Spanish image of the soul as a log in the Divine fire, gradually becoming indistinguishable from the fire itself.⁸³ In Brigit's case, the resemblance also owes something to the sun-fire attributes of her goddess predecessor.

Mary:

The woman clothed with the sun in *Revelation* 12.1, is often understood as a reference to Mary, or to the Church, or to both at once. The early Christians of Ireland probably enjoyed this image. On the continent, Mary inherited the attributes of several Mediterranean goddesses. A similar thing was to happen in Ireland, where imagery which had served so long and so well for earlier figures of the Divine, was re-cycled and re-distributed among the major figures of Christianity. In many cases, the bible would have helped and encouraged them in this process: 'the woman clothed with the sun' would have been both new and familiar. They set about making it their own.

The seventh century monk Blathmac, makes three petitions to Jesus through 'beautiful Mary, little bright-necked one, ... sun of women.' He also refers to her as 'bright Mary' and 'Sun of our race',⁸⁴ Some of the later bardic poets used similar metaphors for Mary, including the image of fire: For Fear Flatha Ó Gnímh, she is 'our great candle-light...our flaming torch,' the 'sun setting red after its circuit',⁸⁵ For Aodh mac Con Connacht Ó Ruanadha she is 'a red Easter sun',⁸⁶ Philip Bocht O Huiginn praises her as 'summer sun of the skies' and 'early sunrise ripening corn.' 'The round gold circle of her face makes the virgin as a dazzling sun.'⁸⁷

However, the bards rarely used such epithets systematically or in isolation. Philip Bocht's 'early sunrise' for example is only one of a number of images which he piles up, most of them drawn from nature:

Mary's hair is compared to sheaves of corn; she is a calm rainless sky, sea-wealth cast on the shore, an unfenced fruit tree, a brimming lake-well.⁸⁸ There is a tendency for the Celtic deities to overflow whatever boundaries are set on them, and the same fluidity is in evidence here. Neither the 'bright goddesses' nor Mary are associated exclusively with the sun. Sun imagery combines with earth and water imagery. The sun is one symbol among many.

Bride (Brigit) and Mary were invoked in parts of the Hebridean tradition, whenever the fire was tended:

I will raise the hearth-fire
As Mary would.
The encirclement of Bride and Mary
On the fire and on the floor
And on the household all.⁸⁹

This piece of domestic liturgy includes an 'encirclement' - *cáim* - which is the word used for making a *dessel* or 'sunwise' circuit round a sacred place or person. Often such a circuit would be made three times, and here the *cáim* is described in terms of three widening circles - on the fire, on the floor and on the whole house. Did the woman walk three times round the hearth before lighting it? Since fires were generally in the middle of the floor, this would have presented no practical difficulties.

The word which Carmichael renders as 'hearth-fire' is also worthy of attention: *tula* or *tulach* - is not so much a fire as a knoll, a little hill or burial mound. The same word could be used of a 'fairy hill'. The *tulach* on the hearth is probably the covered embers rather than the fire itself. Carmichael describes how the *tulach* was prepared

at night: it rested on a bed of ashes which had been divided into three sections. Three peats were then laid on this base and more ashes piled on top 'in the name of the Three of Light'.⁹⁰ At daybreak, the *tulach* of yesterday's fire, would be rekindled with a prayer. If the family had a cow, this would also be the time for milking. Brigit and 'Sun bright Mary' were associated with both these activities. The tradition also calls upon other spiritual presences: saints and angels - the Christian counterpart of the *aes án* - the bright folk. 'Sun-bright Michael' appears in one smooing prayer.⁹¹ The 'Sacred Three' who are also invoked, can be understood as the Holy Trinity and that is no doubt how the phrase was meant in Christian times. However, threeness is a time-honoured attribute of Celtic deities, and the custom of tending the hearth to the accompaniment of prayers, may well be older than Christianity. There can be no certainty as to which triple deity might have been invoked as the 'sacred three' in such a context, but the frequent mention of Brigit in these prayers, together with her association with fire, and the Hebridean tradition of looking for her footprints in the ashes on the morning of St Brigit's Day, make her a likely candidate.⁹²

It is still the custom in Ireland to hang St Brigit's crosses in the house. These are usually made of rushes - from the wet places and the water's edge - and have three or four arms protruding from a woven centre. There is a tradition that they protect the house against fire. The traditional day for hanging them up is St Brigit's day - Imbolc -

now the feast of Candlemas. In many churches, candles are still blessed and lit during this springtime celebration. At first sight it might seem that there is no corresponding light or fire imagery in the biblical source, but of course there is - and the fact would probably not have been so easily overlooked in medieval Ireland. Candlemas marks the occasion when, according to Luke's gospel, Simeon recognised Jesus as the promised Messiah, the 'light to the nations' and the 'glory' of Israel.⁹³

A number of standard sun-fire miracles are found in the lives of St Ita and St Samthann. The house where Samthann is sleeping is filled with celestial light, and when she prays the house appears to be on fire.⁹⁴ The 'child in a burning house' motif is also applied to Ita. We are told that it was the fire of divine grace burning around her; it does her no harm and when she wakes her face is dazzling.⁹⁵ The three suns which hover over Ita's house are a different matter however. There is no corresponding biblical episode, and although the author hesitantly ascribes it to the Holy Trinity, it could equally well be an image from the native tradition. 'The mystery remains,' as the hagiographer observed.⁹⁶

So much for sun-fire imagery as applied to goddesses and to female saints. We shall turn in a moment to some male mythological figures, but I would like to close this section with a poem in which dawn is welcomed into the oratory of a Christian monk, as a woman sent by God to bring light to his morning prayers:

Come into my dark oratory
be welcome the bright morn
and blessed he who sent you
victorious self-renewing dawn.

Maiden of good family
Sun's sister, daughter of proud night
ever welcome the fair morn
that brings my mass book light.⁹⁷

Lug

Early sun-fire imagery of Lug is comparatively rare. According to Máire MacNeill, his reputation as a 'solar deity' derives from the late-medieval story, *Oidhe Chloinne Tuireann* - 'The Tragedy of the Children of Tuirenn' - in which his sun-like radiance is described repeatedly.⁹⁸ By contrast, sun-fire imagery is almost completely absent from *Cath Maige Tuired* - 'The [second] Battle of Moytura' - which would seem to be the most important early Lug text. In *Cath Maige Tuired*, Lug leads the *Tuatha Dé Danann* against the Fomorians. He carries an invincible spear (§4) but it is not described in sun-like terms - eg., as gold or shining. In O'Rahilly's terms, it is the 'lighting weapon', but this makes Lug the hero rather than the 'sun god'. *Cath Maige Tuired*, also describes his chariots and horses (§142-145) but none of their names ('Pasture' 'Fierce' 'Man' 'Branch' et al.) or the names of their charioteers, or the charioteers' goads, contains any obvious sun reference. One of his eleven horses (not four as in the Helios myth) is called Laisad, which could mean 'burning, blazing,' but Gray renders the others as 'The Sea', 'Poem', 'Fear' 'A great Song' and so on.⁹⁹ There is little indication that these are chariots of the sun, unless the name 'Lug' is considered sufficient evidence in itself. 'Lug' may be related to the Greek *leukos* - white - and the latin *lux* - light - but there is no general agreement as to

its etymology. The *Dictionary of the Irish Language*, translates the common noun 'lug' as 'warrior, hero, fighter' - originally perhaps 'lynx'.¹⁰⁰

Equally tantalising is one of Lug's titles - *Samildánach* - 'possessing all the arts at the same time'.^(§55) This is reminiscent of Apollo and of the 'pantechnon' quality of fire as promoter of all the arts. This function was assigned above to Brigit, but could it also have belonged to Lug? His fire connection is clearer in the folk tradition, where it is said that he was fostered by his paternal uncle, Gavidia the smith, and became his apprentice in smithcraft. In this variant of the Balor story, he puts Balor's eye out with a glowing rod from the furnace.¹⁰¹ In general though, there are so few sun-fire references in the early Lug story, that *Samildánach* is probably not intended to be one either, however obliquely.

The comparatively recent tendency to cast Lug as a 'solar hero',¹⁰² probably owes more than a little to the theory expounded by D'Arbois De Joubainville among others, that Celtic religion was basically a dualism of light and darkness.¹⁰³ D'Arbois thought he could detect as the basis of all 'Aryan' cultures the 'dualistic idea of the beneficent deities of Day, Sunshine and Life, warring against the malevolent powers of Death, Storm and Night.'¹⁰⁴

However, the imagery of light and darkness is rare in *Cath Maige Tuired*. The relationship between the *Tuatha Dé Danann* and the Fomorians is usually illustrated in terms of justice and injustice,

plenty and hunger, fertility and infertility. The main complaints against Bres are that he allows foreigners to impose crippling taxes, treats heroes dishonourably, gives poor hospitality, neglects the arts, and fails to bring prosperity to the land. (§25,36,37,39,45.) Lug's victory over him is a triumph of plenty over famine: Bres is forced to reveal to him the auspicious days for sowing and reaping. (§160)

Lug's annual festival - Lughnasad - is connected with agriculture rather than the solstice or the equinox. It is a harvest or pre-harvest festival, and although bonfires are a central part of the celebrations, these can not be shown to be particular to Lug, since fires were also lit at Beltaine, Samain, mid-summer and mid-winter. It is possible that a more detailed investigation of early Lug material will reveal further sun-fire associations which I have overlooked, but for the moment I am unable to explain why, if Lug was a 'solar hero' there are so few references to the fact in *Cath Maige Tuired*.

There is in the end no absolute distinction between the two sides in *Cath Maige Tuired*. It is not a dualistic battle between light and darkness, if 'dualism' is understood in the traditional theological sense of two equal, distinct and opposite powers perpetually at war with each other. The *Tuatha Dé* may occasionally be called the *aes án* - 'the bright folk' - in other texts, but not in this one, and it is difficult to find any early characterisation of the Fomorians as 'dark'. The two sides are also related to each other through two

marriages: firstly, that of Ethne, daughter of Balor of the Fomorians, to Cian, son of Dian Cecht, of the *Tuatha Dé Danann* - Lug being the child of this mixed-marriage (§8); secondly, the union of Elatha son of Delbaíth, one of a triad of Fomorian kings (§14,25) with Ériu of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, their son being Bres, leader of the Fomorians.

This intermarriage of the two sides seems to be deliberate, particularly the mixed parentage of Lug and Bres. Tomás Ó Cathasaigh and Elizabeth Gray both see it as central to the meaning of the text, which they interpret as an exemplary myth on the effects of paternal and maternal kinship.¹⁰⁵ But as Gray observes, following Dumézil, *Cath Maige Tuired* is not just an example for human society to follow. It can also be seen as an expression of cosmic realities.¹⁰⁶ In such a context, the intermarriage of the two sides prevents the myth being understood in terms of a strict dualism, and suggests instead something more complex and more subtle.

Elatha

The story of the conception of Bres further challenges any theory of dark Fomorians. It begins as Ériu is standing on the shore looking out to sea. The sea is calm and level as a board. She sees what looks like a silver boat coming towards her, though she can not make it out very clearly at first. The waves wash it ashore and Ériu sees that is a man 'of fairest appearance'. He has long golden-yellow hair; his cloak and shirt are embroidered with gold thread; he carries two shining silver spears with shafts of bronze, and a sword with a gold hilt and

inlayings of silver and gold; he wears a gold brooch and five circlets or 'wheels' (*cóicroith*) of gold around his neck; after their love-making, he gives Ériu a gold ring as a token. (§16-22)

In Ireland, people still talk about the 'fairy path' meaning the reflection of the sun as it rises or sets over a calm sea. There is nothing dark or threatening about this Fomorian king. If ever a gold-bedecked kingly figure invited comparison with the sun, it is Elatha.¹⁰⁷ Before going back to his own country, he tells Ériu to name their son Eochu Bres ie. Eochu the beautiful, predicting that his name will become a metaphor for every beautiful thing in Ireland. (§21) Elatha then leaves, and the *Tuatha Dé* adopt Bres as one of their own. (§22,14)

Balor:

One of the Fomorian champions in the battle is Balor - Lug's Fomorian grandfather. In *Cath Maige Tuired*, Balor's 'evil eye' is open only in battle and is so enormous that four men are required to lift its lid. It fatally weakens anyone who looks at it. Lug puts the eye out with a shot from his sling. (§135)¹⁰⁸

For O'Rahilly, Balor is the malevolent 'sun god', defeated by the hero with his 'lightning weapon'. However. in *Cath Maige Tuired*, Balor's eye is said to be poisonous rather than dazzling or burning (§133.) and sun-fire imagery of him is curiously lacking in the early literary tradition. It is mainly the folk tradition which portrays him as a fiery figure. According to one such source, Balor's eye was an

eye of flame with seven coverings. If insufficient rent was paid to him, he would uncover his eye little by little, so that the grass was scorched, wood caught fire, and eventually the whole country was ablaze.¹⁰⁹ Black tips on rushes, bog oak, and dark mountainsides in Donegal are all attributed in the folk tradition to Balor's burning eye.

According to Stokes, the word *aed* (fire) was also sometimes used to mean 'eye' on the grounds that 'the pupil is the fire of the eye.'¹¹⁰ For O'Rahilly, one-eyedness is always diagnostic of the 'sun god'. In addition to Balor, he cites several characters called 'Goll.' One of them is the mythical salmon from the falls of Assaroe: Goll essa Ruaid, who may have some link with Fintan Mac Bóchra - another one-eyed man.¹¹¹

Having one eye could simply be a sign of the uncanny or supernatural, without reference to the sun. For example, the mythologies describe a posture of standing on one leg with one eye shut and one hand raised - in order to work sorcery.¹¹²

The Eye of God:

On the other hand, there are signs that the sun was seen as the eye of God in parts of the Hebridean tradition:

The eye of the great God
The eye of the God of glory
The eye of the King of hosts
The eye of the King of the living
Pouring upon us
At each time and season
Pouring upon us
Gently and generously. /

Glory to thee,
Thou glorious sun.

Glory to thee, thou sun
Face of the God of life.¹¹³

One problem with the Hebridean tradition is that it contains an unknown amount of Viking influence - and the sun is significant in Norse religion as well. The theme of the eye is common throughout Carmichael's collection. Sometimes it is benevolent, sometimes malevolent but out of some twenty-five further examples, I have only found one in which the eye could (possibly) be associated with the sun.¹¹⁴

Finn:

Finn is sometimes been identified with Lug,¹¹⁵ and through him, with the sun. Murphy, perhaps the best-known proponent of this theory, etymologises Finn as 'white' and Lug as *perhaps* - 'the gleaming one.'¹¹⁶ Murphy believed that Lug and Finn were different names for the same Otherworld character. He based his argument on an apparent parallelism between the two traditions: both having as their traditional opponent a one-eyed supernatural 'burner'. As we have seen, Lug's opponent Balor is only a 'burner' in the folk tradition. However, Finn's fiery opponents are more numerous and more impressive. He overcomes Aillén, the 'burner' of Tara.¹¹⁷ He has confrontations with one or all of a triad called Fothadh, whose name was 'explained' in one medieval etymology as 'venom of fire' and whose genealogy is packed with names which Murphy translates as 'fierce flame' 'flame ruin' and so on.¹¹⁸ One of Finn's rivals, Derg Corra, better known as

'the man in the tree', also has some connection with fire. His prowess at leaping over the cooking pit becomes the occasion of Finn's jealousy. His full name is Dearg Corra mocu Dhaighre - which Murphy translates as 'Red one of Corra of the race of Flame'. Like Finn, he is also associated with the forest.¹¹⁹ The Finn cycle also includes a number of personages called Aed. One of them has only one eye and is therefore *Goll* - Goll Mac Morna being Finn's traditional enemy.¹²⁰ All of this serves to establish some kind of fire association for Finn - though fire imagery is more clearly used of his opponents rather than of Finn himself. Using O'Rahilly's model, one might identify him on these grounds with Lug the hero, enemy of the 'sun god'. But the fire association of Lug on his own, remains weak - being based mainly on late oral versions of the Balor myth.

Finn's skill as a poet does however link him with the sun-fire imagery of poetry, mentioned above in connection with Brigit. His first inspiration comes from burning his finger on the hot salmon which is roasting over the fire. He practices *imbas forosnai*, which as we have seen, had a sun-fire connection - both in the idea of 'illumination/kindling' and in the idea that it could be obtained by consuming the mysterious bubbles which the sun raised on the hazels of Segais. Mícheál O'Cléirigh glossed the rare adjective *éicside* ('doubtless related to *éicse*' - the craft of poetry) as meaning something like 'bright' or 'conspicuous'. Nagy took these to be solar adjectives.¹²¹ However, Finn appears mainly as the recipient rather

than the source of illumination. One could argue that this is part of the process by which pre-Christian deities were 'demoted' to the status of extraordinary mortals. A *gilla* similar to the young Finn in wildness and marginality is pronounced in a latin gloss to be 'the spirit of poetry',¹²² ie. closer to the source of inspiration, but this does little to reverse the general impression of receptivity gained from the body of Finn texts.

While there are some interesting parallels between Finn and Lug, Murphy's theory is not without problems: Finn has a clear connection with fire, but mainly as its opponent. As a poet, he has some connection with fire and the sun, but mainly as someone who is receptive to mystical illumination. Lug's encounter with the 'burner' is found mainly, perhaps exclusively, in the folk tradition, and though he claims poetry among his many skills, he provides no memorable display of it. One solution to the relationship of Finn and Lug might be that two originally separate traditions converged, rather than that Finn and Lug were originally one and the same.

Ailill and Aillén, Aed, the Dagda and others:

O'Rahilly's example of Ailill Áine - bright or splendid Ailill, is strengthened by the story of the diminutive Ailill - Aillén - who burns Tara every year at Samain till Finn overcomes him.¹²³ Aillén's home is not in the heavens but under the earth (he emerges from a cave) but this is not an insuperable difficulty in that other figures

with possible sun-fire characteristics are also depicted as living under the earth or beyond the sea: Áine, Grian, Elatha.

The Dagda's connection with fire and the sun is by no means obvious from the rather burlesque rôle he is often made to play in the mythology. However, one of his other names is Aed - fire. His home at Uisnech was said to be the site of the 'first fire in Ireland'¹²⁴ and he was also associated with Newgrange through Boand, and Oengus their son. He has a triad of other sons, one of whom is called Mac Greine - son of sun - but it is unclear how 'Mac' is to be understood in this context.¹²⁵ It can also of course indicate the child's mother, or a characteristic of the bearer, as well as paternity.

Further mythical figures connected with fire are Finn's other opponents mentioned above: the Fothadh triad, Aed (again) and Derg Corra. Oghma is sometimes called Oghma Grian-Ainech, ie. 'sun-face'.¹²⁶ And what of the three Deirgs who precede Conaire into the house of Deirg on the night of his death? Might they also be associated with fire? They have red tunics, red mantles, red shields, red spears and red horses and red heads. Later the house is set on fire three times and extinguished three times, before the slaughter begins.¹²⁷

Aed, Maedoc, Lasair, Molaise, and other sun-fire saints:

Plummer's *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* is a rich source of saints with sun-fire associations. Aed and Maedoc are linked with fire through their names, which they share with a number of mythological figures.

According to Plummer, Maedoc is a diminutive of Aed, and might be rendered 'my little Aed'. The names Lasair, Molaise (also known as Lasrén) and Daig are variations on 'flame'. Buite means heat. Others to whom sun-fire imagery is applied are: Abban, Ailbe, Brendan, Cainnech, Carthach, Ciaran of Saigir, Coemgen, Fintan, Fechin (whose mother's name is Lasair) Colman, Congall, Finan, Mochoemog, Moling, Molua (*alias* Lugaid) and Tigernach; also Columba of Terryglas, Daig of Iniskene (whose sister's name is Lasair) Finnian of Clonard and others.¹²⁸ It would almost be easier to count saints who have no association with sun or fire.

Some of their miracles are more to do with the weather in general: many are untouched by snow or rain;¹²⁹ clouds, darkness, rain and snow are dispelled in answer to their prayers;¹³⁰ Cainnech's boat sails calmly through a storm.¹³¹ But even if we put these aside, an impressive number remain.

Some of Plummer's more general theory is open to question, as we noted above: his use of the term 'sun worship' is misleading; there is little to suggest that the pre-Christian Irish ever worshipped such a compartmentalised and invariably male deity as 'The Celtic Sun and Fire God'; and his 'pre-eminence' is by no means obvious. However, Plummer is surely correct in his intuition that the sun-fire symbolism attached to these various saints is inherited from pre-Christian antecedents. The only qualification might be that one should also be on the alert for biblical influence, given the frequency with which

sun-fire imagery was applied to Yahweh, the prophets, the Messiah and the Holy Spirit. This was not overlooked by the Irish hagiographers. Finding it familiar and still potent, they made extensive use of it in their work.

We have seen how the motif of the 'child in the burning house' may be partly (but not wholly) biblical in inspiration.¹³² The flames are explicitly linked with the Holy Spirit in the life of Brigit. In the life of Ita, they are said to be a sign of God's grace. This stock miracle occurs again in the lives of Buite, (iii) Fechin (iv) Mochoemog (vii) and Daig.(CS.2) ¹³³ The 'burning house' miracle and others like it often involve a pillar of fire which, if it is intended to denote the Divine presence, could have been influenced by *Exodus 13* and/or a number of Psalms referring to the same tradition. However, the Irish pillar of fire does not guide the way: it rises into the sky, either from the house or from the top of the child's head.¹³⁴ The *Benedicte* - the 'Song of the Three Children' may also have been a source of inspiration ¹³⁵ but the Irish holy child is usually alone in the flames.

Plummer takes the chariots of fire in the lives of Cainnech (xxvii) and Carthach (xxviii) as a sign of their relationship to the 'sun god.'¹³⁶ This may be true, but he overlooks the chariots of fire in the stories of Elijah and Elisha, and Ezekiel's fiery vision of the 'appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord' riding on four

great wheels.¹³⁷ Carthach's being caught up into the air by the fiery chariot, closely parallels the story of Elijah.

The miracle of the 'dazzling face' has already been discussed with reference to St Ita. The comparison with Moses is made explicit in the life of Brendan (v) and Maedoc's instruction to tell no one (xxxix) directly parallels two accounts of the Transfiguration.¹³⁸ Fintan warns one of the brothers not to look at the brilliant light which plays around him as he is praying, and reminds him of the blindness which befell Paul on the road to Damascus.¹³⁹

A number of stories of miraculously prolonged daylight may owe something to Joshua 10.12-14. This miracle is told of Fechin (xx) Colman (xxiv) Molaise (xi) and Molua (xxxix). Elsewhere, a similar feat is ascribed to the Dagda, who keeps the sun in the sky for nine months so that Elcmar will stay away from home during the conception and gestation of Oengus.¹⁴⁰ This may be a piece of Christian satire. On the other hand, many cultures have a myth of the sun standing still.

Many of these saints, and their disciples, can handle burning objects or carry them without harm: Coemgen (v) Ciaran of Saigir (xxxiii) Finan (v,xxvi.n.9) Lasrén (vii) Molua (iii, xvii) Ailbe (xl) Daig.¹⁴¹ The prophecy of Isaiah comes to mind: 'When you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.' (Is.43.2) But again, the parallel is incomplete. Biblical characters

like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego may *walk* through fire, but handling or carrying it is not a common biblical motif.

The text already quoted from Habakkuk 3.4: 'His brightness was like the light, rays flashed from his hand' - may have encouraged stories of saints whose fingers burst into flames. These include Buite (xix) Cainnech (xxxv) Coemgen (xviii.n.18) and Patrick.¹⁴² Other passages which might have proved appealing would include Hebrews 1.7 ('...Who makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire,'¹⁴³ and Luke 9.54 ('Lord, do you want us to bid fire come down from heaven and consume them?') - Cf. Finan (xix).¹⁴⁴

However, sun-fire symbolism would seem to have been well-established in Ireland before the adoption of Christianity. Brigit is perhaps the best example of the interweaving of the two traditions, but the same process is at work in the lives of many other saints. We have already seen how the 'child in the burning house' is a compilation of biblical and other sources. Other motifs owe little or nothing to the bible: for example, the fiery 'globus' which often appears in the vicinity of the saint. Ita had three such fiery spheres over her house (xxiii) and similar phenomena are found in the lives of Carthach (iv) Ciaran of Saigir (xix) Mochoemog (vii) and Fechin (xiii).

In a motif similar to that of 'the burning house', flames, brilliant lights, or sun-like rays are seen (usually at night) coming from the place where the saint is at prayer: Buite (xvii), Fintan

(xvi), Maedoc (xii), Comgall (xv,xix). There are occasional Transfiguration references ('Say nothing to anyone' says Comgall) but by and large this is not a biblically-derived motif and there are signs of a native version: it was Conaire's custom to light a huge fire in the hostel of Da Derga, even before the night of his death. This fire had seven outlets, the flames from each of which was the size of 'a burning oratory.' Seventeen of Conaire's chariots stood at each entrance to the house:

...and the great light inside was visible to the watchers outside through the wheels of those chariots. 'Explain that, Fer Rogain,' said Ingcél. 'What is that great light yonder?' 'I do not know it,' said Fer Rogain, 'unless it is the fire of a king.'¹⁴⁵

In a variation on the 'dazzling face' motif, a number of saints are said to be red or ruddy-faced: the child Mochoemog emerges from the fiery 'globus' which has enveloped his house - *forma rubicunda* - with a ruddy appearance. (vii) This is not just the effect of the fire. Comgall's face is also ruddy or flaming (vii and n.7) and he has *oculos rutilos* - reddish-gold/shining eyes. At the time of his ordination, a divine light appears for three days and three nights on the hill of Bangor and the presiding bishop sees 'the flaming hair of his head' and angels flying round about him. (xix.n.1) Fintan also has a ruddy face and shining eyes. (xxi); 'The radiance of the Godhead' is seen in the face of Moling.¹⁴⁶ A comparison may be intended with the young David, or with the 'beloved' in the Song of Solomon. (1 Sam.16,12; SOS 5,12.); but saintly redness is explicitly linked with

the sun in the thoroughly non-biblical story of Finan's conception: his mother sees in a dream something like a red-gold fish, flying towards her from the rising sun, and entering her womb. Other non-biblical examples would include the name Ogmá 'sun face' (mentioned above), the sparks of fire in Cú Chulainn's hair and the *luan láith* - 'warrior radiance' - round his head.¹⁴⁷

Cú Chulainn also becomes prodigiously hot, and warms cold water when immersed in it.¹⁴⁸ He shares this property with a number of saints whose body or hands also produce heat: several of them can warm cold water by standing in it: Ciaran of Saigir (xxix) Comgall (xlvi) Molaise (xii). Coengen uses his hands to heat cold milk (xxxv). Snow can not settle on or around these warm saints: Molaise (xxvii) Ailbe (vi) Buite (vii) Ciaran of Saigir (viii) Comgall (viii). The infant Moling survives a night in the snow.¹⁴⁹ Saints who can handle red-hot iron include Molua (xvii) and Finan through his disciple (xxvi.n.9) This miracle does not derive from the bible. If turning things into gold is a sun-fire motif, it occurs in the lives of Cainnech (xxxiv) and Maedoc (xlv).

A large number of miracles relating to cold and darkness are very much the product of their environment: in a typical example, people complain to the saint about being cold, and a fire is miraculously kindled for them - or (in Ailbe's case) the sun comes out: cf., Ciaran of Saigir (xxxii-xxxiii) Coengen (xviii.n.4) Comgall (xliii,xliv) Molua (iii) Ailbe (vi, xl.)

Buite is a particularly striking example of a sun-like saint. We are told how, shining like the mid-day sun, he used to leave his body on earth while his soul was caught up to heaven; one day some angels appear with a golden ladder and carry him off completely. He ascends into heaven - *tanquam alter He[l]lyas* - like another sun. (xvii) This takes place on the Kalends of May - at Beltaine. In the *Félire*, Moling is called 'the sun which warms the sacred heaven' and Ita is - in grian bán - 'the white sun'.¹⁵⁰ Similar metaphors are used of Jesus and Mary, as we have already seen.

In early Ireland, sun-fire imagery was a time-honoured way of referring to the Divine. Before the adoption of Christianity it seems to have been used of a number of native deities. Afterwards, it was used of all three persons of the Trinity, of Mary and many of the saints, some of whom (like Brigit) bear a strong resemblance to pre-Christian Otherworld figures. Fire and the sun also seem to have had an enduring sacramentality. In the 'sacramental universe' of primal imagination, they had a numinousness through which the Divine might reveal itself. From the many saints with fiery names, and the many 'perpetual' or long-lived fires mentioned in the literature,¹⁵¹ it is possible to envisage a number of early sanctuaries, including the famous one at Kildare, where fire and the sun played an important symbolic rôle in Christian worship. We do not know the purpose of the fire enclosure at Kildare, but the Paschal fire and/or the Paschal

candle feature in the lives of Ciaran of Saigir (xxxii, xxxiii) Molua (xxiii) and Patrick.¹⁵² In Ciaran's 'Life' we are told that the Paschal fire - 'our consecrated fire' - was supposed to burn all the year round. If it were to go out, there would be no fire in the monastery till the following Easter. On one occasion when it does go out, Ciaran prays and a 'globus' of fire falls into his lap. Ciaran's Paschal fire is a good example of how closely the spiritual aspect of many nature symbols is related to their practical use: this Paschal fire is not simply part of the liturgy - it also cooks the dinner and warms the guests. The distinction between sacred and secular is almost non-existent here, and there is a primal sense of 'creaturehood' or 'realistic humility' in that human beings are shown to depend on a power or powers greater than themselves.

Patrick

St Patrick's legendary contest with the druids is partly a contest over sacred fire: over who may light it, whose judgements it will endorse and so on.¹⁵³ The story is too well-known to need repetition, but it is important to be aware of the enormous number of fire motifs in it.

Of particular interest is Loegaire's decree that all the hearths in Ireland are to be quenched till the new fire was kindled at Tara. When Patrick's fire is seen, Loegaire's druids tell him that if it is not put out immediately it will burn till doomsday, and that he who has kindled it will vanquish kings and lords. They also warn him not

to go to the place where the fire was made: 'that thou mayst not do reverence to the man who kindled it.' In some way, lighting the fire has given Patrick power over Loegaire - political and spiritual power. It is interesting to compare this with the story of the 'first fire' at Uisnech from which all the fires in Ireland were said to have been kindled. The chief druid who tended it was believed to have been entitled to receive tribute from every house in Ireland on account of it.¹⁵⁴

Patrick's main opponent at Tara is the druid Lucetmael - whose name may include a reference to the sun, fire or perhaps lightning. Lucetmael makes snow fall and Patrick melts it. He makes darkness and Patrick dispels it - and the sun comes out. A trial by fire eventually takes place. Lucetmael and Patrick's companion are shut up in a house 'so that God may deal dooms on you therein.' The house is set on fire. The companion survives and Lucetmael is burned to death. Throughout this story, fire is connected with power and with divine judgement. Both sides claim it and centre their ceremonies around it, but the hagiographer wishes to demonstrate beyond all doubt that fire is now firmly on the side of Patrick.¹⁵⁵ Fire also seems to be connected with the Otherworld judgement against Conaire in 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel' and in 'The Voyage of Snedgus and Mac Riagla', the men of Ross are reprieved from death in a burning house as a punishment for murder.¹⁵⁶

The Life of Patrick in the *Book of Lismore* is less centred around fire imagery than the Tara traditions. However, there is still at least as much as in the Lives of the other saints discussed above. It opens with the verse: 'The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.'¹⁵⁷ We are told that this passage has a historical sense and a spiritual sense, the spiritual sense being that the gentiles were living in darkness 'until the true sun arose unto them' - that is Jesus the 'sun of righteousness' - *grian na firinne*. He is 'the splendour, the flame, the precious stone'. Patrick is the shining lamp which enlightened the west of the world. (1.27-29) Miliucc burns himself alive in his house rather than acknowledge the changed status of his former slave. (1.294-5.) He also has a vision of Patrick with a flame of fire coming out of his mouth - 'the fire of divine grace.' (1?159) Patrick turns icicles into fire and dries up a flood with his fiery finger-tips. (1.80-85,) For the twelve nights of his wake, there is no night, but an angelic radiance, which some people said lasted till the end of the year. (1.636-8)

In part of the folk tradition, Patrick contends with a tyrant called Crom Dubh who lives in a place called Glen Lasaire - Flame Glen. We are told that before Patrick came to Ireland, people believed that it was Crom Dubh who brought 'the light, the darkness and the change of seasons.' Crom Dubh sets fiery dogs on Patrick and attempts to throw him into a fire.¹⁵⁸

The historical Patrick uses none of this extravagant imagery in his own writings - but the sun was highly significant for him none the less. Both R.P.C.Hanson and Noël O'Donoghue have drawn attention to the dream of salvation at sunrise, in the *Confession*.¹⁵⁹ Patrick describes a terrifying dream in which Satan falls on him like a huge rock so that he is unable to move his limbs:

It came to me, into my mind, that I should call out 'Helias'. And at that moment I saw the sun rise in the heavens; and while I was crying out 'Helias' with all my might, behold the splendour of the sun fell on me, and at once removed the weight from me. And I believe I was aided by Christ my Lord, and His Spirit was then crying out for me.¹⁶⁰

According to O'Donoghue, Patrick is calling on 'Elias' or Elijah, 'the herald of Christ, the one who opens the way along which Christ comes',¹⁶¹ but he also notes Hanson's comment that Patrick's contemporaries would have recognised in 'Helias' a reference to 'Helios' - the sun.¹⁶² Is 'Helias' to be understood as a sort of pun, referring on the one hand to Elijah, and on the other to ... what? Could 'Helios' even be a reference to Christ himself? Whatever Patrick's intention in this rather difficult passage, he goes on to link Christ with the sun on two further occasions (§59-60). This is never a matter of crude identification, and he is all too aware of the possibility of being misunderstood: but for Patrick, the sun mediates a strong sense of Christian salvation. It seems to me that this experience has emerged, but only just, from an older Celtic experience

of the sun as affording a 'perception of the infinite'- under another name or names.¹⁶³

It may be that the historical Patrick had a personal preference for sun symbolism and found it particularly potent - as in the 'Helias' experience. He may have used it often in his teaching, and could have drawn on countless biblical examples. But there is surely more here than personal preference. If fire and the sun were also important sacred symbols in the Irish primal religions, then no incoming missionary could have invoked either of them lightly. Confrontations would have been inevitable. Perhaps there is a grain of truth after all, in the story of Patrick's contest at Tara.

Blathmac does not use the sun as a symbol either of Christ or of God. He envisages a sort of hierarchy of beings in which Jesus, the 'son of the King of cloudy heaven' (§24) rules over the sun and the moon: 'his the brightly clothed sun, his the gleaming moon' (§191). The comparison would seem to be with the sort of well-dressed men and women one might expect to find in the entourage of a great king. Their presence reflects well on their ruler. He is their 'Lord' and the sun mourns and hides its light when he dies. (§23,61.) We are reminded again of the 'Canticle of the Three Young Men' in which the whole of creation looks up to Yahweh and praises him.

The author of the 'litany of Jesus' (probably a contemporary of Blathmac) preferred a different approach: ie., strong metaphors in which Jesus is compared to the sun, even addressed as such:

O holy Jesus;
O gentle friend;
O Morning star;
O mid-day sun adorned;
O brilliant flame of the righteous,
and of righteousness
and of everlasting life and of eternity
O fountain ever-new,
ever-living, everlasting.¹⁶⁴

As in the bardic litanies of Mary, other metaphors are used alongside that of the sun: here, Jesus is also a star and a fountain. The theme of everlasting life receives particular emphasis in the last two lines.

It has been suggested that the ring around Celtic crosses is a sun circle - representing Christ as the light of the world.¹⁶⁵ As far as I am aware, this interpretation is not found in any contemporary texts. The circle could represent any number of different things: the cycle of the seasons, the four directions, the cycle of human life, the moon, the void, the cosmos. On the other hand, a sun-circle round the head of Christ would have been a powerful 'bridge' symbol, connecting the primal sun-fire imagery of Ireland with the primal sun-fire imagery of the Middle-East, where it had come to be used for the Messiah, and later, for Christ. But whether any of this was in the minds of the original sculptors is impossible to know.¹⁶⁶

There are no doubt other examples of gods and goddesses, Christ and the saints, being compared to the sun or to fire. O'Rahilly may have enlarged on the earlier focus of Rhyss, Hull, Nutt and Plummer, but he still only used a fraction of the material available. The status of Lug remains something of a mystery. But there is no reason

to question (as Sjoestedt seems to do) whether the primal religions of Ireland included a skywards dimension at all. It is true that a great deal of attention remained focussed on the sacredness of the land, and fire can also be seen as belonging to this more earthly arena of divine activity; but the sun itself was also highly significant. Christianity may have brought with it the image of a God whose permanent home was in the sky: the 'heavenly father'; sun-figures in Irish mythology tend to retire to the *síd* mound or beyond the sea. But there can be no doubt that sun symbolism played an important part in the Irish primal religions. Other explanations will have to be found for Sjoestedt's objection that the Celtic year is not divided by the solstice and the equinox but by the condition of the earth.

In the light of her comments, I approached this chapter with what was perhaps an excessive degree of scepticism. As the chapter draws to a close, I realise that the various theories about Irish solar deities and solar heroes have yet to be adequately disentangled. My guess is that sun-fire imagery will turn out to have been exaggerated in some instances, and overlooked in others. 'Solar mythology' may have distorted the picture further by concentrating on the sun to the detriment of other aspects of nature. Similarly, an over-rigid categorisation of the old gods and goddesses might lead one to assume that solar imagery always attaches to a 'sun god' - when for example, heat and radiance might simply be one of many possible signs that the being in question is holy, supernatural or Divine. The considerable

overlap between 'sun goddesses' and 'water goddesses' has already been noted, cf., the apparent interconnectedness of Fintan, Aed, the Dagda, Goll, and the salmon of wisdom. If strictly categorised, Aed and the Dagda would be 'fire deities' whereas Goll and the salmon would be 'water deities'. O'Rahilly's suggestion that they are all one is worth considering - particularly given the presence in the group of Fintan the shape-shifter, who had been at various times a hawk, a salmon, an eagle and a man. This image of the shape-shifter seems to me to present one of the strongest challenges to the over-rigid categorisation of deities, reflecting as it does the possibility that one being could take on a number of different forms.

That primal symbols should often be taken together is further illustrated by the Patrician *lorica* known rightly or wrongly as 'The Deer's Cry'. It begins with an invocation of the Trinity:

through belief in threeness
through confession of the oneness
Of the Creator of Creation.

The theme of unity in diversity is present from the start, but the fourth section is particularly interesting:

I arise today
Through the strength of heaven
Light of sun
Brilliance of moon,
Splendour of fire
Speed of lightning /
Swiftiness of wind
Depth of sea
Stability of earth
Firmness of rock.¹⁶⁷

The sun takes its place here as one symbol among many. All are under the power of the Creator, either as different manifestations of the

one divine energy, or as subordinate spiritual powers like the guarantors of *Cáin Adamnán*.

In Ireland as in Israel, sun and fire were sacramental symbols and images of the Divine. In Israel the sun was associated with light and fertility, judgement and holiness. In Ireland, sun-fire imagery was also associated with fertility, with light and warmth, the arts (particularly poetic inspiration) and again, judgement. In both cultures, the life-giving qualities of sun and fire evoked the giver of life. Their dangerous qualities were also experienced as supernatural in origin. Sun-fire imagery seems to have been present since prehistoric times in the religious heritage of both cultures. Because of its basic elemental quality, people moving from a primal to a universal religion, were able to carry it with them, almost unconsciously. The process of harnessing the spiritual energy of the old symbols to the new religion is evident in many early Irish texts.

NOTES TO CHAPTER SIX - SUN AND FIRE

1. This phenomenon was re-discovered in 1967. See M.J. O'Kelly, *Newgrange: Archeology, Art and Legend*, London, 1982, 123-124; J.Patrick, 'Midwinter sunrise at Newgrange' *Nature* 249.1974.517-9;
2. The building of Newgrange required enormous energy and organisation. See O'Kelly, *Ibid.* 115-121.
3. Sandmel *HS*, 518-519.
4. Ezekiel 43,1-5. Sandmel, *Ibid.*, 166-167.
5. In a previous vision, Ezekiel sees the temple being used for various forms of non-Yahwistic worship; he sees twenty-five men standing 'with their backs to the temple of the Lord, and their faces towards the east, worshipping the sun toward the east.' Ezek.8.16.
6. Amos 5,18-20; Psalm 118,19. Sandmel, *Ibid.*, 64-65. Sandmel's translation.
7. Joshua 10,12-14.
8. Gen. 32, 30-31.
9. Lk. 23,45; Mtt.27,45; Mk.15,33; Mtt.28,1; Mk.16,2; Lk.24,1.
10. Hab.3,4.
11. Ps.84.11
12. Num.6,25; Cf. Ps.31,16; Ps.67,1; Ps.80,3,7,19; Ps.119,135; Ps.4,6; Ps.89,15.
13. Ps.118,19,20,24,27
14. These are traditionally the 'last words of David.' 2.Sam.23,2-4.
15. Zeph.1,7-16; Ob.1,15-21; Joel 2,1-3; Sandmel, *HS*. 109-110.
16. Is.60.1-2. Cf.9.1-2; 42.6-7; 51.4; 58.6; 60.19-20.
17. Lk.1,76-79.
18. Mtt.4,15-16. Cf. Is.9,1-2.
19. Jn.9,5; Jn.12,46; Mtt.5,14; Mtt.13,43; Jn.1,4-5,9.
20. Mtt.17.2; Cf.Rev.1.16
21. Eph.5,14.
22. Eph.5,14 was probably a baptismal hymn. 'The Sun of the resurrection' was a popular symbol in the early church. For further examples see Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, Edinburgh 1991, commentary on 5,14.
23. 1 Kings, 8,12; 2 Chron.6,1.
24. *Conf.*, 59-60
25. Translated by McCone, *PPCP*, 73, from *Senchas na Relec*, in *Lebor na hUidre*, ed. R.I. Best and O. Bergin, 50a-50b.
26. Arbois, *The Irish Mythological Cycle*, Dublin, 1903, 8-9,103-5,112-114. The original French version had been published in Paris in 1884. Rhyss, *The Origin and Growth of Religion as illustrated by Celtic Heathendom*, Hibbert Lectures 1886, London, 1888; Nutt, *The Voyage of Bran*, London, 1895, I, 292; Hull, *Folklore*, 18,131; Plummer *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, Oxford, 1910, I, cxxxvi.
27. *EIHM*, 513-4.
28. *GHPC*, 52.
29. Danaher points out that Imbolc and Lughnasad take place 45 and 46 days after the solstice, but this only accounts for two of the quarter days and no explanation is offered for the significance of these figures. He also notes that the calendar was self-correcting, since agricultural activities would still be governed by the condition of the earth and the state of the weather. This leads us back to Sjoestedt's view that it was the 'mother

- goddesses' of the earth, rather than the sun, who governed time. Danaher, 'The Irish folk tradition and the Celtic calendar', O'Carroll, CC, 221-2.
30. Ross, PCB, 323-4.
 31. In 1889, Max Müller wrote of the 'perception of the infinite' in nature, particularly in the sun. See *Natural Religion*, London, 1889, 141-155. This volume represents the first in a four-part series of Gifford Lectures presented at Glasgow University between 1889 and 1892.
 32. Stokes, *San. Cor.* §60; O'Grady, *SG* I, 310-11, II, 347-8. Cf. II.575 where she is *Áine fhionn.*; *RC* 13, 434-438. This *Áine*, of the region around Knockainy and Lough Gur was still known to the folk tradition in the late nineteenth century. See David Fitzgerald, 'Popular Tales of Ireland', *RC* 4, 189-190. For *Áine's* connection with water, *vid. sup.* Chapter 3, n.25. All of these examples and most of those which follow in this section, are expansions of notes from *EIHM* 286-307.
 33. O'Grady, *SG* I.175, II. 196-7; Gwynn, *Met. Dind.* 3, 114-115. Cf. *Áine* daughter of Manannán in *Mittelirische Verslehren* §36, ed. Thurneysen, *IT* 3, 83 and again in *Cath Finntrága* 74, ed. Kuno Meyer.
 34. O'Grady, *SG* I.161-163, II.179-180. She appears again in I.103, II.111, where she provides the king's sons with a generous/miraculous cook.
 35. *Ráith Áine* and a *Sliabh Aine* might be related to *Sliabh Cairthind oc Áni á[i]n* in the *Metrical Dindshenchas* 4, 164-5. O'Rahilly cites John O'Donovan's Ordnance Survey letters from RIA manuscripts 85, 228. In the folk tradition, Aine was associated with Knockmany, Co. Tyrone, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, 1898, 110. *EIHM*, 518.
 36. O'Rahilly cites these from Rawlinson B502, 117g1 and LL 311a34; and from Rawlinson B502, 159b48 and 160a10.
 37. See 'Cormac and the Badgers' from Trinity College manuscript H.3,18,42 cited by Stokes in his introduction to 'Cormac's Glossary', *Three Old Irish Glossaries*, xliii. Her father's name is given there as *Firai*, which O'Rahilly takes to be a variant of *Fer I.* *EIHM*, 289-90.
 38. Gwynn, *Met. Dind.* 3, 306-7. *EIHM* 289-90.
 39. *Rennes*, *RC* 16, 46. This *Grian* is daughter of *Midir* of *Brí Léith* and the association is with *Macha* daughter of *Sainrith mac Imbath*.
 40. 'St Patrick's Hymn', ed. Stokes & Strachan, *Thes. Pal.* II.355; 'The Evernew Tongue' ed. Stokes, *Eriu* 2, 134-135, §114; *EIHM* 287.
 41. O'Davoren's Glossary, *Three Irish Glossaries* ed. Stokes; Plummer, *BnNE* I, 164, xv, II, 158, xv.
 42. Gwynn, *Met. Dind.* 4, 150-151. Cf. Meyer, *Bruchstücke der Älteren Lyrik Irlands*, Berlin, 1919, §125 (*os Éirinn áin*); LU 9967 (*i nÉirind áin*); and Todd Lectures Series 3, 202a (*d'Erind áin.*)
 43. *Eochaid Mairccend*: *Met. Dind.* 4, 182, *EIHM* 291. For *Láir Derg* see 'The Laud genealogies and tribal histories' ed. Kuno Meyer, *ZCP* 8, 307 and 'Conall Corc and the kingdom of Cashel' ed. Vernam Hull, *ZCP* 18, 420-421. *Tochmarc Étaín* ed. Bergin & Best, *Eriu* 12, 148-9.
 44. Pierre Grimal, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, 190. *Rig Veda*, 1, 92; 15, 180; 1, 50; 8, 190. For further examples of the sun chariot

- see Eliade, *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, 133-137. For Josiah, see 2 Kings 23,11.
45. The 'horseman' is more fully described as the giver of light and warmth, speedy and unwearied, who circles the world from day to day. *EIHM* 291-294. The fiery saints will be discussed later in the present chapter.
 46. LL 123a19, *EIHM* 296-7. For Senchán, see Stokes, *Three Irish Glossaries*, 38; O'Donovan, 'Cormac's Glossary' 137-8.
 47. *Betha Choluim Chille*, ed. O'Kelleher & Schoepperle, 190-119, §186; Plummer, *VSH*, I, cxxxv n.5 & 6; Rennes, *RC*, 15, 315-6.
 48. *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland*, 2nd ed., 1716, 16,277,99,20. Also 17,116-9,140,241,248.
 49. *EIHM*, 294-6.
 50. Bruce Chatwin, 'On Yeti Tracks', *What Am I Doing Here?* London, 1989, 274.
 51. 'The conversion of Loegaire and his death' ed. Plummer in 'Irish Miscellanies', *RC* 6, 165-168; *Trip.* ed. Stokes, II, 566-567; See also the *Annals of Ulster* for 458 and 462, ed. Sean Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, part 1, Dublin, 1983.
 52. Rennes, *RC* 16, 32-33. The Greeks also invoke the sun (Helios) as a protector of oaths in the *Iliad* III, 276-8. Zeus, Helios and Ge are all invoked as witnesses as in *Iliad*, XIX, 259-60. *EIHM*, 298.
 53. R. Thurneysen, 'Morands Fürstenspiegel', *ZCP*, 11, 63, §11, cited by McCone, *PPCP* 129-130.
 54. Mac Neill, *DF*, I, 30/130.
 55. *Táin*, O'Rahilly, 234. Cf., the demand of Ferdia in the Book of Leinster version of the *Táin*, (lines 2667f.) that the sun and moon, sea and land should be pledged as sureties before his battle with Cú Chulainn. Cited by William Sayers in "'Main Mairdi An Nem..." Ringing Changes on a Cosmic Motif', *Eriu*, 37, 1986, 107, n.24. For further examples of oaths by the elements, see Plummer *VSH*, I, cxxxv n.6.
 56. Henry, *EECL*, 192. For Loegaire, vid.sup. n.51.
 57. O'Rahilly, *EIHM*, 300-304.
 58. O'Rahilly, *EIHM* 304, citing *Dioghluim Dána*, 10,12. Miranda Green also interprets various pieces of circular metalwork as sun symbols, see *The Sun Gods of Ancient Europe*, passim; especially the early bronze age 'sun disc' from Wexford, 41, fig.22.
 59. *Saltair na Rann*, 2385, 1077; O'Rahilly, *EIHM*, 304.
 60. O'Rahilly, *Ibid.*, 304-7.
 61. *Ibid.*, 51-2, 58-74, 331. For further discussion of 'the hero versus the sun god' see O'Rahilly, 'Buchet the Herdsman', *Eriu*, 16-17, 1952-55, 1-20.
 62. *Ibid.*, 297; emphasis added. Cf. Anne Ross's observation that 'certain Celtic deities especially those concerned with thermal waters and therapeutic affairs, were directly connected with the sun in its healing rôle. *PCB*, 324.
 63. *PPCP* 162-163
 64. *Ibid.*, 164-5 citing De Vries and Solinus. Brigit under her latin name, Briganti, may have been partially assimilated to Minerva during the Roman occupation of Britain
 65. See later in the present chapter.
 66. Sanas Cormaic, Stokes, *Three Irish Glossaries*, 1862, 8; 'Cormac's Glossary', trans. O'Donovan, 23.

67. *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, ed. D.A.Binchy, 1978.420.32, cited by McCone *PPCP*, 166
68. Marginalia from a volume of Cassiodorus, Flower, 1932.73
69. The translation is McCone's, *PPCP* 169;
70. Breatnach, *Eriu* 32,1981,45-94,\$11.
71. McCone, *PPCP*, 166, quoting Aeschylus's *Prometheus Desmotes*.
72. Michael Grant describes Apollo as 'the god of light (later identified with Helios the Sun) and so of inspiration, which does for the soul what light does for the world...the dazzlingly splendid young Lord of music and song ... he was the giver of prophecy as well...healer of bodies with medicine...purifier and patron of the juridical aspect of religion,' *MGR* 137,106.
73. 'For the origin of poetry and knowledge is in everyone physically, but in every second one it does not shine forth.' P.L.Henry, 'Cauldron', *Stud.Celt.*,14-15,1979-80,124-5; emphasis added.
74. McCone, *PPCP*, 162, citing Binchy, *CIH*, 377.26; 380,14-15; and F. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, 1988,356;
75. On the tendency towards interchangeability of Bríg and Brigit, see McCone, *PPCP*, 162.
76. Binchy, *CIH* 1654.12, cited by McCone *Ibid*.
77. *Bretha Nemed*, *Eriu*, 13, 26,9; P.L. Henry, *Studia Celtica*, 14-15.1979-80.115.
78. *Lismore*, line 1171-2
79. *Ibid.*, 1207; *Beth.Brig.*\$1,3; In *Lismore* 1187, a pillar of fire is seen above her mother's house before she is born. These are miracles are repeated in the lives of several other Irish saints. *vid.inf.*.
80. According to O'Rahilly, the original form of Boann may be Bouvinda - 'cow-white (goddess)', *EIHM*, 3. Interestingly, in the *Rig Veda* the chariot of Usas (Dawn) is drawn by tawny cows as well as by horses. She spreads out her rays 'like cattle, like a river in full flood...' At times, she almost becomes the cow, creating light for the universe by uncovering her breast, like an udder full of milk. She also inspires the poets and receives their praise. (*RV*, I,92,179-180. In Greek mythology, Helios has a herd of white cattle, which are tended by his daughters, the Heliades; Grimal, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, 190.
81. Stokes and Strachan, *Thes.Pal.*,2,336; *Beth.Brig.*, appendix \$6.
82. Stokes and Strachan, *Thes.Pal.*,2.325
83. St John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, II,x,2.
84. James Carney, *The Poems of Blathmac*, Irish Texts Society 47, Dublin, 1964,\$138, Cf.\$161; \$143,\$150.
85. McKenna, *Aith.Dán.*,. 72,\$5,11; 97,\$29. The same author also compares her to the moon: 'a bright moon is Mary's grace, pure stream, new moon' - 'the evening moon is her image.' But this is less common. *Ibid.* 93,\$2; 87,\$16.
86. *Ibid.* 82,\$12.
87. McKenna, *Philip Bocht O Huiginn*, 2,\$13,24; 11a \$4; Also 'bright heaven's sun' 2,\$1.
88. *Ibid.* 2,\$22-24,32. Cf. Fear Flatha Ó Gnímh: 'our blooming hazel tree...our flaming torch... pure-downed fairy swan', *Aith.Dán.*, 72.\$5-11; and Ó Ruanadha, 82: 'pool of the great salmon' \$10, 'an overflowing stream' \$15
89. There was a similar prayer and a little ceremony for covering (or 'smoothing') the fire at night. Carmichael *CG*, I, 232-3, 240-1.

90. *Ibid.*, 234-5. Carmichael does not give the gaelic for this phrase.
91. *Ibid.*, 236-237.
92. For other hearth prayers, see, *Ibid.* 232-241. Re. footprints see *Ibid.* 168. Cf. the tradition that St Brigit herself tended the fire at Kildare on certain nights: Gerald of Wales, *History and Topography of Ireland*, §68.
93. Lk.2,32.
94. Plummer, *VSH*, II,253,§1-2. Also §5.
95. *Ibid.*, 116-7, §ii. This motif of the dazzling face is found in many other lives of Irish saints and is no doubt partly influenced by the sun imagery in the story of Moses' dazzling face and the Transfiguration of Christ. Exodus 34,29-35; Mtt.,17.2; Cf., 2 Cor.3,18: 'we all with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.' However, Oghma is also *Grian-Ainech* - 'sun-face' - vid.inf. note 126.
96. *Ibid.* 124, §xxiii.
97. James Carney, *Medieval Irish Lyrics*, Dublin, 1967, 80-81.
98. Mac Neill, *FL*, 5, citing Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, 49-81. An earlier version of this tale exists as an interpolation in the *Lebor Gabála* (Vol.4, ITS 41, 134-137) and according to Dillon, the title *Oidhe Chlainne Tuirrean* appears in the Book of Leinster, though the tale is not told there. (*Early Irish Literature*, 153.) There is no sun-fire imagery of Lug in the *Lebor Gabála* interpolation. For further discussion of this tale see Thurneysen, 'Tuirill Bricrenn und seine Kinder' *ZCP* 12, 237-254. The eleventh-century text, *Baile na Scáil* describes a number of golden objects in and around Lug's house - a golden tree (*bile*), ridge-pole, vessel and cup - but otherwise nothing golden, fiery or sunny about his person. The golden crown in this tale is on the head of the sovereignty goddess: Dillon, 'The Phantom's Frenzy', *Cycles of the Kings*, 13, §6.
99. Grey, *CMT*, 110-111.
100. For further discussion see H. Wagner, 'Studies in the origins of early Celtic civilisation', *ZCP* 31, 1970, 22-24.
101. John O'Donovan, *Annals of the Four Masters*, Dublin,1851, I,18-21. Variant on the Tory Island traditions of Lug and Balor, given to O'Donovan by Shane O'Dugan in 1835; For Balor, vid.inf.
102. Eg. Ella Young's 'Celtic wonder-tale' in which Lug the 'sun warrior' appears frequently in a blaze of light. This is probably based on the late version of 'The Children of Tuirenn'. Together with T.W. Rolleston, Young has had a certain amount of influence on popular conceptions of Lug in the twentieth century. In reworking a story for a different age she is in good company, but it should be noted that there is a greater polarity of light and darkness in this tale than in any of the more traditional Lug texts. Ella Young *Celtic Wonder Tales*, Dublin, 1910, 68-73. T.W.Rolleston, *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race*, London, 1911, 109.
103. O'Rahilly noted this theory and dismissed it as groundless: *EIHM*, 264 and 482.
104. For D'Arbois, Lug is Hermes or Mercury. He is also 'chief of the gods of Light and Life': *Irish Mythological Cycle*, 113-4; Cf.8-9,77,122; For Lug as 'the Celtic Mercury' mentioned by Julius Caesar, see MacCána, *Celtic Mythology* 27-29.

105. Gray, 'Cath Maige Tuired, Myth and Structure' *Eigse*, 1982-83, 1-36, 230-262; Ó Cathasaigh, 'Curse and Satire,' *Eigse*, 1986, 10-15; In the first battle of Moytura, the opposing sides are also related: the Fir Bolg and the Tuatha Dé, speak the same language and have a common ancestor in Nemed: ed. J. Fraser, *Eriu* 8, 1916, 20-21, §24.
- 106 *CMT* 5
107. Elatha is in fact one of O'Rahilly's main examples: *EIHM*, 304.
108. The editor could conceivably have borrowed the sling motif from the story of David and Goliath. However, Lug is anything but a shepherd boy, and Goliath's fate (beheading) is different from that of Balor in *Cath Maige Tuired*, where his eye comes out at the back of his head. Giants are also common among Irish Otherworld characters; there would have been no need to use an 'imported' one like Goliath.
109. Murphy, *DF*, III, lxxi, quoting Tomás Ó Cillín in *Béaloides* IV, 88.
110. *On the Metrical Glossaries of the Medieval Irish*, 38, quoting Best and Bergin, *LU*, 3375; Meyer, *Anecdota* IV, 4, §33; Murphy, *DF*, III, lxviii. If this usage were ever at all widespread, then the fiery eye might be a commoner motif in Irish mythology than has generally been realised. However, the fact that it has to be 'explained' in a Glossary suggests otherwise.
111. O'Rahilly also identifies Goll the salmon with Aed Ruad, who supposedly drowned in the same falls, and Aed Ruad with Aed Álainn of Ess Ruad - a name of the Dagda. Aed is also another name for Finn's traditional enemy, Goll Mac Morna. The salmon is also associated with Elcmar and with Nuadu. *EIHM*, 318-321
112. Cf. Fer Calliu and Cicul the hag in 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel' Gantz, *EIMS*, 71, 76. Also, Lug encouraging his troops, *CMT*, §129. Cf. *Bruiden Da Chocae*, - 'Da Choca's Hostel' - ed. Stokes, *RC*, 21, 156-7; According to one tradition from the *Lebor Gabála*, the Fomorians are permanently in this monstrous shape: *LG* 2, ITS 35, ed. Macalister, 259. For further refs., see Gray *CMT*, 106-7, notes to §129, 133. It has also been suggested that having one eye is to be neither blind nor fully-sighted, and is 'an outward manifestation of the passage of the person concerned... from a more or less normal human condition, to a superhuman, otherworld condition': Liam Mac Mathuna, 'On the Expression and Concept of Blindness in Irish.' *Stud.Hib.*, 19, 61.
113. *CG*, III, 307. Carmichael reconstructed this prayer from two fragments, one from South Uist, the other from Mingulay. Since he was a contemporary of Müller and D'Arbois, it is reasonable to consider whether he might have been influenced by their solar mythology. We do not have copies of the original material, nor do we fully understand his editing procedures. There is no explicit mention of the sun in the first eight lines, but the last couplet alone would seem to establish a comparison between the sun and the face (if not the eye) of God.
114. *Ibid.* III, 57; Cf. II, 45; II, 69; IV, 169. For complete collection of Carmichael's eye charms see *Carmina Gadelica*, Edinburgh, 1992, 137-145, 384-392. For another possible sun-eye comparison, see 'Incantation for the Eye', 143-4.
115. Murphy, *DF*, III, lxxii-lxxxv; MacCána, 'Fianaigecht in the Pre-Norman Period'; B. Almqvist, *The Heroic Process*, Dun Laoghaire,

1987. Cf. Ó Cathasaigh, 'Exemplary Myth', *Folio Gadelica*, ed. DeBrun et al. 1983.13.
116. Murphy, *Ibid.*
117. Murphy, *Ibid.* liv-lxv; In a similar story, also set in Tara, Amairgen kills *in t-ellén trechend* - 'the three-headed bird'. O'Rahilly takes this *ellén* to be derived from Aillén; 'The Battle of Mag Mucrime', *RC* 13, 448,5; *EIHM* 300.
118. Murphy, *Ibid.*, lxiii-lxiv.
119. *Ibid.*, lxiv.
120. *Ibid.*, lxx-lxxii.
121. Cf., *WO* 286,n.58, where Nagy translates *éicside* directly as 'solar'.
122. *Sanas Cormaic*, §1059; 'Cormac's Glossary', trans. O'Donovan, 137. Nagy, *WO*, 32; P. Ford, 'The blind, the dumb and the ugly', *CMCS* 19, 1990, 34.
123. See n.117 above.
124. *Rennes*, ed. Stokes, *RC*, 15,297.
125. *vid.sup.* Chapter 3.
126. Macalister, *LG* 4, ITS 41, 188-9 where he is said to be the father of Delbaeth. Cf. *Táin*, ed. Windisch, line 4868.
127. Gantz, 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel' *EIMS*, 69-70,103.
128. Plummer, *VSH*, I, cxxvi, cxxxvii.n.8; One might also include Finán, Fintan, and Finnian among saints whose names have sun-fire connotations. As for Molua/Lugaid: sun-fire imagery is applied in such a general way to so many saints, that it can not be argued with certainty that he inherits these characteristics from Lug, far less from Lug alone.
129. *Ibid.*, cxxxviii, and n.12.
130. Eg. *Ibid.*, I, 48, §6 (Ailbe); II. 92, §18 (Finan); II, 133, §11 (Lasrén); II. 179, §29 (Mochoemog); II. 213, §35 & 53 (Lugaid).
131. *Ibid.*, I, 161, §xxiii.
132. Cf. Acts 2,2.
133. Paragraph references are to the recensions edited by Plummer, except for Aed and Daig where the *Codex Salamanticensis* (CS) provides more relevant material: W.W.Heist, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellens*, i, 1965.
134. Exodus,13.21; Psalms, 78,14; 105,39; Life of Carthach viii.
135. Daniel, 3,13-27; Especially in the Life of Cainnech §vi.
136. He places the flying chariot of Aed in the same category: Heist, *Ibid.* 170-179, §11,19,36,42.
137. 2 Kings, 2,11-17; 6,15-17; Ezek.1.
138. Mtt.17.9; Mk.9,9.
139. Acts, 9,1-8.
140. *Tochmarc Étain*, 'The Wooing of Étain', Gantz *EIMS*, 39.
141. Heist, *Ibid.* 392,16.
142. *Trip.*, I. 126-7. Plummer gives further examples: *VSH*, I, cxxxviii.n.7; This miracle also occurs in the traditions of the Desert Fathers: cf. Thomas Merton, *The Wisdom of the Desert*, London, 1961,50,LXXII.
143. Cf. The protective fires around Carthach (xxvi), Ciaran of Saigir (xxiv), and Samthann (i).
144. Some further examples are suggested by McCone, *PPCP*, 174-178.
145. Gantz, 'Da Derga's Hostel', *EIMS*, 77.
146. Stokes, 'The birth and life of St Moling', *RC*, 27,1906,§21, cf. §29.

147. Finan §1; Cf. Maedoc 'son of a star' §1. For Cú Chulainn, see *Táin*, ed. O'Rahilly, 137.
148. *Táin*, ed. O'Rahilly, *Ibid.*
149. Stokes, 'The Birth and life of St Moling', §6-9. According to Eliade, 'mastery over fire' (eg., walking on fire, touching red-hot iron) and the ability to generate heat, are among the distinguishing characteristics of shamanism. *Rites and Symbols*, 85; *Shamanism*, 5.
150. *Féilire*, 156; Plummer, *VSH*, lxxiii.n.7.
151. Plummer gives extensive references: see *VSH*, cxi-cxli.
152. For Patrick, *vid.inf.*
153. Similar contests occur in the lives of other saints. Plummer, *VSH*, clxvi,n.2.
154. *Rennes*, *RC*, 15,297; Cf. the fire at Cashel which marked the founding of the Eoganacht dynasty, *vid.sup.* chapter four.
155. Cf. Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal - 1 Kings, 18,20-41.
156. Gantz, *EIMS*, 103; Stokes, *RC*, 9,1888,14-25,§6-8.
157. *Lismore*, 149; Cf. Is.9,2; Mtt.4,15-16; Lk.1,79.
158. P.K. Ford, 'Aspects of the Patrician Legend', *Celtic Folklore and Christianity*, 36, citing Douglas Hyde, *Legends of Saints and Sinners* (Dublin) 1915 and 1973. 1-11.
159. O'Donoghue, *Aristocracy of Soul*, 16-18, citing Hansen.
160. *Confession*, §20.
161. O'Donoghue, *Ibid.* 16; Elijah is also associated with fire and the sun in the bible, through his fiery chariot and his contest with the priests of Baal. There may also be some half-remembered echo here of Jesus calling on Elias from the cross. According to the evangelist, Jesus was not calling on Elias but on Eli - on God. *Mk*,15,34-36.
162. Cf. 'Helyas' in the life of Buite §17
163. For a more detailed analysis of the 'Helios experience', see O'Donoghue, *Ibid.*
164. Plummer, *Irish Litanies*, Oxford, 1925,40-41.
165. Streit, 142-143.
166. 'Celtic cross' shapes, found in prehistoric rock art from Southern Scandinavia, are interpreted by Miranda Green as 'sun symbols': *The Sun Gods of Ancient Europe*, 43, fig.25. A Coptic source has been suggested by Ian Stead in the British Museums Guide Series, c. 1990.
- 167.. L.Bieler, *The Works of St Patrick*, London, 1953,70,104. Probably ninth century from an earlier original.

CHAPTER SEVEN

BAD WEATHER AND NATURAL DISASTERS

From the evidence of the foregoing chapters it would seem that the early peoples of Ireland believed that the Divine could be revealed in and through nature. So far we have concentrated on relatively pleasant, life-giving aspects of this experience, but there was also a recognition that nature can appear harsh, or even terrifying. It would have been possible to discuss as part of each of the previous chapters, this awful face of nature, and the images which arise from it - of frightening Otherworld beings, and the God who brings death, as well as life, to all creatures. The present chapter will attempt to address this question: what was the response in early Ireland, when nature ceased to function as a life-giving source and became instead a source of pain and destruction - through winter cold, disease, floods, famines, fires, and so on?

The mystery of death and suffering is perhaps one of the most unanswerable mysteries of all. Together with its less insistent partner, 'Why is there anything at all?', it occupies a central place in human thinking, and there are many different approaches to it in the religions and philosophies of the world. Ireland made its own contribution to this age-old debate, but did not produce a more definitive theodicy than any devised elsewhere. It will be our business here, to look at some of the ways in which the early Irish Christians, with their primal heritage and their enculturated theology, attempted to make sense of nature in its more violent moods. The subject is too large to deal with comprehensively here, and

examples could no doubt be multiplied by further research. I have decided to exclude destruction by deities and Otherworld beings who are not explicitly linked with some aspect of nature, eg. the 'war goddesses' - though this may be a rather artificial distinction. The 'explanations' can be grouped under five headings: 1) that bad weather and natural disasters are part of the on-going cycle of life, 2) that they are a punishment for sin or a response to kingly misrule, 3) that they are a means of purification, 4) that they are the work of demons or destructive Otherworld entities, 5) that they are the inexplicable 'dark side of God'.

WINTER

The inevitable onslaught of bad weather in winter, was probably accepted as an inevitable but temporary phase in the on-going cycle of the seasons. In Ireland, this cycle had been filled with religious significance since pre-Christian times: cf. the spring and autumn festivals of Brigit and Lug. The matching of the seasons to sacred story is found in many religious traditions, including Christianity, whose liturgical year often evolved in direct relation to older seasonal festivals. Early Irish Christianity was no exception: with Candlemas at Imbolc, St John's Day on the summer solstice, All Saints at Samain and so on. In order to understand the significance of winter within the sacred year, we must first broaden our outlook to take in the other seasons as well.

According to Frazer, 'the mind of the savage' often attributes the growth and decay of vegetation, and the birth and death of living creatures to the 'waxing and waning strength of divine beings, who were born and died, who married and begot children, on the pattern of human life.'¹ Frazer's condescension towards primal religionists is

all too obvious, but he also provides thousands of fascinating examples. Of particular relevance are his chapters on the spring festivals of various Middle-Eastern and Graeco-Roman deities, and the harvest festivals of the 'Corn Mother' in Northern Europe and beyond.² It would seem that harvest celebrations were often accompanied by customs relating to the old age of the deity, while spring festivals tended to be associated with his or her youth. Could there have been similar beliefs in pre-Christian Ireland? There is some evidence to support this suggestion.

The 'land goddesses' - Tailtiu, Macha and Carman were particularly remembered at the Lughnasad assemblies. Lughnasad seems to have had an alternative name: *Brón Trogain* - which is explained in *Tochmarc Emire* - 'The Wooing of Emer' - as the beginning of harvest, 'when the earth sorrows under its fruits.' As Máire Mac Neill points out, the metaphor is that of a woman in labour.³ Fairs held at this time were often believed to bring fruitfulness, peace and good weather.⁴ They were also sometimes linked with the death of their eponymous goddesses, often in childbirth or as the result of heavy agricultural work - another form of labour.

According to the *Dindshenchas*, Macha wife of Nemed died in the plain near Armagh, which her husband had cleared and named after her. Armagh's Lughnasad assembly was said to have been established to mark the death of Macha Mong-ruad, daughter of Aed. A third Macha, wife of Crunnchu, dies at the same assembly, giving birth to twins.⁵ The Lughnasad assembly at Teltown, was said to have been established by Lug in honour of his foster-mother Tailtiu, who died as a result of her labours after clearing a forest to make a plain.⁶ Another

Lughnasad assembly marked the death of the goddess Carmun 'a fierce marauding woman' who blighted the corn and/or the fruit trees; but whose fair, like Tailtiu's, was believed to bring peace and plenty.⁷ The goddess Mongfhin 'to whom women and the common people still offer their prayers,'⁸ was said to have died on the eve of the following festival - Samain.

On one level, the 'death' of the festival goddesses may represent their displacement by a later cult.⁹ But the motifs of fertility and abundance suggest another level, on which life-out-of-death is the unifying theme - the death of a 'land goddess' and the new life which she provides through her labour. Even the fair of Carmun the 'marauder', was celebrated as a time of peace and abundance. Could it be that Lughnasad and Samain were once the festivals of various goddesses who died each year in order to give life?

In the folk traditions of Ireland and Scotland, the last sheaf of the harvest was often known as the *cailleach*, hag, or granny. On the night of the harvest supper, it was often taken home and set in the rafters above the kitchen, parts of it being made into harvest knots. In some areas, the *cailleach* was sent 'mischievously' to a neighbour who had not yet finished reaping.¹⁰ Frazer found similar names and customs all over Northern Europe.¹¹

Was there a springtime equivalent? Examples from the early texts are hard to find. We know that the spring festival, Imbolc, was associated with St Brigit in medieval Ireland, and presumably originated with her goddess predecessor. However, there is very little early textual evidence for what actually happened on that day. By contrast, the folk traditions connected with it are well-documented

and worth repeating provided we bear in mind the historical distances involved.

Carmichael recounts a number of Hebridean traditions associated with 'Bride's day'. These suggest the survival in christianised form, of a celebration marking the birth and/or youth of the goddess Brigit. 'Bride's day' was accompanied by symbols of springtime fertility and the encouragement of courtship among the young people: on the Eve of St Brigit's Day, the young women of the townland would take a sheaf of corn from the previous harvest, shape it into a female figure, and decorate it with shells, primroses and new spring greenery.¹² They would then carry it in procession round the houses where similar decorations would be added. The mothers of the community gave bread, butter and cheese. The girls would then retire to a house with the 'Brigit' figure, block the windows and the door, and wait for the young men to arrive. These now brought their own offerings and there was a festival meal, with 'singing and dancing, fun and frolic' till dawn.

According to Carmichael the Irish version of this custom involved a churn staff rather than a wheat sheaf.¹³ This was decorated - with pins, needles, and bits of stone or straw. Most of these are common votive offerings in Ireland, but it is unclear whether Carmichael's subsequent description of Brigit's cradle and Brigit's wand belongs to Ireland or the Hebrides or both.¹⁴ He was familiar with Brigit's crosses and describes them as one of the decorations fastened to the *dealbh Bride* - the form or 'ikon' of Bride. We know from other sources that Irish traditions surrounding Imbolc also sometimes included a festival supper, processions (particularly of young girls) going from

house to house, and the making and carrying of a female figure known as the Biddy or 'Brídeog' - these being diminutives of affection derived from Brigit.¹⁵

It is worth asking whether Imbolc might once have marked the rebirth of a goddess who had died the previous year. Were the *cailleach* and the *Brídeog* ever one and the same? Carmichael's statement that the *dealbh Bride* was a sheaf from last year's harvest suggests that they could have been. In other parts of Europe, grain from the old sheaf was added to the seed corn at sowing time. In Islay it was fed to the horses at ploughing time, and in other parts of Scotland the harvest sheaf was occasionally referred to as the Maiden or Bride.¹⁶

Winter could then have been seen as the dead time, between the death and resurrection of the goddess or goddesses. January was *mios marbh* - the dead month - in Hebridean folk tradition.¹⁷ Some islanders also spoke of 'the three dead months' or the 'dead quarter'. We have already considered the imagery of death and renewal with reference to the burial mound at Newgrange. Of course this belongs to a much older stratum of religious experience than the myths and customs we have been discussing, but it shows a long-standing or recurring association between winter and death.

In medieval Ireland, we occasionally find a literary association between winter and human death.¹⁸ In a slightly later winter piece ascribed to Caeilte, the ageing *fíán* leader laments his failing strength and grieves for his contemporaries 'whose plight tonight is very cold,' ie. they are all dead.¹⁹ Another 'Song of Winter',²⁰ with

its famous exclamation 'Cold till Doom' also lets in an icy blast of mortality.

What about Irish seasonal poetry? Is it simply an attractive way of presenting a large number of maxims or general truths (gnomes) about the weather and the seasons? Kenneth Jackson addressed this question in his *Studies in Early Celtic Nature Poetry*, and came to no very definite conclusions.²¹ He notes a theory that later Continental poetry of this type could have been derived from seasonal ceremonies marking the beginning of spring or the end of summer, (eg. the ritual 'contests of summer and winter' in parts of Continental folk tradition) these being 'probably a folk-survival of some primitive nature worship'. Jackson was dubious about the application of this theory to Ireland, but he noted a reference in one version of *Serglige Con Culainn* - 'The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn' - to 'the laments of Samain throughout Ireland' - these being part of an annual Samain fair at Emain Macha. Jackson thought it quite likely that these laments were bewailing the passing of summer. In the light of the discussion above, we might also consider whether they might have developed out of laments for the death of a goddess. Jackson was unable to find any parallels in the later Irish folk tradition, ie. he found no songs or carols specific to Samain. He did however find folk songs for bringing in the summer on May day: cf. the Old Irish poem *Cétamon*, from the literary rather than the popular tradition, but none the less also specific to Mayday.

Aware of the risk of projecting continental folk customs onto medieval Ireland, Jackson looked for other possible sources for Irish seasonal poetry. He notes that 'nature gnomes' are very rare in early

Irish poetry, but asks whether a 'gnomic awareness' might not have expressed itself in pure description. He also considers a combination of native interest in the seasons, plus the influence of the latin calendar form.

Finally, he draws attention to his research on 'Tradition in Early Irish Prophecy', in which he discusses an Old Irish genre of prophecy in which nature prognostication is given in chant metre, as in the prophecy of Néde in the 'Colloquy of the Two Sages':

Good tidings
Sea fruitful
Strand wave-washed,
Woods smile
Witchcraft flees
Orchards prosper
Cornfields flourish
Bee-swarms abundant
The world cheerful
Joyous peace
Happy summer.

Compare this with the famous ninth-century winter poem:

I have tidings for you
The stag bells
Winter snows
Summer has gone.
Wind high and cold
The sun low
Short its course
The sea running high
Deep red the bracken
Its shape is lost
The wild goose has raised
its accustomed cry
Cold has seized the birds wings
Season of ice
This is my news.

Jackson suggests that *scél lem duib* - 'Tidings' - is a conventional opening-phrase at the beginning of a prophetic poem. An example from 'The Battle of Magh Léana' opens with: *Sgéal leam dhaoibh*. He also notes that *Cétamon*, and the prophecy of Néde have a phrase in common: *síd subach sam* - 'joyous peace (is) summer' - in Néde's prophecy, and *síd subach, sam sogar*, - 'joyous peace, happy summer' - in *Cétamon*. His suggestion is that even if the seasonal poems are not prophecies

and the other side of the road.

The road was very narrow and the traffic was very heavy. The cars were very old and the drivers were very impatient.

The road was very narrow and the traffic was very heavy.

The road was very narrow and the traffic was very heavy.

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themselves, some of them have been strongly influenced by this tradition of prophetic chanting.

On balance, Jackson was inclined to feel more comfortable with literary rather than religious explanations for these poems, but one senses that he found the literary explanations inadequate in themselves: 'the very definite genre of seasonal announcement seems to demand some more specific explanation'. Given the importance of the seasonal festivals and the various myths associated with them, I can only agree. The seasonal poems may be devoid of 'religious' language, but they often show a primal sense of kinship with nature, and an underlying awareness that human beings depend for their survival on a power or powers greater than themselves. The growth and decay of vegetation, the strength or weakness of the sun, the presence or absence of natural produce, the friendliness or hostility of the elements, were all minutely observed.

2) RETRIBUTION

So far, we have been examining the harshness of nature as it occurs predictably and regularly, as part of the rhythm of the seasons. We turn now to more unexpected events which could not be explained so easily. Natural disasters were sometimes linked, in Irish mythology, to the *gáú flatha* (the opposite or negation of the king's *fír* - described by Dumézil as the 'sin of the sovereign'.²³ One thinks of Cairbre Cenn-cait who led the *Aithech-Tuatha* in their short-lived revolt. Cairbre's reign is beset by famine and unseasonal weather - as if the elements themselves oppose this reversal of the 'natural' order.²⁴ Conaire's visionary premonitions on the night of his death,

include 'a fearful wind' and 'destruction of corn' - in contrast to the earlier abundance of his reign.²⁵ Bres's reign is also characterised by scarcity.²⁶

None of the above examples involve the 'sovereignty goddess'.²⁷ However, she is clearly present (in modified form) in *Aided Muirchertach Mac Erca* - 'The Death of Muirchertach Mac Erca',²⁸ - where she is identified almost completely with bad weather. When Muirchertach asks her name, she says 'Osnad, Easnadh, Sín, Gaeth Garb, Gamadaig, Ochsad, Iachtad, Taethean' - that is: 'Sigh, Sough, Storm, Rough Wind, Winter night, Cry, Wail, Groan,' (§4) - a name which Muirchertach must never pronounce. He takes her home and puts his wife and children out of the house. Hearing of this, St Cairnech goes to the house on the Hill of Cletty and curses it: 'May neither its corn nor its milk be good...' (§10) It would seem that both the Christian and the pre-Christian traditions saw this as a suitable punishment for (or the inevitable consequence of) kingly misrule.²⁹

Muirchertach is also destined to be punished by Sín - 'Storm' - (this seems to be her principle name) as an act of vengeance for the killing by Muirchertach of her family and 'all the Old-Tribes of Tara' (§49). She presides at his feasts, but serves him poisonous wine and druidical meat. These feasts deprive him of his strength, and when Sín (like Ériu in the *Lebor Gabála*) conjures up enemies from stones and sods, he is unable to defeat them. (§21-25). One winter's night, she summons snow and gales, causing him to pronounce several of her forbidden names (§31,34). He also has prophetic nightmares, including one of being burnt alive in a house full of demons. This nightmare proves disastrously accurate in that: a) it attempts to alert him to

the 'demonic' nature of his beloved, b) she eventually burns the house down around him, c) he dies and goes to hell. (§42,51)

The main purpose of this tale seems to be to secure certain rights for Muirchertach's descendants through his first wife (§12,14-15). But the author, who is plainly hostile to the sovereignty myth, takes the opportunity to parody or demonise the goddess at the same time. In a reversal of the usual sovereignty myth, Sín approaches the king with the sole purpose of destroying him, and pours poison for him instead of wine or ale. The author also chooses to present her as a mortal woman whom the deluded Muirchertach takes to be 'a goddess of great power.' A few lines later however, she is saying things which are clearly intended to be blasphemous: boasting of her power as a rival Creator and her ability to turn water (from the Boyne) into wine. (§16) It is probably no coincidence that the church which is built against the wishes of this 'Storm' woman is dedicated to *in Choimded moir na ndúl* - the great Lord of the Elements (§27). In this and several other ways, the author makes the point that for all her power, Sín is ultimately subordinate to the Christian God.

Not all of Sín's character is straightforward parody, however. Disaster following the breaking of *gessa* (§4,27,31,34) links her story with a large number of more traditional tales, in particular 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel' where there is also a woman with a string of sinister names, a burning house, and a king whose judgement has become unsound. Her name and her summoning of snow and storms, link her with the ability of the 'sovereignty goddess' to bring bad weather as well as good. The way she robs Muirchertach of his warrior strength also suggests some link with the 'war goddess' tradition. In

many ways therefore, the author has constructed this parody from perfectly traditional negative aspects of the goddess myth or myths.

There are curious parallels between Sín and the figure of Eve in an earlier poem. They are both 'the woman who brings bad weather'; both are regarded as sinful; and both are presented as enemies of God and man. Here is the last verse of 'Eve's Lament' in which she lists all the evils which have come into the world as a result of her sin: /

There would be no ice in any place,
There would be no glistening windy winter,
There would be no hell, there would be no sorrow,
There would be no fear, if it were not for me.³⁰

Mysogynistic portraits of Eve were also common in continental theology, but the idea of punishment by ice and by 'glistening windy winter' has a distinctively Irish ring to it. No doubt some continental theologians had included winter in their lists of pains attributable to Eve, but I am not aware that anyone had emphasised it quite so forcefully before. The idea that Mary inherited many of the beneficent features of the pre-Christian goddesses is generally accepted. Does Eve here inherit some of their more baneful features? Or is she simply being scape-goated in a distinctively Irish way?

Shifting the blame to Eve can also be seen as a shift away from *gáú flatha* towards a rather different view of moral responsibility. By the tenth century, living kings were perhaps less likely to be held personally responsible for natural disasters, though the mythological framework remained in place. Unless *gáú flatha* was always seen in purely rhetorical terms (in which case what credibility could it ever have had?) then the introduction of a sinful fore-mother must have come as something of a relief to kings, if not to their female

subjects, since women were often identified with Eve in medieval theology.

A slightly more even-handed example is found in the dialogue of Cumain Foda and Comgan:

What is it that brings the snow
Through the wind without being purified?
The King gives the snow
and scarcity of fruit.

The grudging which women practise
empties the pantries -
The grudging which men practise
leaves the ground without corn.³¹

The king in question here is the King of Heaven, who is said to be the sender of snow, wind and poor harvests. Why does he send them? It is hard to avoid the conclusion that they are sent in response to the meanness of ordinary men and women in their respective spheres. The King of Heaven seems to have taken the place of the 'sovereignty goddess' in her negative aspect, withdrawing his 'Otherworld support' from the world of human beings.

The harshness of nature and human sin are also linked in parts of the bible, where the farmer's constant battle against weeds was once ascribed to the sin of Adam: 'cursed is the ground because of you.' (Gen.3,17-19). Noah's flood was understood as Yahweh's response to violence and corruption (Gen.6,11-13) and prophets like the author of Jeremiah constantly warned that Yahweh would send 'sword, famine and pestilence' as a punishment for idolatry.³² The wrath of God in apocalyptic literature comes from the same tradition, and develops many of the same motifs. The drought and famine of Ahab's reign can be seen as a Hebrew parallel to the Irish principle of *gáu flatha*.

While stories like these may have reinforced native beliefs in Ireland, there is no reason to doubt the antiquity of an Irish tradition linking natural disasters with kingly misrule. The belief

that human (and particularly kingly) behaviour can affect the harshness or benevolence of nature is so widely attested throughout the world, that there is no need to assume biblical origins for it. The idea seems to have occurred to many cultures independently.³³

3) PURIFICATION

The themes of punishment and purification are closely related. Initially, Suibne is presented as a king suffering for his misdeeds:

I give thanks to the king above
With whom great harshness is not unusual
'Tis the extent of my injustice
that has changed my guise.³⁴

Here the individual bears responsibility for his own sins. Suibne does not die like the traditional unjust king. Instead he undergoes a sort of involuntary penance. His madness and dereliction are in effect a sort of purgation. One early Irish preacher said that the seasons are the 'likenesses' of heaven and hell in this world: summer was like heaven, but hell was like 'winter and snow, tempest and cold, age and decay, disease and death.'³⁵ Suibne's experience seems to be more than just a 'likeness' of hell. By the time he arrives at Teach Moling, his purgation is almost complete.³⁶ He has gone into exile, fasted, been exposed to the elements night after night, till at times his protests almost seem to echo parts of the Psalms and even the 'suffering servant' of Isaiah.³⁷ In the end he becomes 'Suibhne Geilt without reproach' (§83). One of the monks describes him as 'the king, the saint, the saintly madman.' (§80) The author betrays a certain ambivalence about this whole process. Suibne is on the whole a more interesting character than either Ronán or Moling, and although his story can be read predominantly as a 'moral tale', some aspects of it, eg., the dialogue with Moling towards the end, present his lack of

enthusiasm for the Psalter and the Mass, in a surprisingly sympathetic light.

A different sort of purification involving nature, is the 'cleansing' of the community through trial by fire or water of suspect individuals. We have already seen several examples of this: eg. Patrick's contest with Lucetmael, and the casting adrift of the men of Ross.³⁸ The idea that suspected criminals could be submitted to the elements for judgement is a curious one, and recalls their place in the guarantor list of the *Cáin Adamnán*.

4. THE DESTRUCTIVE OTHERWORLD

There are times when the harshness of nature can not be explained either as a punishment for sin, or as part of the natural cycle; when pain comes to the innocent, or death comes out of season. Sometimes nature behaves with what we can only judge to be frightful and unnecessary cruelty. In medieval Ireland, one response to this experience was to blame destructive entities from the Otherworld. Both native and Christian terms are used for these hostile beings.

a) Plague demons

Epidemics were sometimes said to have been caused by *deamna* - 'demons'. The *Chronicum Scotorum* records a 'great mortality' for the year 985. It took the form of a 'magical colic' brought by demons from the east. Many people claimed to have seen them.³⁹ A late eleventh century entry in the *Annals of Tigernach*, notes a 'great pestilence' caused by three battalions of demons 'from the northern isles of the world'. Each demon was observed to have a sword of fire coming out of his throat and to be as high as the clouds of heaven: 'Their heat and fury spreads venom wherever they go.'⁴⁰ This image, which suggests some kind of fever or throat infection, occurs again in one of the

miracles of Brigit, who heals a sick nun and opens her eyes to the presence of Satan in the room: the devil has a flame coming out of his throat and nose. Here the sickness is seen as a sort of trial by which the devil attempts to corrupt the good sister.⁴¹ A *píast* - beast - is also held responsible for plague in the 'Life of Mac Creiche',⁴². There may be some influence here from the beasts of *Revelation*, but if so the authors have borrowed little more than the term 'beast'. The beasts of *Revelation* are not responsible for plagues. On the contrary, the plagues of the apocalypse are unleashed by good angels and other loyal servants of the Lamb.⁴³

In *Aided Cheltchair Maic Uthechair* - 'The Death of Celtchar Mac Uthechair' - we find the *luch donn*, (literally 'brown mouse' but from subsequent descriptions, some sort of dog) which kills sheep, cattle and human beings, ravaging a different farm every night.⁴⁴ Elsewhere, a herd of uncountable pigs from the cave of Cruachu prevent the growth of corn, grass and leaf for seven years wherever they go.⁴⁵ From the same cave come sheep-killing werewolves - the three daughters of Airitech 'of the last of the Grievous Company from the Cave of Cruacha'.⁴⁶ These various hostile forces are eventually overcome, by Celtchar, Medb and Caeilte respectively.

b) Fomorians

Scarcity and illness were also sometimes ascribed to oppression by the Fomorians. In the *Lebor Gabála*, the Fomorians are regularly presented as monsters.⁴⁷ They appear throughout the narrative, but are never included among the 'takers' of Ireland. Their origins are explained in a number of different ways, and though they are often portrayed as foreigners, their early and persistent presence (from the time of

Partholon onwards) gives them a sort of primordial status. At one point they are said to be from 'Sliab Emor' an unidentified mountain which MacAlister thought might be modelled on Mount Hermon. In the Book of Enoch, this was the place where the fallen angels came to earth.⁴⁸ In one version of the 'first battle in Ireland' they are said to be one-eyed, one-armed demons in the form of men. Their leader is Cicul, a name which seems to refer to his strange way of walking. His mother is a monster from Mount Caucasus.⁴⁹

The Fomorians demand two-thirds of all wheat, milk and progeny from the children of Nemed. In this part of the story they are 'sea-rovers' with a 'great fleet' and it has been suggested that the experience of being pillaged by Vikings and other sea-borne raiders was a major factor in the development of the Fomorian myth.⁵⁰ In the later folk tradition, famine, illness, and death were often attributed to the *Síde* - the 'fairies.' These might 'take the goodness out of the milk' or abduct people to the Otherworld, leaving their bodies behind. It is possible that the Fomorian myth was used in a similar way, to 'explain' a period of unusually low yields and high mortality. The Fomorians go on to oppress the *tuatha Dé Danann*, and again scarcity is a central characteristic of their reign. There is no feasting, no drinking, champions grow weak from lack of food. They are finally defeated when Lug learns from Bres the secrets of sowing and reaping.⁵¹ At some level, the Fomorians represent a life-denying energy-sapping power, the antithesis of fertility and abundance. As such they are also agents of social disintegration.

c) Water monsters

The texts mention a large number of other monsters whose connection

with water is quite explicit. The Glossator of the *Amra Choluimb Chille* repeats the story of a mythical sea monster called Rochuad or Rosualt: 'when it spews with its face towards land, poverty and scarcity in that country during seven years, or in the year only.' If it spewed upwards, that was taken to mean 'poverty and storm in that air'; if downwards - 'poverty and mortality on the beasts of the sea.'⁵² The glossator might have heard of Rahab, the biblical sea monster. But Rahab is usually only mentioned in order to recall her death, (Jb.26.13; Ps.89.10; Is.51.9.) and there are no prognostications connected with her.

It is possible that the *Dindshenchas* of Lough Béal Dragan also shows the influence of a biblical name, but if so, none of the surrounding material has survived. The story of Bel and the dragon (from the deuterocanonical chapter 14 of Daniel) is an anti-idolatry text, which might well have been considered appropriate for the catechesis of early Irish kings. But in the *Dindshenchas*, the name (given here as Béal not Bel) has become attached to 'a dragon (*dragan*) of fire in a salmon's shape' which was said to have burst out of the earth and been driven into the lough by St Fursa. It was believed to be lurking there still.⁵³ Brendan also meets a monster (*beist*) in the sea and is surprised to discover that it gives more honour to Brigit than to himself.⁵⁴

A female *píast* - beast or monster - appears in a late *dindshenchas* of Lough Derg from the Finn Cycle. In the tale, she has killed two thousand *fiana* and still demands a tribute of fifty cows and fifty horses a day.⁵⁵ A slightly earlier poem tells how Finn and his companions cut their way out of an *ilphiast* - a great beast -

which had come up out of a loch and eaten them alive. This beast is male and is said to have come from Greece, like Cicul the Fomorian from the *Lebor Gabála*. The poet goes on to list some twenty-four other supernatural creatures killed by Finn. Fourteen of them come from loughs, five from rivers and fords, five from glens, and three from mountains.⁵⁶ These are exactly the same sort of numinous places as are associated elsewhere with theophanies, saints and devotional practices. The use of the definite article with most of the beasts in Finn's list (eg. The beast of Lough Neagh, the beast of the Shannon...) suggests that the association of hostile Otherworld phenomena with such numinous places was both well-known and widespread.⁵⁷ Goll also kills monsters: 'I left no hideous monster (*péist*) in lough or linn...no spectre (*arracht*)... no phantom (*fúath*) but was slain by me.'⁵⁸ In a folk tale from the Galway area, Patrick is swallowed by a water monster and kills it from the inside with his crozier.⁵⁹ Another list of supernatural assailants is found in the Hebridean *lorica: Beannaich, A Thriath...* - 'Bless, O Chief...'⁶⁰ Among them are the *glaistig* and the *ban-nigh*, both Otherworld women associated with water.

Demonisation?

The question arises: to what extent might these various beasts be demonised gods and goddesses of pre-Christian Ireland? Could such bogies as the water-monster and the salmon-shaped fiery dragon be propagandist distortions of pre-Christian deities? We have already noted this process at work with Sín, in 'The Death of Muirchertach Mac Erca'. That such distortions were carried out is beyond dispute.

There is widespread evidence of a debate over the spiritual status of pre-Christian Otherworld beings. The question is raised several times in the *Lebor Gabála*, and different points of view are recorded: to some they were demons, to others, descendents of Nemed or the poets of the Greeks.⁶¹ In at least two places it is stated boldly that the *aes dána* among them were gods.⁶² Another author preferred to see them as admirable men and women of the past. He alludes to the demons theory and flatly contradicts it. That is not true...' he says, pointing to their knowledge, poetry, craftsmanship and the soundness of their genealogy:

And though the Faith came, those arts were not put away, for they are good, and no demon ever did good. It is clear therefore from their dignities and their deaths that the *tuatha Dé Danann* were not of the demons, nor were they of the *Sídh* folk.⁶³

A later editor adds a footnote to the book, anathematising certain 'men of false learning' for saying that the *tuatha Dé Danann* are in the Land of Promise. On the contrary he says, they are in the lowest pit of hell.⁶⁴ This puts them firmly out of reach. The Land of Promise was after all, a place which certain people might visit and from which Otherworld visitors might occasionally come and go. It was also a 'bridge symbol' which could refer both to the Christian heaven or as the native Otherworld.

A note at the end of the *Echtra Cormaic* refers to the same debate, and suggests that whenever the kings of old received Otherworld visitors: 'it was a divine ministration that used to come in that wise and not a demoniacal ministration...'⁶⁵ In this way, the young man with the musical branch becomes a 'minister' from heaven, indistinguishable from an angel. Another scribe declared that their

origin was unknown but: 'it seems likely that they came from heaven...on account of their intelligence and for the excellence of their knowledge.'⁶⁶ Though opinions were sharply divided as to the status of the *Tuatha Dé Danann*, it is clear that not everyone condemned them as demons.

Murphy notes that the later Finn cycle tends to caricature certain aspects of the native tradition.⁶⁷ Some of the most impressive examples of spectres and water-monsters also occur in this same part of the Finn cycle. It would be a mistake however, to take the second observation as evidence for the first. There are a number of significant early examples as well. Rochuad the sea-monster has already been noted, as has the river Ness monster (*bestia*) described by Adamnán in the seventh century.⁶⁸ If there is a propagandist element at work in the water-monster tradition, it can not be viewed as a late development.

There is a more serious problem with the demonisation argument. It is easy to see why, in a propagandist context, water-monsters should be overcome by Christian saints, like Fursa, Patrick, and Colum Cille. But why should a propagandist writer adopt Goll and Finn to be victors over 'heathen gods' - in the case that this is what the monsters represent? In the classic text of the Finn cycle, the *Acallam*, the *fíana* are often friends and allies of Otherworld personages. There is no sense of implacable hostility.

Should we then reverse the proposition? Could it be that saints who confront the *píast* are in fact modelled on a myth of the hero versus the monster? We have found no reason to suppose that the hostile Otherworld is purely the work of Christian propagandists. The

early texts are full of frightening phenomena: burners and destroyers of one kind or another, who are subdued not by saints but by warriors, kings and queens. It is Medb who defeats the destructive pigs from the cave of Cruachu. Since Cruachu is her own home as well, we have in this story a clear image of destructive and beneficent Otherworld powers issuing from the same source.

The popularity of the *lorica* tradition also reveals a strong sense of the world as a dangerous place. The people who composed and recited these protection prayers, considered themselves to be surrounded by all kinds of visible and invisible forces, which might be either helpful or harmful. The *loricae* are usually couched in Christian terms, and often include petitions against various aspects of the old religion.⁶⁹

Consider however, the Old Irish protection prayer: *Ad-muiniur secht n-ingena trethan* - 'I call on the seven daughters of the sea' - which Greene and O'Connor class as a type of *lorica*.⁷⁰ There is a Christian coda to this peculiar piece, but the three main invocations are to obscure non-Christian figures: the 'seven daughters of the sea', the 'silver champion', 'Senach of the seven lives'. All three are seen as having the power of life and death over the person praying. Among the petitions are a plea to be protected from phantoms (*Ním*), from the 'two-headed serpent' (*nathair dechonn*), the 'hard grey worm' (*dorb dúrglass*) and the senseless beetle (*doel díchuinn*).⁷¹ The latin loan-word *píast* is not used in this text, which would tend to confirm that the potential hostility of the Otherworld was already established in native tradition before the adoption of Christianity.

There is a persistent ambiguity about some of the terms for Otherworld beings. Manannán is described as a *grúagach* in one fifteenth or sixteenth century Finn poem.⁷² This term can have a negative sense, denoting some kind of unfriendly 'goblin'. In the *lorica - Beannaich, A Thriath* - the *gruagach* is clearly felt to be malevolent. But Manannán is not malevolent in the Finn poem - though he is formidable and frightening. A dangerous *grúagach* appears in 'The Men from Sorcha' but he too is formidable rather than evil; he comes from the 'bright lands' and invites Oscar to do battle with him there.⁷³ The word *Grúagach* has an interesting range of meanings in Irish: on the one hand it can denote 'goblin', on the other: 'long-haired', with the possible extensions of 'enchanter' and 'wise'. In the 'Lay of Beann Ghualann' it is used in this latter positive sense. There the *grúagach* is an Otherworld ally who lulls enemies to sleep with his harp and is also a skilled herbalist.⁷⁴ In Scots Gaelic too, *gruagach* is not a negative term. It refers simply to a woman, and has connotations of youth and purity.

A similar ambiguity surrounds the terms *ban-sith* and *glaistig*. In the *lorica - Beannaich A Thriath*, the *ban-sith* is definitely to be feared, but in Irish mythology the 'fairy woman' could also exercise a healing influence.⁷⁵ In the same *lorica*, the petitioner asks to be protected from the *glaistig*, a term for which Dwelly's Dictionary gives an interestingly double-sided definition: 1) a she-devil or hag; 2) a beautiful fairy woman, usually dressed in green, and rarely seen except at the bank of a stream, engaged in washing. Like the *gruagach*, the *glaistig* could be represented in two completely opposite ways.

There can be no doubt that the supernatural beings of native tradition were sometimes deliberately distorted by Christian teachers. It makes sense to see Christianity as responsible for the widespread use of the loan-word *píast* (with its links to various demonic beasts in the bible) and for the association of 'spectres' with past deities - the primary meaning of *arracht* is in fact 'idol'. But demonisation can never be an adequate explanation for the persistent ambivalence towards the Otherworld found in so many Irish and Hebridean texts.

5. THE DARK SIDE OF DIVINITY

The friendly and unfriendly aspects of the Otherworld are sometimes united in a single figure. If Máire Bhreatnach is correct in identifying the hag of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* with the 'sovereignty goddess', then the goddess's unfriendly, destructive aspect can be seen as being linked in some way to the injustice of the king. However, this is not the usual reason for the 'sovereignty goddess' to appear as a hag. She sometimes appears in this form to young men who are candidates for kingship but are not yet kings: eg. Niall Nóigiállach, the sons of Eochaid, Lugaid Láigde. Their willingness or unwillingness to embrace her - even in her ugliness - is in some way a test of their suitability as candidates.⁷⁶ It would seem that the dark side of the 'sovereignty goddess' was taken to be one of her 'many forms' rather than simply a reaction to *gáú flatha*.⁷⁷

John Carey accepts the well-established two-sidedness of the 'sovereignty goddess' and extends it into other areas of goddess mythology. He draws attention to the close relationship between 'war goddesses' and 'land goddesses' showing that in some instances they are one and the same.⁷⁸ Anu or Anann appears twice in the *Lebor Gabála* as one of the daughters of Ernmas and a sister of Badb and Macha.⁷⁹

Badb and Macha often appear as a 'war-goddess' triad together with the Morrígan, but their sister Anu or Anann is the eponymous goddess of the Paps of Anann. *Sanas Cormaic* describes her as 'mother of the gods' and links her name with the word *ána* - abundance.

The Machas of Ard-Macha are also the 'land goddess / goddesses' of the area around Armagh,⁸⁰ while elsewhere, Macha belongs to the 'war-goddess' triad.⁸¹ Carey suggests that Macha wife of Nemed is also linked to the 'war goddess' tradition through her prophetic dream of the cattle-raid of Cooley.⁸² He also detects a 'war goddess' function in Macha daughter of Sainrith mac Imbaith in that she brings debility on fighting men through her famous curse. At the same time, she also has 'mother goddess' characteristics: Crunnchu's family thrive under her care and she gives birth to twins.⁸³ Carey sees a two-fold partition in the Macha *nexus*: 'sinister and aggressive on the one hand, on the other, beautiful and prosperous.'⁸⁴ He goes on to suggest that contrasting figures within a group (eg. contrasting sisters) may sometimes express the same sort of paradox.⁸⁵ He concludes:

Warfare and the land, horror and beauty, fertility and death are the antitheses which define the goddesses discussed above. Such a series of associations seems to reflect a conception of the world in its totality: the theatre of unending conflict, in which oppositions can be neither disentangled nor ignored.⁸⁶

This, rather than demonisation, may explain the two-sidedness of many Irish Otherworld beings. It may be why water, for example, could be associated both with goddesses and with monsters: the lady of Lough Erne, and the *píast* of Lough Derg. The positive and negative connotations of words like *glaistieg* and *grúagach* may well have been present from the start. There is no denying that the negative side was

sometimes deliberately played up. But beneath the ideology, is there not a primordial fear - the fear of nature with its unpredictable power and hidden energies?

In his study of Canaanite myths, John Gibson remarks on the terror felt by the ancient peoples in the face of the ambivalent forces of nature.⁸⁷ The Psalmists liked to invoke Yahweh's power and protection by praising his mastery over other powerful forces, for example their enemies, or other gods⁸⁸ But it was his power over the frightening forces of nature which inspired some of their most lasting and widely-accessible poetry.⁸⁹ Snow and ice, storm winds, earthquakes and the sea are all celebrated as obeying his voice or coming from his hand. Understandably, the Psalms also contain frequent references to 'the fear of the Lord'⁹⁰ which is perhaps in large part, the realistic acknowledgement that human beings depend ultimately on forces beyond their control. At the same time, it extends these deep feelings of ambivalence, beyond the realm of creatures, into the very heart of the Divine mystery.

NOTES TO CHAPTER SEVEN - BAD WEATHER

1. Frazer, *GB*, 324.
2. *Ibid.* 399-424
3. MacNeill, *FL*, 7, citing *Tochmarc Emire*, *RC*, 11, 442-3.
4. See fairs of Tailtiu: Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* 4, 152-3; and fair of Carmun, Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* 3, 18-19, and 24-25 which describes the ill-effects of neglecting it.
5. Stokes, *Rennes*, *RC*, 16,44-46; The goddess Tlachta from the Hill of Ward near Athboy, also dies in childbirth, but as far as I know, the tradition is not attached to any particular time of year: see *ibid.*, 61-62.
6. Gwynn, *Met.Dind.* 4, 148-151.
7. Carmun, *Met.Dind* 3, 4-5, 18-19 ('Corn, milk and peace..') and 22-23 ('May there be given them..')
8. O'Grady, *SG*, II,466,511.
9. Lug being perhaps the most likely candidate.
10. S. Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Folk Custom and Belief*, Dublin, 1967, 21.
11. In Germany, Austria, Poland, Russia, France, Sweden, Scotland, the Hebrides and Ireland. *GB*, 399-412.
12. Carmichael, *CG*, I,160.
13. Interestingly, an alternative name for the wheat-sheaf *cailleach* in Ireland was the 'churn'. Ó Súilleabháin, *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid*, 167-8.
15. K. Danaher, 'Irish Folk Tradition and the Celtic Calendar' *CC*, 217; Daithí O hOgain, *Myth, Legend and Romance*, London, 1990, 64; Sometimes the female figure was a churndash, (=churn staff?) carried by boys dressed up as girls and known as *Brídeoga*. Ó Súilleabháin *Irish Folk Custom and Belief*, 52.
16. *GB*, 400-1, 406-9.
17. As was December, see Carmichael, *CG*, I,172.
18. Is it a coincidence that the poem translated by Jackson as 'The Coming of Winter' (*CM*, 64 - 'My tidings for you') should occur as a gloss in the *Amra* on the death of Colum Cille? It is there partly to illustrate a linguistic point, but has the glossator been influenced by thoughts of mortality?
19. O'Grady, *SG*, I,172, II,192. Murphy translates the last verse as 'I am very cold.' *EIL* 154-5.
20. Meyer, *AIP*, 57-58; From *Uath Beinn Etair* - 'The Hiding of the Hill of Howth', *RC*, 11, 127.
21. The following paragraphs are based on Jackson, *ECNP*, 133, 154-175. Jackson cites the prophecy of Néde in 'The Colloquy of the Two Sages' (ed. Stokes, *RC* 24,32) His own article on early Irish prophecy was published in *Man*, 34, May 1934. For the prophetic poem in the 'Battle of Magh Léana' see O'Curry, Dublin, 1955, 122f. The translation of 'I have tidings for you / The Coming of Winter' is from Jackson's *CM*, 64.
22. See chapter one; also Maria Tymoczko " 'Cétamon': Vision in Early Irish Seasonal Poetry' *Eire-Ireland*, 18,4,1983,17-39 on the 'mantic' dimension of seasonal poetry.
23. Ó Cathasaigh, '*Cath Maige Tuired* as exemplary myth', 4.
24. Thurneysen, '*Morands Fürstenspiegel*', *ZCP*, 11,63,\$11. For further discussion of the relationship between *Fír* and oaths by the

- elements, see H. Wagner, 'Studies in the Origins of Early Celtic Civilisation' *ZCP* 31, 1970, 20-21.
25. 'The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel', Gantz, 91; Cf., 67 - 'There was great bounty...'
 26. Grey, *CMT*, §25,39.
 27. She does not always appear in connection with abundance either. Cf. F.Kelly, *Audacht Morainn*, 1976, §12-21; *Scél na Fír Flatha*, Stokes, *IT*,3, 183-229; J.C.Watson, *Mesca Ulaid*, 1967,1,130-5; McCone, *PPCP*, 129.
 28. Stokes, *RC*, 23, 395-431. Stokes dated the earliest manuscript version of this tale to the thirteenth century, but it refers back to much earlier traditions.
 29. Frazer refers to a canon in which the converse principle of abundance and the just king is endorsed by St Patrick. *GB*, 90; Source reference not found.
 30. Meyer, *AIP*, 34; Probably tenth or eleventh century, according to Meyer; See also *Eriu*, 3,148 from Stowe MS.B,IV,2,Fo.146b.
 31. O'Keefe, 'Mac Dá Cherda and Cummaine Foda' *Eriu*, 5,25; Cumain Foda is described as 'sage and archbishop of Munster'. Comgan belongs to the tradition of the 'holy fool'. Thanks to my fellow-student Tom Clancy for this reference.
 32. See for example, Jer.29,17-20; 14,1,17; 50,38. Also Deut.32,23-25; 1.Kings 8,35-37; Ezek.5,12-17.
 33. Frazer cites examples from Scythia, Egypt, Malaysia, the Pacific, China and Mexico as well as Ireland. *GB*, 87-90.
 34. O'Keefe, *BS*,39,§27. Also 'God has thrust me in rags' (41,§27); 'Christ has put him in bondage (53,§36); 'My transgression has come against me' (77,§40) and the vengeance of God for the dishonour done to his people. (123,§63)
 35. Strachan, 'An Old Irish Homily', *Eriu*, 3,9.
 36. Hell and purgatory are not clearly distinguished in Irish Christianity of this period. There are, for example, many stories of people being released from hell following the prayers of a saint.
 37. 'All men see that I am not shapely', §21 Cf.Is.53.2; 'Grey branches have wounded me, they have torn my hands'...'The pure wind has pierced my body, wounded are my feet.' §21,61 Cf.Ps.21.16; Also Ps.55.2-8; The parallels between Suibne and Nebuchadnezzar (Dan.4.28-33) are even clearer and probably deliberate.
 38. Muirchú's 'Life of Patrick' ed. Hood, §20. Cf. the casting adrift of Macuil, §23. For the men of Ross, see Stokes, 'The Voyage of Snedgus and MacRiagla', §8.
 39. Hennesy, *CS*, 231; Cf. *Ibid.* 99, where signs in the sky precede another 'mortality'. There is no mention of demons here, but the 'signs' suggest a supernatural dimension to the tragedy.
 40. Stokes, *Annals of Tigernach*, *RC*, 17,417.
 41. *Lismore*, 'Life of Brigit', 1402-24. The devil is referred to as Satan, *deman*, and *an torathar ngranna* - the hideous monster.
 42. 'Life of Mac Creiche', ed. Plummer, *Miscellanea Hagiographica Hibernica*, Brussels, 1925, 36,§49, cited in *DIL*.
 43. *Eg.*, Rev.6,8; 9,13-19; 11,6.
 44. Meyer, 'Death Tales of the Ulster Heroes' R.I.A. Todd Lectures Series, XIV, Dublin, 1906,28-29,§10. Ninth century; Jackson, *CM*,

- 56; Cf. the *luch-sith* ('fairy mouse') in the Hebridean *lorica* C.G.I.30-31
45. Stokes, 'The Battle of Mag Mucrime', *RC*, 13, 448-50. Jackson, *CM*, 159-60
 46. Stokes, *Ac.Sen.*, *IT* 4,i,214-6. Jackson *C.M.*162-4; Twelfth century.
 47. Also in *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel* Gantz, 86. Contrast this with the Fomorians of *Cath Maige Tuired*.
 48. MacAlister, *LG* II, *ITS* 35, 258-9, 260 n.9; Enoch 6,6.
 49. *Ibid.* 260.n.9; Also *LG* 3, *ITS* 39, 12-13, 72-73 §3-6; The monstrous hag from *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel* has a similar name - Cichuil. See Gantz 72.
 50. MacAlister, *LG* 3, *ITS* 39, 122-125, §242; and 138-139, §255.
 51. Gray, *CMT*, §36-40.
 52. Stokes, *RC*, 20,257,§60.
 53. And on St John's Day (ie. the summer solstice) at the end of the world it would 'arise to afflict Ireland'. Stokes, *Rennes*, *RC*, 15, 441-2.
 54. Stokes, *Lismore*, 'Life of Brigit', 1792.
 55. Murphy, *DF*, 2, LX, 235; Sixteenth-century. Murphy's dating of the Finn poems is used throughout this chapter.
 56. Mac Neill, *DF*, I, *ITS* 7, XXIV, 78-80/191-193; Fourteenth or fifteenth century.
 57. *píast*, *peisd*, or *péist*, the commonest term for these phenomena, is a loan word from the latin *bestia*: cf. *Lismore* 333. It is variously translated as 'monster' 'serpent' or 'reptile'. Other terms for supernatural creatures include *fúath*, (phantom, spectre) *arracht*, (idol, spectre, apparition) and *aithech*, (peasant, churl, giant, monster)
 58. MacNeill, *DF*, I, XXXV, 91/206. Thirteenth or fourteenth century.
 59. Murphy, *DF*, 3, 140, citing Hyde.
 60. *CG*, I,30-31.
 61. MacAlister, *LG* 3, *ITS* 39,155, §267-9. Cf. *LG* 4, *ITS* 41, 107,135,§318.
 62. MacAlister, *LG* 4, *ITS*, 41,111,135.
 63. MacAlister, *Ibid*, 165.§353. Their death is mentioned again at 203,§371.
 64. *Ibid.*,241.
 65. Stokes, *Echtra Cormaic*, §80.
 66. Rees, *CH*, 30 citing story Tuan Mac Cairell from *Lebor na hUidre*, and other sources.
 67. *DF*, 3, 56, 128.
 68. *Vita Sancti Columbi*, II, 27, 74b.
 69. Eg. The *lorica* attributed to Patrick, against 'the black laws of heathenry' and the 'spells of women and smiths and wizards.' Bieler, *The Works of St Patrick*, London, 1953,71; G.S. MacEoin suggests that the form of some *loricae* derive from the *Benedictus*; see 'The Invocation of nature in the *loricae*', *Stud.Hib.*, 1962, 212-7.
 70. David Greene and Frank O'Connor, *Golden Treasury of Irish Poetry*, 33-35; Thurneysen, *IT*, 3,53; Meyer, 'An Old Irish Prayer for Long Life', *Miscellany Presented to John Macdonald Mackay*, Liverpool, 1914.226-232. Meyer dated parts of this prayer to the eighth century and saw it as a remodelled version of a pre-christian prayer.

71. I have used Greene and O'Connor's text and translation. *Nim* (sic) according to the *DIL*, is related to *neim*, a) venom b) a malefic power (used of Balor's eye), a virus, poisonous snow. *Nathair dechonn*, is translated by Meyer as 'headless adder' and *doel díchuinn* as 'headless chafer'; *Dorb* is not an earth-worm, but often a water-borne worm or insect.
72. Murphy, *DF*, 2, LXI,241.
73. Mac Neill, *DF*, I, XXIII,170; Later than the *Acallam*, but before 1300.
74. Murphy, *DF*, 2,LXIII.381. Fifteenth or sixteenth century.
75. Eg. *Bebhionn* in the *Acallam*, O'Grady, *SG*, I,222, II,252. Cf., the *Mnatha-sithe* in Carmichael, *CG*, I,8-9. By contrast, the Banshee of the folk tradition is above all (perhaps exclusively) the 'death messenger', see Patricia Lysaght, *The Banshee*, Dublin, 1986, *passim*.
76. Stokes, *Echtra mac nEchach Muigmedóin*, *RC*, 24,1903,200-201,§15. Stokes, *Cóir Anmann*, *IT*, 3, 1891, 318-21. One might also wish to include the five brothers in the story of Macha Mong-ruad. Stokes, *Rennes*, *RC*, 16,281.
77. Cf. 'Noble Sín of the many forms' in *Aided Muirchertaig meic Erca*, ed. Stokes, 420-421, §34. In *Echtra Mac Echdach Muigmedóin* (metrical version, ed. M. Joynt. *Eriu*, 4, 1910, 91-111.) Niall asks the 'sovereignty goddess' by the stream, 'What form hast thou assumed?' And in the prose version (ed. Stokes, *RC* 24, 200-201, §15) he comments on her transformation from hag to beauty with the words, '*Is ilreachtach sin, a bean, - that is many-shaped, O Lady*'.
78. John Carey, 'Notes on the Irish War-Goddess', *Eigse*, 19, 1982-3, 263-275.
79. *LG*, 4, ITS 41, 122-3, 160-1; cf.182-3
80. Stokes, *Rennes*, *RC*, 16, 44-45; 279-83.
81. Carey gives a useful list of references in 'Notes on the Irish war-goddess', 269, n.33-34.
82. Carey, *Ibid.* 268.
83. *Ibid.* 266.
84. *Ibid.* 268.
85. *Ibid.* 272-4.
86. *Ibid.* 275.
87. Gibson, 'The theology of the Ugaritic Baal cycle', *Orientalia* 53, fasc.2, 1984, 218-9.
88. For example, Ps.2,1-6; 3 *passim*; 7,1-6; 82,1-4; 95,4; 135,5. This sort of invocation is so frequent, that it is impossible to provide an exhaustive list here.
89. Again, there are innumerable examples. For a representative sample, see: Ps. 19,1-6; 95,3-5; 96,4-6,11-12; 97,1-6; 98,7-8; 135,5-7; 136,5-9.
90. A full list of references to this 'fear' (which can sometimes be accompanied by a paradoxical sense of comfort and protection) would include: Ps.19,9; 22,23; 31,19; 33,8; 61,5; 85,9; 86,11; 96,4. Cf. Prov.1,7: 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.'

CONCLUSION

Research into a wide range of early Irish literature has yielded a large number of texts in which nature and the Sacred are clearly linked in some way. By comparing and contrasting these various nature texts with each other and with attitudes to nature in the Bible and elsewhere, it is possible to arrive at a basic understanding of the religious significance of nature in early Irish Christianity and, to some extent, in pre-Christian Irish religion.

The Land

The sacredness of the land in Irish primal religion is suggested in the first place by three of the ancient names of Ireland - Eriu, Banba and Fórla - these being the names of three divine sisters. There was also an association between goddesses and plains: the flat land round Armagh was said to be named after the first Macha (wife of Nemed) and the goddess Tailtiu (herself a clearer of plains) is described as being descended from a female figure called Mag Mór - 'great plain'. Further, the central myth of Irish kingship describes the king's relationship to his territory in terms of a sacred marriage with the 'sovereignty goddess.'

How literally are we to take this identification of the land with the goddess or goddesses? Phrases like 'the Paps of Anu' and the 'cheek of ancient Carman' suggest that the identification may once have been very close indeed. However, these 'land goddesses' were also said to have walked the earth - some were even said to have come from abroad. It would seem therefore that their relationship with the land

went beyond the physical-material level. The same could be said of the 'Sovereignty goddess.'

In ancient biblical tradition, there is also a sense of the sacredness of the land. Several place-names in *Genesis* contain the divine name, El: Beth'el, Peni'el, Israel - and the writer offers an 'explanation', as in the Irish *dindshenchas*. To the Hebrews, the land seems to have been sacred largely because it was believed to be the handiwork of God, the Creator's gift to Abraham. It was central to their sense of relationship with God. If land and people prospered, this could be taken as a measure of divine favour. The converse also applied.

The two traditions differ in two important ways: a) in Ireland, the deity could be closely identified with the land, whereas in Israel the two are clearly distinguished; b) in Ireland, female imagery of the deity predominates, whereas in Israel the imagery is mainly masculine. However, the traditions also had at least two ideas in common. In Ireland, the link between the *fír flatha* of the king and the fruitfulness of the land was a standard feature of the sovereignty myth. In the bible the 'righteousness and justice' of the king is also linked with fruitfulness of the land. The link between kingship and fertility is so widespread in other cultures and so untypical of medieval theology on the continent, that there is no need to assume that the biblical idea gave rise to the Irish one. At the same time, it is unlikely that the native concept of *fír* remained totally unaffected by biblical models. Some degree of synthesis probably took place here, as in relation to the second common feature: the paradise myths of the 'Land of Promise' and the 'Promised Land'. Whatever the

original name or names for the Irish paradise, native and biblical elements are freely interwoven in some descriptions of it.

Mountains and hills

Within the overall category of the land, mountains and hills provided a particular focus for religious thought and activity. Many had mythical associations with gods, or (again) more commonly goddesses: Áine is the eponym of Knockainy, Macha of Armagh, Mis of Slieve Mis. In the Celtic period, the burial mound at Newgrange was associated with Boand and the Morrígan, as well as with Oengus, Elcmar and the Dagda. A neighbouring mound, Knowth, was said to be the home and burial place of Buí, a consort of Lug. The hill of Tara had associations with its eponym Tea and with Medb, while the hill of Ward was dedicated to Tlachta, and Teltown to Tailtiu. Other important hills of pre-Christian times were the hill of Uisnech, home of the Dagda, and Rathcroghan with its eponymous goddess Cruachu, and its more famous mythical inhabitants, Medb, Aillil and others.

Sometimes the hill was said to be named after a deity who had died and/or been buried there. In other myths, the hill is frequented or inhabited by the goddess or the god. Some tales include both, as in the traditions about Buí and Macha. The Finn Cycle is particularly rich in descriptions of the Otherworld court under the hill or *síd* mound. Such tales usually refer to the mythical past, but 'sightings' of 'fairy women' like the one on Knockainy last century, suggest that the tradition lingered on into modern times.

Some holy mountains were natural geographical features which had been ritual sites in pre-historic times, but the *dindshenchas* also mentions hills which were in fact the grassy mounds over neolithic

passage graves. Some hill sanctuaries combine the natural with the artificial - being burial-mounds constructed on high ground. The Celts attached their own myths to many of these sacred sites and may have preserved some of their pre-Celtic associations as well. Fairs were often held in the vicinity of burial mounds. Other hills were famous as inauguration places. Many fulfilled several functions: Rathcroghan for example, seems to have been a multi-purpose religious centre. It could boast mythical associations with several deities, an entrance to the Otherworld, an extensive burial site, a fair, a royal residence and an inauguration place.¹

Many biblical writers also thought of mountains as places where the divine presence might be felt, heard, or even seen. Some holy mountains were natural features: Sinai, Horeb, Hermon, Carmel, Zion. Others (the subject of polemic by later prophets) were artificially constructed 'high places' which often included a standing stone and a sacred tree. Some might include memorials to the dead. The holy mountain tradition reaches back into early Semitic religion, and forward into the New Testament and the imagery of the early church.

Some of Ireland's most important holy mountains fell into disuse with the coming of Christianity. A number continued to serve as inauguration places, while some of the hills where fairs traditionally took place, acquired a Christian liturgy and/or a patron saint. Other high places took on Christian associations which were at least as strong, if not stronger than whatever went before: the story of St Patrick on the Rick has all but obscured the pre-Christian origins of the famous July pilgrimage.

Wells, Rivers and Loughs

Archeologists sometimes find what appear to be votive offerings in the beds of Irish rivers and wet places. Many Irish rivers bear the names of Otherworld women: the Boyne (Boann) and the Shannon (Sinann) are particularly rich in goddess lore. Some loughs have associations with Otherworld women, and a number of wells still bear goddess names though most are now dedicated to saints. Their rôle as pre-Christian holy places is often indicated by the dates of their pattern days. Sacred waters appear in the texts as sources of power for both warriors and kings: they refuse to fill the cup of the unjust ruler (Conaire, the Fomorians) and they answer Cú Chulainn's prayer for help. The water's edge was also said to be a place of inspiration for poets, while their knowledge was believed to come from the Otherworld well of wisdom in *síd Nechtain* or under the sea. That water could also awaken a sense of dread is evidenced by examples of dangerous wells and water monsters and by the saying (from the folk tradition) that 'the lough will claim a victim every year'.

Holy wells were a feature of early Semitic religion and some were claimed by the Hebrews as places where El/Yahweh was said to have appeared eg. Beer-la'hai-roi and Beersheba. In Jerusalem, the spring of Gihon and the pools of Bethesda and Siloam had strong religious associations. Water imagery is used frequently throughout the Bible, as a sign of God's life-giving action/presence in the world and even as a metaphor for Yahweh himself. In the New Testament, this imagery is applied freely to Jesus. The waters of baptism, like the Red Sea and the Flood in earlier tradition, are signs of judgement and death, purification and renewal.

The Irish 'water goddesses' were not forgotten with the coming of Christianity but their myths were extensively reworked: in the *dindshenchas*, Boand and Sinann are represented as sinful Eve-like women who drown as a result of their folly. The sanctity of the Boyne was preserved in another part of the same tradition, by claiming it as the source of the Jordan and the rivers of Eden. The author envisages one great river encircling the earth, and uses this image to attempt a synthesis of native and biblical wisdom traditions. Patrick's use of a sacred well disclosed to him by Caeilte, shows an awareness of both continuity and change in the status of such ritual sites. The water's edge was represented as a place of inspiration for Colum Cille, and devotions at the water's edge continue today in the pilgrimages to Lough Derg and Lady's Island. In the folk tradition too, we find clear evidence of continuity and synthesis: Tobar an Ailt almost becomes the pool of Siloam; elsewhere, the fish in a well is marked with the sign of the cross.

Trees

The *biledha* or sacred trees of Ireland have mostly disappeared, but a large number of place-names testify to their presence in former times. Trees were a feature of inauguration places and the forts of kings. Others grew in ecclesiastical sites, by wells or at crossroads. Classical sources mention trees in connection with the religion of the Celts and trees occur frequently in Irish myth, often in association with divine or semi-divine figures, druids, poets and kings. Otherworld figures associated with trees include Medb, Finn, and the so-called 'man in the tree', Derg Corra.

The image of the Otherworld Tree occurs in a large number of *echtraí* and *immrama*, often mixed with Christian motifs. Various kings, heroes, and saints were said to have seen this tree on its paradise island or plain. It was believed that branches and leaves from it could be brought back, and that five of its berries sprouted into 'the five *biledha* of Ireland' - one of which had a litany composed in its honour. In this way the Otherworld tree became mystically present in this world, bringing with it *in potentia* some of the fruitfulness and harmony of paradise. The white branch which was handed to the king by the chief poet at some inauguration ceremonies may have represented a branch from this Otherworld tree, as may the 'branch of peace' wielded by the king or his druid in some tales. Hazel trees were important in the initiation myth of *filidecht*. The relationship between these hazels and the tree of kings is uncertain, but there was clearly some link between sacred trees, sacred kingship and sacred knowledge.

Tree sanctuaries are not mentioned in the New Testament and in the Hebrew bible, there is a tradition of polemic against them. This has tended to obscure the fact that at one time the Hebrews laid claim to a number of important tree sanctuaries where Yahweh was said to have appeared and/or spoken to one of the ancestors. It was under such trees that the early Israelites assembled to offer sacrifices, teach, judge, prophesy, crown their kings and/or bury their dead. Tree imagery is found throughout the bible despite the polemic: in theophany stories, in Solomon's temple, and as a metaphor for the tribe, its king and its Messiah. The Christian iconography of trees comes partly from the bible and partly from other sources.

It is likely that the early Irish Christians were familiar with the tradition of sacred trees in the bible: a reference to the *terebinthus regis* at Glendalough borrows some of the language. There is no evidence of Christian polemic against inauguration trees - they were felled by poets and enemies as well as by saints - and were no doubt defended by powerful political interests. Various myths of the hazels of Segais survived, though there is no clear account of the ritual connected with them. Nor do we know when the litany of *Eó Mugna* was last used. Some trees, particularly those in churchyards and by holy wells, became associated with a Christian saint. In the folk tradition, prayer rags are often attached to such trees, there is a taboo against cutting them, and their bark is said to have protective powers. A synthesis of primal and Christian tradition is also found in the medieval literary tradition: in some Irish apocryphal writings, and in monastic nature poetry which makes frequent use of the 'tree with birds' motif from the native Otherworld paradise.

The Sun

The sun has been significant in Irish religion for at least five thousand years. It was also important in ancient Israel where it would seem to have been a sacramental symbol through which the Israelites hoped to experience Yahweh's life-giving power and presence. Later it became an image for Yahweh the righteous judge and for the messiah. Sun/light imagery is used frequently of Jesus in the New Testament.

The rôle of sun symbolism in Solomon's temple calls into question the accuracy of the terms 'sun worship' and 'sun god' in relation to other cultures which also orientated their sacred sites towards the

rising sun - as did the builders of Newgrange. Sun and fire continued to be sacred symbols in Celtic Ireland, but the claim that they worshipped the sun in itself, as a compartmentalised deity, may owe more to polemic and pre-conception, than to fact. That fire played a part in pre-christian liturgy is suggested by reports of a sacred fire at Uisnech and by the folk tradition of lighting bonfires on the old Celtic quarter days and at midsummer, with various attendant customs. It is common for Irish deities/Otherworld personages to have sun-fire associations, either in their names or in their characteristics.

Sun-fire names appear frequently in the hagiographies, together with a striking number of sun-fire miracles. Some of these include clear references to the Transfiguration story, Elijah's chariot and so on. Others are unfamiliar from a biblical point of view but bear a close resemblance to native myths and hero-tales. There can be little doubt that in Ireland, fire and the sun had sacred associations for Christians and primalists alike. The contest of Patrick and Lucetmael is in many ways a contest over sacred fire. Some Christian texts continue to speak of the sun as if it represented a subordinate spiritual power, but most apply the traditional sun-fire imagery to Jesus, Mary and the saints. Fire symbolism in the liturgy continues to this day, but the perpetual fires which burned at Kildare, Cashel and number of other Irish monasteries probably owed more to pre-christian tradition than to monastic practice elsewhere.

The harsh side of nature was understood in various ways: as part of the on-going cycle of death and renewal, as a punishment, as a means of purification, as the work of demons and monsters. There was also a sense of what has been called the 'darkness' or the 'left hand'

of God. All the aspects of nature which we have been examining were seen as being potentially hostile as well as beneficent. Since nature was taken to reveal the Divine, the conclusion that the giver of life is also the bringer of death, must have seemed inescapable. The resulting ambivalence is seen clearly in some of the native traditions, and also, though perhaps less clearly, in the Christian texts. This may be because it was mitigated to some extent by the doctrines of the resurrection and the incarnation, though many Christians today still respond to natural disasters with feelings of fear and outrage.

The primal religions of Ireland and early Israel had many features in common. Both saw the land, water, trees, sun, fire and other aspects of nature as potentially revealing the presence and activity of the Divine. The term 'sacramental universe' is appropriate to both, and neither distinguished sharply between the spiritual and the physical. How did they come by this integrated world-view? There are of course theories of symbolism and sacramentology which one might call upon in an attempt to explain the experience ² but such abstract conceptions belong to a different time and place. To say that they used their primal imagination is also to import ideas from another world, but at least they are ideas which have been formed in dialogue with surviving primal religions. Exactly what primal imagination is (as distinct from what it believes) and how it operates is another matter.

It is none the less an important question. Did the people who approached the Divine in and through nature, address an external reality, or a projection, or a delusion or what? We asked similar

questions in relation to the girls who claimed to have seen the fairy woman on Knockainy, but the answers are far from clear. What is clear however, is that in Ireland as in Israel, the life-giving energy of nature was seen as having a supernatural source or sources, upon which human beings were ultimately dependent. This was a cause of wonder and also of fear. Both cultures sometimes expressed a deep ambivalence towards the Divine.

Yahweh and the deities of pre-christian Ireland represent very different conceptions of God and the cosmos. However, the primal imagination which we have seen at work in parts of the Hebrew Bible, together with the wealth of nature imagery found throughout the Bible as a whole, may have helped the early Irish Christians to retain some of their own traditional attitudes towards nature, as they made the transition from a primal to a more universal faith.

NOTES TO CONCLUSION

1. Michael Herity, 'A Survey of the Royal Site of Cruachain in Connacht' *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 113, 1983, 121-130; John Waddell, 'The Royal Site in Connacht' *Journal of Irish Archeology* I, 1983, 21-46.
2. Cf. Marie-Dominique Chenu's description of the school of 'Dionysian' symbolism current in late-twelfth century Europe. This school, which Chenu contrasts with the more dominant and allegorical 'latin' school, was largely inspired by the ninth-century Irish-born philosopher, John Scotus Eriugena. *La théologie au douzième siècle*, Paris, 1966, 174-178.

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT

- AB - *Antiphony of Bangor*, ed. F.E. Warren.
- Ac.Sen. - *Acallam na Senórach*, ed. S. O'Grady in *Silva Gadelica*
- Amra - *Amra Choluimb Chille* ed. W. Stokes.
- AI - *Ancient Israel*, R. De Vaux.
- AIP - *Selections from Ancient Irish Poetry*, ed. K. Meyer.
- AIT - *Ancient Irish Tales*, ed. T.P. Cross & C.H. Slover.
- Aith.Dán. - *Aithdiogluim Dána*, ed. L. McKenna
- AT - *The Annals of Tigernach* ed. W.F. Skene.
- AU - *The Annals of Ulster* ed. W.M. Hennessy.
- BCC - *Betha Choluim Chille* ed. A. O'Kelleher & G. Schoepperle.
- Beth.Brig. - *Bethu Brigte* ed. D. Ó hAodha.
- BNnE - *Beathada Náem nÉrenn / Lives of Irish Saints*, ed. C. Plummer
- BS - *Buile Suibne*, ed. J.G. O'Keefe.
- CC - *Celtic Consciousness*, ed. R. O'Driscoll.
- CD - *Céli Dé*, P. O'Dwyer.
- CG - *Carmina Gadelica* ed. A. Carmichael.
- CH - *Celtic Heritage*, A. & B. Rees.
- CIH - *Corpus Iuris Hibernici*, ed. D.A. Binchy.
- CM - *A Celtic Miscellany*, ed. K.H. Jackson.
- CMCS - *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*.
- CMT - *Cath Maige Tuired*, ed. E. Gray.
- Conf. - *Confession of St Patrick*.
- CS - *Chronicum Scotorum*, ed. W.M. Hennessy.
- DF - *Duanaire Finn* ed. E. MacNeill, G. Murphy.
- DIL - *Royal Irish Academy Dictionary of the Irish Language*.

- EC - *Etudes Celtiques*.
- ECNP - *Studies in Early Celtic Nature Poetry*, K.H. Jackson.
- EECL - *The Early English and Celtic Lyric*, P.L. Henry.
- EH - *Ecclesiastical History*, Bede.
- EIL - *Early Irish Lyrics*, ed. G. Murphy
- EIHM - *Early Irish History and Mythology*, T.F. O'Rahilly.
- EIMS - *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, ed. J. Gantz
- EIP - *Early Irish Poetry*, ed. J. Carney
- Féilire - *Féilire Oengusso céli Dé*, ed. W. Stokes.
- FL - *The Festival of Lughnasad*, M. MacNeill.
- FM - *Annals of the Four Masters* ed. J. O'Donovan.
- GHC - *Gods and Heroes of the Celts*, M.-L. Sjoestedt.
- GB - *The Golden Bough*, abridged edition, J.G. Frazer.
- HS - *The Hebrew Scriptures*, S. Sandmel.
- IBA - *Irish Biblical Apocrypha*, ed. M. Herbert & M. Macnamara.
- IMC - *Irish Mythological Cycle*, H. D'Arbois de Joubainville.
- IT - *Irische Texte*, ed. E. Windisch & W. Stokes.
- I.Trad. - *The Irish Tradition*, R. Flower.
- ITS - Irish Texts Society.
- JB - Jerusalem Bible.
- JIA - Journal of Irish Archeology
- JRSAI - *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*
- IG - *Lebor Gabála Éirenn*, ed. R.A.S. Macalister.
- Lismore - *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore*,
ed. W. Stokes
- LL - Book of Leinster
- LRCC - *Liturgy and Ritual of the Celtic Church*,
ed. F.E. Warren.

- LU - Lebor na hUidre
- Met.Dind. - *Metrical Dindshenchas*, ed. E.J. Gwynn.
- MV - *Mittelirische Verslehren*, ed. R. Windisch & W. Stokes
in IT.
- ODCC - *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, ed. F.L.
Cross & E.A. Livingstone.
- PCB - *Pagan Celtic Britain*, A. Ross.
- PPCP - *Pagan Past, Christian Present*, K. McCone.
- RC - *Revue Celtique*
- Rennes - *Rennes Dindshenchas*, ed. W. Stokes
- RIA - Royal Irish Academy.
- RV - *Rig Veda*.
- Saltair - *Saltair na Rann, The Irish Adam and Eve Story in*,
ed. D. Greene, F. Kelly, B. Murdoch.
- San.Cor. - *Sanas Cormaic*
- SG - *Silva Gadelica*, ed. S. O'Grady
- SSS - *Sages Saints and Storytellers*, ed. D. Ó Corráin,
L. Breatnach & K. McCone.
- Stud. - *Studies*
- Stud.Celt. - *Studia Celtica*
- Stud.Hib. - *Studia Hibernica*
- Táin - *Táin Bó Cúailgne*.
- TBDD - *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*.
- Thes. - *Thesaurus Palaeohibernicus*, ed. W. Stokes & J.
Strachan.
- TLS - Todd Lectures Series.
- Trip. - *The Tripartite Life of Patrick* ed. W. Stokes.
- VSH - *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. C. Plummer.
- WO - *The Wisdom of the Outlaw* J. Falaky Nagy.
- YBL - Yellow Book of Lecan

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