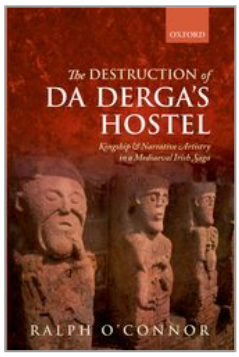

The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Mediaeval Irish Saga
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Afterword: Reading the Togail

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Abstract and Keywords

The Conclusion returns to the two key questions underpinning the whole book: in what sense is this saga a work of literature, and how may we establish its meaning? The author explores the range of meanings the *Togail* had for mediaeval and modern readers by considering its reception history, from mediaeval authors to Lady Gregory and James Joyce. These appropriations suggest that a saga's meaning is not limited to the author's intention, but they also suggest variation on certain limited themes rather than an infinite plurality of meanings in the postmodernist manner. From this perspective the author reassesses the extent to which the *Togail* is an ambivalent or multivalent work of literature, and asserts that taking its aesthetics seriously or even labelling it a ‘masterpiece’ does not mean importing an anachronistic concept of ‘art for art's sake’. Rather, it helps to underscore the complexity and sophistication of mediaeval Irish textual culture.

Afterword: Reading the Togail

Keywords: reading, meaning, ambivalence, reception history, influence, literary criticism, postmodernism, Ulysses, Tolkien

I began this book by observing that the *Togail* was constructed in a specific way with specific designs on its tenth- or eleventh-century audience, and that those designs can to some extent be recovered by sympathetic critical analysis within the saga's cultural context. Ten chapters later it emerges that a radical ambivalence lies at the heart of the saga's intended meaning. We may now be closer to an understanding of how the *Togail* 'works' at a technical level, the kinds of concerns it addresses, and how it approaches these concerns; but its meaning remains elusive and unstable, and this too seems to have been part of the author's purpose.

This purposeful ambivalence may have contributed to the saga's enduring popularity in the Gaelic Middle Ages and later, by keeping the saga open to a wide range of different interpretations. Composed during a period when scholars were anxiously scouring monasteries depleted during the Viking Age and seeking to restore lost knowledge in an upsurge of compositional and compilatory activity, the *Togail* rapidly became one of the best-known of all the early sagas. As Máire Herbert has pointed out, its physical and cultural status was so secure that by the twelfth century this status could be made fun of.[1] In the outrageous dream-vision which lies at the heart of *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, its hungry protagonist travels to a foody Otherworld in which he is greeted by a cleric clad in delicacies,

> cona triubhus do bīud scabail fo cossaibh, cona assaibh īerslesai hi raibe Tāin Bó Cūailgne ocus Bruiden Dā Derg isin asa robōi fo cois deis, Tochmarc Etaine ocus Tochmarc Emere isin asa robōi fo a cois clī […][2]
>
> with his trousers of potted meat about his legs, with his boots made of a hind-quarter in which were *Tain Bo Cúailgne* and *Bruiden Dá Derga* in the right boot and *Tochmarc Étaíne* and *Tochmarc Emire* in the left.

This vignette plays delicious havoc with the concept of hidden Otherworldly knowledge projected by the *Togail*. The subtle

metatextuality with which that concept was invested in the *Togail*, hinting that the saga itself represents a story known all along to the people of the *síd*, here congeals into the disconcertingly material form of a saga-manuscript stuffed into a meaty Otherworldly boot.

(p.330) The popularity of the *Togail* is more prosaically attested by the relatively large number of its texts that survive on parchment, as well as reworkings, allusions, and borrowings in other texts. Clearly, audiences and authors from the twelfth century onwards continued to find meanings old and new in this text. Since the present study has focused so insistently on the tenth- or eleventh-century archetype, a brief overview of some of these later responses is in order.

The varying visual layouts seen in the surviving texts of the *Togail* show how different readers perceived the saga in different ways, even at the basic level of structure—although there are also interesting continuities, as we have seen in the case of the description-sequence.[3] Some of the Middle Irish expansions of the *Togail* suggest a desire to adjust its structural balance for new purposes: the final sections of the D and U texts, composed in an age when the new genre of the *cath* (‘battle’) was enjoying an upsurge in popularity, show a desire to give the final battle a greater degree of dramatic prominence (although in the case of U the author or scribe soon changed his mind about this). The arrangement of texts in *Lebor na hUidre*, with the *Togail* accompanied by an earlier version of the same story (Recension Ib) and placed alongside a range of other vernacular sagas within a rubric designed for clear visual scanning, shows this saga being put to new and systematic scholarly purposes which have been the focus of much recent discussion. Conversely, the much-expanded Recension III represents a bold exploitation of the cyclic potential inherent within the *Togail* and its sources, incorporating Recension Ib within the new text of the *Togail* and joining it to a version of *Tochmarc Étaíne* to produce a connected Étaín–Eochaid–Conaire ‘cycle’[4]—an arrangement which has serious implications for the meaning of the *Togail*, especially the role of the Otherworld in the king's downfall. The alterations and adjustments made by the scribes of other

manuscripts containing the *Togail*, and their choice of textual accompaniment for this saga, all alter the saga's meaning to a greater or lesser extent and reveal its ongoing, shifting significance within Irish textual culture.

A second body of evidence for active, creative engagement with the *Togail* in mediaeval Ireland is provided by later sagas (about other personages) which drew on it. A particularly striking example is *Bruiden Da Choca*, which its editor Gregory Toner has dated to the twelfth century and which tells of the death of Cormac Cond Loinges at Da Choca's Hostel. Several aspects of this story were modelled on the *Togail*, from its structural use of *gessi*, portents, and the ‘watchman device’ to its representation of the king-hero's dilemma between his duty to protect his people and his loyalty to his foster-kin. So great is this saga's debt to the *Togail* that Toner has suggested that the author's familiarity with the older saga was what led him to compose *Bruiden Da Choca* in the first place.[5] To modern tastes, the result may seem less successful than the *Togail* as dramatic narrative, and it was left to the Early Modern Irish reviser of *Bruiden Da Choca* to produce a more tightly-knit and coherent version of the story in the B-recension. Yet in assessing the Middle Irish (p.331) A-recension we must not let our aesthetic sensibilities lure us into thinking of *Bruiden Da Choca* as a mere derivative of the *Togail*, or its author as passively ‘influenced’ by the older saga. As Toner has shown, he actively engaged with the structures and meanings of the *Togail*, using them (in some cases) to opposite purposes. He borrowed the idea of a spying-episode followed by a battle, but his desire to make the battle the true climax led him to foreshorten the spying-scene and spin out the battle-narrative in a way which turns the strategy of the *Togail* on its head. Likewise, in *Bruiden Da Choca* Cormac deals with his conflicts of loyalty to his people and his foster-kin in the opposite way to Conaire: to protect his province, he takes violent action against the marauding kin of his foster-parents. This action, prompted by evildoers in Cormac's retinue, sets in motion the chain of events leading to his death, suggesting that the author of *Bruiden Da Choca* took the opposite view to the author of the *Togail* as to the

relative importance of fosterage relationships and other responsibilities.[6]

Various other saga-authors reworked narrative elements drawn from the *Togail* in still more creative ways. In these cases it is rarely possible to demonstrate direct influence with confidence, but I strongly suspect that the *Togail* itself played an important part in the proliferation of sagas from the late Middle Irish period which narrate the (often threefold) death of a king in a hostel or royal hall after he has committed a fatal error. Such texts form part of a subgenre which uses this narrative template to explore the tensions within the institution of kingship and the difficulty of bringing it off in practice. Apparent solutions to the problems depicted, such as proper cooperation between the king and the church, turn out to be easier said than done, and (as Jan Erik Rekdal has recently emphasized) the erring king is typically depicted with considerable pathos. A cluster of Middle Irish texts about the death of Diarmait mac Cerbaill and the cursing of Tara exemplifies this trend, including *Aided Diarmata meic Cerbaill* whose use of Samuel–Saul typology along with a portent-laden journey towards an expiatory and riddling death suggests at least the possibility of influence from the *Togail*.[7]

That possibility is clearer in the late Middle Irish kingship-saga *Aided Muirchertaig Meic Erca*, in which similar concerns about kingship are powerfully explored by recombining narrative elements from *Aided Diarmata* and the *Togail*. Its plot narrates the downfall and threefold death of a king who is led astray by a sorceress and dies after (p.332) infringing a taboo laid on him by her.[8] In a brilliant reconfiguration of motifs from the *Togail*, this sorceress initially appears to Muirchertach as a simulacrum of a sovereignty goddess, with the features and clothing of Étaín as she appears to Eochaid in the *Togail*; but her name is Sín (‘Storm’), one of the names of Étaín's sinister *alter ego* Cailb in the *Togail*, and her purpose is to work the king's ruin. He believes her to be a goddess, and she keeps him caught in a fatal web of illusion by giving him magical bracken wine to drink: under her spell Muirchertach abandons the business of responsible government, his own wife, and most importantly the Church. His actions are clearly

represented to us as wrong, and his confessor St Cairnech repeatedly brings the true faith (and its practical role in maintaining effective government) into the picture; but Muirchertach himself is trapped in the ‘darkling maze’ of supernatural enchantment, pathetically swerving in his madness between Sín's influence and that of Cairnech, and with no means of telling who represents the true path.

Aided Muirchertaig and *Aided Diarmata* emphasize the Christian ‘solution’ far more explicitly than in the *Togail*, yet their narratives, too, are constructed to heighten the pathos of the kings’ fall and present them as (at least in part) victims as well as wrongdoers. In both cases, but especially in *Aided Muirchertaig*, the figure of the king without clear access to divine guidance (implicit in the *Togail*) is made an explicit and determining feature of the story in a new, Christian setting. Once again, this is not passive ‘influence’ but an active, creative engagement with the source-text.

Like other Middle Irish sagas, the *Togail* remained an important source-text for chronicles, synthetic histories, place-name lore, and other historical writings up to and beyond the early seventeenth-century *Annals of the Kingdom of Ireland* by the ‘Four Masters’. These histories each had their own specific purposes and structures, into which information from the *Togail* (and perhaps other versions of the same story) was slotted where appropriate. By placing the saga's events in wider historical frameworks, these texts draw out and underline a sense implicit in the *Togail* that Conaire's death at Da Derga's Hall was a pivotal moment in the history of the kingship of Tara, and of Ireland more generally.[9] Like text U itself, some of the *dindṡenchas* texts which treat the events at Da Derga's Hostel draw out the saga's scattered hints that the *togail* was memorialized in the Irish landscape.[10] Taken together, these appropriations draw the story of the *Togail* into a larger web of (p.333) textualized memory, a project which Erich Poppe has identified at the heart of mediaeval Irish narrative (including the original sagas themselves): ‘a massive project of learned, collective *memoria* intended to preserve their country's past as narrated history, within the textual genre of *historia*—which must be kept strictly separate from

modern notions of historical veracity and documentation, but must also be distinguished from a detached antiquarian interest in a remote past'.[11]

However, in the age of Renaissance humanism and Enlightenment historiography typified by Geoffrey Keating and his successors, the form of the prose saga was no longer felt by leading Irish scholars to be the most appropriate vehicle for narrating *historia* or *senchas*. The advent of new formal requirements for historiography seems reflected in the very popularity of Keating's appropriation of the mediaeval sagas (and other sources) in his 1634 masterpiece *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* ('The Foundation of Knowledge about Ireland'), popularly known as *A History of Ireland*: in this smooth-flowing panoramic survey, Keating reduced his sources' content to elegantly condensed outlines and thus omitted many of their stylistic and formal features as individual narratives.[12] By the nineteenth century, sagas remained important as sources for historiography, but their status *as* historiography was becoming problematic. Their function as entertaining narrative, always an important part of their role in Irish culture, arguably began to overshadow their function as literally truthful commemorations of past events, paving the way for the much later and more extreme critical assumption that historiography was not really literature at all.[13]

Yet this was not a straightforward replacement of history with fiction. When the *Togail* was 'rediscovered' as an independent literary entity by Irish, French, and German scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was typically treated like other sagas as an 'epic' or a 'romance' of dubious historical reliability but of potentially immense value as a window onto a lost past, whether linguistic, cultural, social, or mythological. This revival of saga-literature fed into and drew strength from the Irish cultural revival movements of the period, which all aimed (in their very different ways) to recover Ireland's glorious and ancient past. In this context, sagas like the *Togail* retained their commemorative function at one remove, as records of ancient customs and repositories of genuinely archaic myths and legends mediated, and partly ruined, by 'monkish' redactors. In line with developing images

of the ‘visionary Celt’, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century appreciations of the *Togail* (and many since then) typically emphasized its fateful atmosphere and its exotic primitivism, localizing the source of that atmosphere not in the extant saga, but in the myth or story of which the extant saga was a poor reflection.[14]

(p.334) This attitude lies behind much of the early scholarship and criticism on the *Togail* discussed in previous chapters. It also prompted a number of highly creative rewritings for the general public. Turn-of-the-century adaptations of Irish sagas, especially those emanating from the Anglo-Irish revival, tend to attract disapproval from modern scholars as well as mediaevalists for their politicized distortions of the original sagas;[15] but from the perspective of reception history it becomes possible to appreciate these transformations in their own terms (rather like their mediaeval forebears) as carefully crafted, fit-for-purpose literary texts.[16] Samuel Ferguson, for example, used blank verse in his *Conary* (1880) to accentuate the epic flavour of the story, and made other adjustments which aligned it with classical models of heroic behaviour familiar to his target audience. *Conary* also fills the gap left by the saga's absence of providentialism, inserting a prophecy of the coming of Christ and suggesting parallels between monarchy, monotheism, and the rule of law. This move has been deplored as a ‘sentimental diffusing of the pagan currents of the source’ in the name of an ‘unconvincingly ideal version of the imperial order’;[17] but in using the story to reflect on contemporary questions of strong, just rule in a Victorian imperial context, Ferguson was simply putting the story to new uses which, in fact, parallel those made by the Christian author of the ‘source’, the *Togail* itself.

Twenty years later, when the Irish revival movements had become more focused on issues of racial identity and national destiny, a still wider readership was reached by the prose translation-adaptation of the *Togail* incorporated into Lady Gregory's collection of heroic sagas, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902). The radical alterations made by Gregory to the sagas in this volume were praised by W. B. Yeats for successfully restoring the lost perfection to these long-tarnished tales: for

Yeats, Gregory ‘tells them [the stories] perfectly for the first time’. He predicted that her book would reawaken modern Irish readers to the sense that their own country was ‘a Holy Land’ in which ancient mysteries still lived.[18]
Gregory's prose style drew on the Anglo-Irish dialect spoken on her lands of Kiltartan: much of her rendering of the *Togail* has an informal, conversational style reminiscent of modern folktales, embodying her and Yeats's belief that the old sagas were the inherited lifeblood of the common people of Ireland.[19]

Even for writers who scorned the Anglo-Irish and Gaelic Revivals’ ideologies of the ‘visionary Celt’, the mythological dimension of Irish sagas continued to exert a (p.335) powerful fascination. James Joyce's eclectic interest in mythologies of all kinds, including that of Ireland, is well documented in relation to his epic novel *Ulysses* (1922); but he also appears to have drawn specifically on the *Togail*, weaving what he saw as its underlying mythological schema (the king's fated journey to the house of the dead) into the middle-class suburban setting of his short story ‘The Dead’, composed in 1907.[20] In Joyce's appropriation, the *Togail* is not a story about kingship, but a story about mortality and its constant presence in the ordinary world around us. This meaning may seem distant from those which Ferguson, Gregory, and Yeats had found in the saga, but it represents a natural extension of the interest in underlying myths about ‘the beyond’ which permeates responses to the *Togail* from this period, and which has continued to play a vital role in more recent retellings of and popular responses to the saga.

This brief and partial survey gives a flavour of some of the varied meanings which have developed out of and through the *Togail* as it has been transmitted in texts of the saga, adaptations, translations, and allusions through the centuries; and similar stories could be told of the saga's reception beyond Ireland as well. The uses to which the saga has been put often have little to do with the aims and objectives of the tenth- or eleventh-century author—the point here being that authorial intention does not dictate the meanings which subsequent users draw from a given text.

This observation should, however, be balanced by a corresponding awareness that most or all of these varied appropriations of the *Togail* have not transformed it arbitrarily and comprehensively, but instead have drawn out and emphasized particular aspects of the saga itself. In this sense every appropriation or adaptation is not just a new text in its own right, but also a commentary on its source-text which may even help us to illuminate some aspect of that source-text. For example, as Maria Tymoczko has shown, Joyce's interest in Irish sagas may have been partly inspired by convergences between certain of their narrative procedures and those of the incipient Modernist movement.[21] From this perspective, it is easy to see why the *Togail* appealed to Joyce over and above its mythological content. In this saga's architecture, formulae are recycled, clichés are paraded, numerical logic is flouted, characters change shape or become interchangeable, static descriptions take on a dreamlike life of their own outside the flux of time, abstract patterns become vividly apparent in the narrative, and the chronological progression of events is repeatedly violated.

The parallel with *Ulysses* is irresistible. These same techniques are held up for critical adulation in *Ulysses* but deplored (even by Joyce scholars) as evidence of incompetence in the *Togail*.[22] Direct influence or not, Joyce's creative reuse of similar techniques can usefully alert us to the presence of unhelpful critical assumptions in our own approach to mediaeval Irish literature. Joyce experimented in this way as a deliberate challenge to the conventions of the realist novel, but the (p.336) *Togail* was composed centuries before those conventions took root, and they should not be held against it. Both works, in their very different ways, step beyond the outward forms of sequential narrative; they freely plunder the storehouses of tale and metaphor afforded them by the intellectual traditions to which their authors had access, in order to reveal and suggest the secret causes and wider meanings buried within one particular story. In both saga and novel, a single man becomes the archetype of a whole class of men, and the landscape of one small part of Ireland at one historical moment becomes the stage on which a timeless drama of cosmic dimensions plays itself out.

There are dangers in drawing such parallels, of course. To do so risks replacing one set of anachronistic literary-critical norms with another, exchanging those of the realist novel for those of literary Modernism. The differences need emphasizing as much as the similarities. Unlike *Ulysses*, the *Togail* was produced in an age in which prose composition was not attributed to single creative minds. The archetype of Recension II may be a collaborative effort: much of its contents may not have been authored by the person I have been calling the ‘saga-author’ (who was responsible for the large-scale structure imposed on the saga's component parts), and it is rarely clear where a given word or phrase derives from this saga-author's contribution or from one of his putative sources.

If the identity and even singularity of the author is so unclear, one may well ask: why then try to impose literary coherence on the text at all? Why not accept that it, like all other narrative, is inherently multivocal and open-ended, and focus on the meanings which subsequent users have drawn from and imposed on the story? Abigail Burnyeat, for instance, has recommended greater attention to reception history and the analysis of scribal techniques as a means of ‘bypassing the fixation with “lack of unity” which characterised early twentieth-century approaches to medieval Irish literature’.[23] In a different but complementary manner, several literary critics have urged a more whole-hearted embracing of the semiotic ‘openness’ of these texts, celebrating their instabilities rather than trying to foreclose their meanings by insisting on outdated concepts of textual integrity.[24]

This point is well made, and reception history in particular is crying out for greater attention in this field. However, there is also a potential risk involved, were we to focus too single-mindedly on ‘lack of unity’ in these texts in particular. Unlike the canonical texts on which most reception histories and deconstructionist analysis proceed, the Irish sagas are extremely little-known and understudied, and even within Celtic studies they are suspected of a more prosaic and less scintillating form of incoherence. To approach these texts *solely* from the point of view of celebrating semiotic indeterminacy or the illusory nature of textual integrity[25]

would risk depriving these understudied and much-misunderstood narratives of any literary-critical legitimacy whatever, by unwittingly feeding the much more (p.337) old-fashioned view that their aesthetic strategies are by definition irrelevant or non-existent.

In this book, I have sought to show that these sagas are worth considering as ‘literature’, and to show that their narratives have been constructed with great technical skill and with specific designs on their audiences. This is not to repeat the intentional fallacy that the meaning thus discovered is the only ‘true’ meaning of the text. The search for a text's ‘true’ meaning is often confused (by its critics as well as its proponents) with the search for a text's intended meaning, as if authorial intention were necessarily the key to a transcendent and monolithic truth;[26] but the search for authorial intention can and should comprise the more modest goal of arriving at a provisional understanding of what the author of a specific text was up to (consciously or unconsciously), without using the resulting interpretation to deny legitimacy to subsequent interpretations and reinterpretations of the text.

Unlike some critics, I do not believe that such a goal is fundamentally misguided or that one should focus *solely* on what a text's subsequent users have made of it. These are two very different, but complementary, forms of analysis. The attempt to uncover the intentions of an author in his or her own cultural context brings with it a depth of engagement with a single text and its milieu which can usefully enrich the diachronic project of elucidating that text's reinterpretation across time in a wider range of contexts (and vice versa). This is true even for a text whose basic coordinates are unknown, such as the identity of its author or intended audience and the circumstances of its composition. The saga itself survives: its transmission history obscures some of the archetype's details, but its broad outlines are clear enough for us to be able to explore its structure and its overarching meanings. Any interpretations resulting from such an exploration, including those I have advanced in the preceding chapters, must be

provisional rather than dogmatic; but the enterprise itself remains potentially fruitful.

The literary study of mediaeval Irish sagas has become somewhat polarized in recent years between adherents of modern literary-theoretical approaches and adherents of more traditional approaches. But this polarization is unnecessary. When encountering these texts we do not, in reality, face a stark choice between closed texts with single meanings and open texts with infinite meanings. The Irish saga, of which the *Togail* is a particularly fine example, may fruitfully be approached as an internally coherent text with a set of primary designs on the audience (often with a degree of *intentional* open-endedness in this respect), but which has, in the course of transmission, been reused and re-signified by subsequent authorial figures and audiences in ways which the original author did not intend. These later meanings do not appear to be infinitely variable, but represent gradually ramifying variations on a finite range of themes and purposes. Future research will doubtless confirm or refute this initial impression drawn from a sampling of later responses.

To attempt to identify the original saga's basic workings, and to interpret its meanings at the period of its initial composition in this form, therefore seems (p.338) worthwhile for literary studies of all kinds. I have done this in more detail than any previous literary analysis of an Irish saga in order to demonstrate the sheer technical virtuosity and intricacy of the saga's structure and the complexity of its meanings. If the language of literary value may be introduced at this point, Irish saga literature has its part to play in the canon of ‘great literature’ worldwide, not because of its vestiges of archaic content (fascinating as these are), but because of the artistry of those who wrote it.

Literary ‘greatness’ is of course a subjective affair and the artefact of a specific critical tradition, but the mediaeval transmission-history of sagas such as the *Togail* and the *Táin* suggests that we are not the only age to perceive them as significant and worthy of admiration. We are, however, only beginning to understand that the power they exert is not simply an effect of the antiquity and otherness of the narrative

universe they depict when viewed from a modern perspective. That is an important contributing factor, but it is, in large part, an artefact of the artistry of the sagas themselves. As we have seen, the architecture of the *Togail* is not of a familiar kind. Some of its most important structural features are foreign to the modern reader and have led some scholars to assert that this saga was put together without any artistry at all. But if we make the imaginative effort required to read the *Togail* in terms of the narrative norms of Irish saga, many of the passages held up as evidence of clumsiness turn out to display its dramatic effectiveness, structural elegance, and its supreme fitness for its own particular purposes.

In this respect it is time for the literary department of mediaeval Irish studies, and of Celtic studies in general, to catch up with its neighbours. This should not mean abandoning the traditional methods of textual criticism, philology, structural anthropology, and historical analysis which have yielded such benefits since the late nineteenth century. It need not mean jumping at once to the conclusion that any attempt to reconstruct an 'original' text from its manuscript witnesses is inherently misguided. There is room in our discipline for philologies both Old and New, and for literary approaches which reconstruct lost texts (and underlying myths) as well as those which trace reception history, scribal performances, or the social (de)construction of meaning. What I am advocating, like several scholars before me, is a more concerted attempt to understand the literature we have inherited *as literature*: to take its aesthetic features as seriously as we do those other features of mediaeval literary texts (mythological roots, social significance, political functions, later reception, openness to further meanings). It is above all the sagas' own structures and literary 'effects' (to use that much-disparaged word) which create the lens through which we view all those other aspects of the texts' meanings, including that sense of otherness and pastness appreciated by the sagas' wider non-specialist readerships today. Consequently, as many other critics have emphasized before now, it is a basic requirement for us to understand—and be able to explain—the structures and strategies of this literature in its own context, as best we can, without attempting to claim

any monolithic finality or closure for the interpretations which result.

Inspiration from neighbouring disciplines is not lacking. In the study of Greek and Latin drama and epic, for example, narrative 'inconsistency' of the kind found (p.339) in the *Togail* is increasingly treated by classicists as a vital force in the construction of meaning and the generation of dramatic tension in these texts, rather than (as used to be the case) as evidence of scribal corruption or Homer 'nodding'.[27] Much the same may be said of studies of biblical narrative, as we have seen in the case of 1 Samuel. The study of French *chansons de geste* and romance long ago bade farewell to the idea that neo-Aristotelian conceptions of 'unity' offered the most helpful means of unlocking the richness and beauty of this branch of mediaeval vernacular literature, and the study of interlace and other distinctively 'romantic' formal features has now made significant inroads into the analysis of other European vernacular literatures, including that of the prose saga in Iceland.[28]

Closer to home, one only has to recall the celebrated and once notorious 'digressions' of *Beowulf*, which used to be seen as unfortunate blemishes on a once-pristine heroic narrative. After more than half a century of sustained literary-critical attention, these 'digressions' are seen as one of the great strengths of the poem, casting piercing side-lights onto the main story and infusing it with a valedictory breadth and depth of vision. Its overall structure, another target for critical opprobrium in the early twentieth century, is now widely seen as a magnificent example of a narrative diptych, whereas the bipartite structure of the *Togail* is still too often dismissed, explicitly or implicitly, as an accident of compilation.[29]

Of all the scholars whose work contributed to this sympathetic understanding of *Beowulf* as a literary work, the most influential and eloquent was J. R. R. Tolkien, in particular his ground-breaking Israel Gollancz Memorial Lecture, '*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics', delivered in 1936 (the same year that Eleanor Knott published her still-indispensable edition of the *Togail*). Without endorsing every aspect of

Tolkien's approach to mediaeval literature, I can think of no better way to conclude this book than by repeating his parable about critical approaches current in his time, and by no means extinct in ours. Its application to *Beowulf* remains relevant to this day; its application to the *Togail*, and to mediaeval Irish narrative more generally, is still waiting to be fulfilled.[30]

> A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material. Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: 'This tower is most interesting.' But they also said (after pushing it over): 'What a muddle (p.340) it is in!' And even the man's own descendants, who might have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: 'He is such an odd fellow! Imagine his using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did he not restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.' But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.

Notes:

([1]) Herbert, 'Crossing Historical and Literary Boundaries', p. 101.

([2]) Kuno Meyer, *Aislinge Meic Conglinne*, pp. 124–5. This quotation is from the longer 'H' recension, which Herbert considers the older of the two ('Crossing Historical and Literary Boundaries', p. 101).

([3]) See the discussions in chapters 1 and 6.

([4]) Poppe, *Of Cycles*, pp. 31–2.

([5]) Toner, *Bruiden Da Choca*, pp. 30–6.

([6]) The Middle Irish tale *Aided Bressail* may also be a narrative 'riposte' to the *Togail*: it tells how Diarmait mac Cerbaill had his own son killed for stealing a cow from a nun, thus representing a similar dilemma to that faced by Conaire (with an ecclesiastical spin) but showing Diarmait responding in the opposite manner, even to the extent of committing *fingal* (for which he must then do penance himself). For texts, see Stokes, *Lives of Saints*, pp. xxvii–xxviii; Kuno Meyer, 'Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften (Fortsetzung)', *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*, 7 (1908–10), 297–312, pp. 305–7; Best et al., *The Book of Leinster*, VI, 1612 n. 1 (*in marg*. at line 49430). On the link with the *Togail* see Wiley, 'An Edition', p. 40.

([7]) See Radner, 'The Significance', and Rekdal, 'From Wine in a Goblet', on some of these tales' shared concerns. As seen in chapter 10, the author of *Bruiden Meic Da Réo* also drew on this narrative template in order to reflect critically on kingship ideology and practice, although in dramatic terms the main focus of interest is not the king but his rebellious subjects and the mediating figure of Morann.

([8]) Nic Dhonnchadha, *Aided Muirchertaig Meic Erca*; for a translation see Cross and Slover, *Ancient Irish Tales*, pp. 518–32. For commentary see Radner, 'The Significance'; Rekdal, 'From Wine in a Goblet', pp. 234–41; Herbert, '*The Death of Muirchertach Mac Erca*'; Sayers, 'Deficient Royal Rule'; and especially Mark Williams, '"Lady Vengeance"', who has noted some of the saga's transformations of motifs from the *Togail* (pp. 6–9 and 22).

([9]) For example, as noted by West ('An Edition', p. 193), the entry on Conaire in the 'Annals of the Four Masters' (O'Donovan, *Annals*, I, 90) contains an extended eulogy of his peaceful reign very similar to the narrator's eulogy at lines 182–91 of the *Togail*. The chronicle's version arguably performs a similar punctuating purpose to that in the saga. For detailed discussion of these chroniclers' procedures, see Bernadette Cunningham, *The Annals of the Four Masters:*

Irish History, Kingship and Society in the Early Seventeenth Century (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), pp. 74–135.

([10]) For example, Lé Fer Flaith's death was memorialized in the *dindṡenchas* of Rath Chnámrossa, printed in Edward Gwynn, *The Metrical Dindsenchas Part III*, pp. 128–32. On the literary project represented by the *dindshenchas*, see Brian Ó Cuív, '*Dinnshenchas*—The Literary Exploitation of Irish Place-names', *Ainm*, 4 (1990), 90–106.

([11]) Poppe, *Of Cycles*, p. 48; see also Ní Mhaonaigh, 'The Literature of Medieval Ireland', p. 35. See further my discussion of *historia* in chapter 1 and references there.

([12]) On Keating's treatment of his sources, see Bernadette Cunningham, *The World of Geoffrey Keating: History, Myth and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2000), pp. 65–82. There is no evidence that Keating knew the *Togail*.

([13]) This process was far from simple or unilateral, and calls for further study.

([14]) See Patrick Sims-Williams, 'The Visionary Celt: The Construction of an Ethnic Preconception', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 11 (Summer 1986), 71–96.

([15]) For a representative example, see John Wilson Foster, 'The Revival of Saga and Heroic Romance during the Irish Renaissance: The Ideology of Cultural Nationalism', in Heinz Kosok, ed., *Studies in Anglo-Irish Literature* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1982), pp. 126–36.

([16]) Maria Tymoczko's *Translation in a Postcolonial Context* is a rare example of such an approach, although her focus is primarily on translation techniques rather than on more radical forms of reworking like Ferguson's.

([17]) Conference discussion reported by Terence Brown, 'Ferguson's "Conary"', in Terence Brown and Barbara Hayley, eds., *Samuel Ferguson: A Centenary Tribute* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1987), pp. 73–4, p. 74.

([18]) W. B. Yeats, ‘Preface’, in Augusta Gregory, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne: The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster* (London: John Murray, 1902), pp. vii–xvii, pp. vii and xvii.

([19]) On Gregory's style, see Tymoczko, *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*, pp. 90–145.

([20]) John V. Kelleher, ‘Irish History and Mythology in James Joyce's “The Dead”’, *Review of Politics*, 27 (1965), 414–33.

([21]) On the possible influence of mediaeval Irish sagas on Joyce's prose style, see Maria Tymoczko, *The Irish Ulysses* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 138–76.

([22]) Kelleher, ‘Irish History and Mythology’, p. 420.

([23]) Burnyeat, ‘*Córugud* and *Compilatio*’, p. 366.

([24]) Morgan Thomas Davies, ‘Protocols of Reading’; Dooley, *Playing the Hero*.

([25]) I hasten to add here that several recent applications of these approaches to the Irish sagas do not limit themselves in this way.

([26]) Morgan Thomas Davies, ‘Protocols of Reading’, p. 22.

([27]) See, for example, Ruth Scodel, *Credible Impossibilities*; O'Hara, *Inconsistency in Roman Epic*.

([28]) Mediaeval French and English literature was examined from this perspective forty years ago by William W. Ryding, *Structure in Medieval Narrative* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 115–39, and Vinaver, *The Rise of Romance*; on the Icelandic dimension see Clover, *The Medieval Saga*.

([29]) On these developments in *Beowulf* criticism see Shippey, ‘Structure and Unity’.

([30]) Tolkien, ‘*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics’, pp. 54–5.

Afterword: Reading the Togail