The Battle of Clontarf Story and Gortnaclea*

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The Story  
One of the most popular texts among eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scribes in Ireland is a literary re-enactment of the historical battle at Clontarf in 1014 called *Cath Cluana Tarbh* (hereafter *CCT*).\(^1\) To its eighty-nine extant manuscript sources described in my recent edition of the text,\(^2\) one more is now to be added which came to light in 2012 and was subsequently purchased by the Royal Irish Academy where it is now preserved as MS 12 K 50. There are two principal reasons for the popularity of *CCT*: firstly, at the heart of its message is the fact that the battle itself amounted to Brian Bóramhe’s victory over centuries of Viking heathen oppression in Ireland; secondly, rather than being a record of events, the historical battle at Clontarf in 1014 is presented as a story in which ‘heroes shine and villains play their sinister parts and dramatic incidents are invented or exaggerated for the benefit of the reading public’.\(^3\) These two reasons are not exceptional in the case of *CCT*, of course, as the same holds true for the earliest literary account we have in Irish concerning the battle of Clontarf, namely that in the early-twelfth century Irish text known as *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* (hereafter *CGG*) or the ‘War of the Gaels against [lit. ‘with’] the Foreigners’.\(^4\)

While many of the plot details in *CCT* ultimately derive from *CGG*, there are two further reasons why the tale should feature so much in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manuscripts. In the first instance, given that most of these manuscripts are of Munster provenance, it is hardly surprising that a battle of Clontarf story which presents Brian Bóramhe and the O’Briens of Munster as heroes *par excellence* would find favour with scribes from that province in particular. Secondly, the transmission of *CCT* was clearly influenced by *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, a history of Ireland first compiled in the 1630s by Geoffrey Keating (Séathrún Céitinn). It was Keating’s presentation of Brian Bóramhe’s wife, Gormfhlaith, as instigator of open warfare at Clontarf as well as his characterisation of Maol Seachlainn of Meath as consummate traitor of the O’Briens and, by extension, of Munster, which caught the fertile imagination of the scribes of *CCT*.\(^5\)

Notwithstanding the evidence of scribal creativity in the ninety extant manuscript sources, all of them contain what I have referred to as a core narrative which comprises the following series of events:

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\* This note arises from a discussion following a lecture on ‘The Battle of Clontarf as Story in Irish-language Tradition’ which I delivered to the Laois Heritage Society in Port Laoise on 22 May 2014. I am very grateful to my colleague, Dr Regina Úi Chollatáin, and to the organising committee for the invitation to speak on the day.
\(^2\) Ní Úrdail, *Cath Cluana Tarbh*, 226-54.
\(^3\) John Ryan, ‘The Battle of Clontarf’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 68 (1938), 1-50 (at p. 3).
\(^4\) James Henthorn Todd (ed.), *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh. The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill, or the Invasions of Ireland by the Danes and other Norsemen* (London 1867).
\(^5\) For a detailed discussion, see Ní Úrdail, *Cath Cluana Tarbh*, 14-25, 66-77.
§1-3 An army, led by Brian Bóraimhe and his son Murchadh, gathers at Clontarf to do battle against Maol Mórdha, King of Leinster, and his Viking allies.

§4 Unwilling to spill blood on Good Friday, Brian remains apart from the battle in prayer in his tent.

§5 Maol Seachlainn Mór, King of Meath and ally of Brian, abandons the battlefield.

§6 Murchadh son of Brian encounters a friend (Dubhlaing Ó hArtagáin) on the battlefield and follows him to the Otherworld where a supernatural woman (Aoibheall of Craglea) foretells their deaths and that of Brian.

§7 Murchadh and Dubhlaing return to the fray but Murchadh must quench his insatiable thirst by drinking regularly from the well of Clontarf.

§8 Those guarding the well on Murchadh’s behalf are killed by a Viking band and once their blood mingles with the water of the well Murchadh is unable to drink it.

§9 Murchadh dies at the hands of a Viking warrior (Henry son of Eabhrac).

§10-11 Brian is killed by a fleeing Viking (Brodar); his death marks the end of Viking oppression in Ireland.

§12-13 Toirdhealbhach son of Murchadh dies at the weir of Clontarf and the opposing armies suffer heavy losses.

§14 The bodies of Brian and Murchadh are transported for burial to Ireland’s primatial church in Armagh.

§15 Maol Seachlainn Mór describes to his kinsmen the horrors of the battle which he witnessed.

§16 As instructed by his father, Donnchadh son of Brian pays twelve score cows to the primate of Armagh on Easter Sunday.

§17-18 While Donnchadh returns homewards to Thomond with his wounded army, political tensions are already beginning to erupt within Munster.

Gortnaclea
Part of the post-Clontarf narrative in section 18 above will be of special interest to readers of this journal. It describes a final obstacle for Donnchadh son of Brian on his homeward journey with his brother, Tadhg, and their depleted forces and followers, namely that posed by Mac Giolla Phádraig (Fitzpatrick) of Ossory in challenging the much-wounded Munstermen to battle. Intimidated by their fearlessness, the ruler of Ossory yields and as a result Donnchadh can continue with his followers onwards to Thomond. I give the relevant section from CCT with my accompanying translation:

Ó ’d-chonairc Donnchadh mac Briain an miorún maitheasa-sin dá chéile ar n-eirghe eidir shlocht Eóghaín Mhóir féin, do thógaibh a longphort agus a lucht othrais leis agus ag gabháil tre Osraighe dóibh, do iarr Mac Giolla Phádraig bráighde nó cath air. ‘Do-bhéar-sa cath uaim’ (ar Donnchadh) ‘óir ní chuala go dtug aon neach dá dtáinig romham riomh bráighde nó umhla d’aon neach dá dtáinig roimhe Mhac Giolla Phádraig, agus ni mó do-bhéar féin dó iad.’ Is ann sin do ollmhaigh Donnchadh agus Tadhg iad féin chum an chatha. Mar do-chualadar an lucht othrais sin, do iarradar iad féin do cheangal do chrhannaigh
When Donnchadh son of Brian saw that that mutual enmity had developed among the descendants of Eóghan Mór [Munstermen], he brought off his camp and his convalescents and while they were travelling through Ossory, Mac Giolla Phádraig demanded hostages or a battle of him. ‘I will give battle’ (said Donnchadh) ‘for I have not heard that any forebear of mine ever gave hostages or submission to any forebear of Mac Giolla Phádraig, and neither will I myself give them to him.’ Then Donnchadh and Tadhg prepared themselves for the battle. As soon as the convalescents heard that, they asked that they be tied to the trees of the plain where they were in order to fight against all. As soon as Mac Giolla Phádraig heard that, he refused battle. ‘It did not surprise me,’ said Donnchadh son of Brian, ‘that the descendants of Eóghan Mór should demand our hostages, considering the size of their army and host. Nevertheless I find Mac Giolla Phádraig demanding them very surprising.’ Donnchadh son of Brian reached his dwelling after Mac Giolla Phádraig refusing battle and eight score of his convalescents had died by then. 6

The underlined passage here derives ultimately from CGG where the wounded supporters of Thomond demanded that ‘stakes’ (indlaighe) be made from the trees of a wood nearby. With these stakes as props to their backs, the wounded intended to come to the aid of the sons of Brian in warding off a threat of revolt by the men of Ossory. 7 Interestingly, in his description of the history and antiquities of Ossory, William Carrigan, PP of Durrow (1911-24), 8 refers to the understanding among local people at the beginning of the last century that this incident took place in the townland of Gortnaclea, Co. Laois:

As Irish speakers call it Gortnaclēha, its meaning is evidently the field of the wattle or stake. Locally it is understood to signify the field of the stakes; and from this arises the popular, though erroneous, belief that Gortnaclea is the scene of that memorable exhibition of Dalcassian bravery, when the wounded heroes of Clontarf had themselves bound to stakes, that they might be able to engage in conflict with the traitorous Ossorians, then bent on obstructing their homeward march. 9

According to the Placenames Database of Ireland Gortnaclea in Irish is yet to be confirmed. 10 Whether erroneous or not, it is noteworthy nonetheless that an understanding of the importance of Gortnaclea was subsumed into subsequent tradition concerning the battle of Clontarf.

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6 Ni Úrdail, Cath Cluana Tarbh, 130, 131.
7 Todd, Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh, 216 §121.
8 Máire Ní Mhurchú, Diarmuid Breathnach, Beathaisnéis a Naoi (Baile Átha Cliath 2007), 21-2.