

VARIA III

Quatrains relating to the controversy of the Red Hand*

The three quatrains edited below form part of a controversy which arose in the late seventeenth century, as to which family could legitimately lay claim to the heraldic symbol of the Red Hand.¹ The controversy is relatively well known, as four poems belonging to it appeared in *Reliquiae Celticae* in 1894, and the topic has not infrequently been referred to in print since O'Curry's day.²

The substance of the four poems is outlined here in order to provide a context for the quatrains presented below:

- (1) *A Chormaic, cuimhnigh an chóir* (Diarmaid (mac Laoisigh) Mac an Bhaird),³ Cameron (1894) 291–3.

The poet addresses a certain Cormac, admonishing him not to claim the symbol of the Red Hand for the descendants of Conn (here: Í Néill) unjustly.⁴ Instead, the descendants of Íor (here: Méig Aonghasa) should be allowed to retain the symbol which rightly belongs to them. The argument is supported by an appeal to the authority of written sources, viz. *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*, *Leabhar Ultach* and an Ó hUiginn poem beginning *Lámh dhearg Éireann Í Eachach*.⁵ The origin of the symbol is recounted, relating that Conall Cearnach left the impression of his blood-stained hand on a standard while avenging Cú Chulainn's death.⁶ This has been the inheritance of Conall's descendants ever since. The text ends with a challenge to dispute the poet's assertions.

- (2) *(Is) ná(i)r an sgéalsa teacht do thoigh* (Eoghan Ó Donnghaile), Cameron (1894) 293–4.

A response to poem (1). The author upbraids Mac an Bhaird for claiming the emblem on behalf of the descendants of Róich (*clanna Róigh*); dismisses the evidence adduced; and deals in particular with the tale *Deargruathar Conaill Chearnaigh*, arguing that this is

* I am grateful to the editors of *Ériu* and an anonymous reader for helpful comments on this article.

¹ The controversy is dated to 1689 in TCD 1288 (H.1.14), p. 157.

² Cameron (1894), 291–9; O'Curry (1873), 264–5, 278. For fuller discussions, see Simms (1983), 146–7 and Hughes (1990), 85–90.

³ For details of Diarmaid Mac an Bhaird and the other poets involved, see Hughes (1987), 61, 66–8; de Brún *et al.* (1971), 181–2 and Thomson (1969–70).

⁴ The plausible suggestion that the poet is addressing Cormac Ó Néill (d. 1707) is made by Hughes (1990), 86.

⁵ *Scéla Mucce Meic Dathó*: ed. Thurneysen (1935) and Breatnach (1996) (EMod); *Leabhar Ultach* is the title in a copy in the Book of Lecan of the text also known as *Senchas Síil Ír* and *Senchas Ulad*, transcribed in Dobbs (1921); the poem has been edited in Ó Riain (2008) and the copy in UCD Fr. A 25 is published in *ABM*, poem 292.

⁶ Conall Cearnach's vengeance forms part of the death-tale of Cú Chulainn; see Van Hamel (1933), §§45–58 and Kimpton (2009), §§25–30. The detail of the standard does not occur.

the only deed of note Conall's descendants have to boast of. In contrast, the numerous battles Conn Ceadchathach fought are irrefutable evidence that the symbol of the Red Hand belongs to his descendants by right, if hands reddened in battle are proof of a legitimate claim to it.⁷ The author's account of the origin of the emblem is different from that presented in poem (1); here it is related to *Lebor Gabála* traditions concerning the aftermath of the defeat of the Tuatha Dé Danann by the sons of Míl. The survivors of the Tuatha Dé gave three valuable objects (*trí seóide*) to the sons of Míl in order to obtain protection (*cádhas*) for their people (*cairde*), one a large standard bearing the symbol of a red hand. (This information is attributed to Saint Seachnall).⁸ Since Irial Fáidh slew the four sons of Éibhear, the standard has belonged to the descendants of Éireamhón without contention (*gan imreasain*).⁹

- (3) *Labhradh Trian Chonghail go ciúin* (Niall Mac Muireadhaigh, d. 1726), Cameron (1894) 295–7.

A response to poem (1). Mac an Bhaird is advised not to claim a symbol that belongs to the descendants of Colla (here: Clann Domhnaill). An account is given of how the standard of the descendants of Íor was seized by one of the three Collas when they defeated the king of Ulster (Fearghas Fogha).¹⁰ Colla placed his bloody hand on the standard, which gave rise to the emblem. The poet suggests that Méig Aonghasa should instead adopt the symbol of a tawny lion, following the practice of Conchobhar (mac Neasa) and Conghal Claon in the Battle of Magh Rath (the latter as reported by the poet Flann).¹¹ The association of the Red Hand with the descendants of Echu made in the poem *Lámh dhearg Éireann Í Eachach* is accepted, and it is noted that the symbol has been used by Clann Domhnaill within the poet's own memory and should be left to them.¹² Niall will not be bested in this matter, and he asks a messenger to convey these remarks to the son of Laoiseach (Diarmaid).

⁷ The poem ends here in the Black Book of Clanranald (and so also in Cameron 1894), but a further thirteen quatrains are found in other copies, for example Maynooth M 8, 368ff.

⁸ In *Lebor Gabála* and other texts four objects are mentioned, none of which is a standard; see Hull (1930).

⁹ Cf. *FFÉ* II 116.

¹⁰ Cf. *FFÉ* II 364.

¹¹ The ultimate source of this information is presumably the tale *Cath Maighe Rath*; see O'Donovan (1842), 228 (cf. also pp 343–50). Flann is referred to as having composed one of the poems in this tale at p. 250. The quatrain dealing with the lion is also cited by Keating, *FFÉ* III, 124.

¹² This composition is attributed to 'Ó hUiginn' in item (1) above. While Niall Mac Muireadhaigh's misunderstanding that this referred to Tadhg Dall rather than Maol Eachlainn 'na nUirsgéal' has often been noted since Eleanor Knott pointed it out in 1922 (pp xvii–xviii), I am not aware that attention has been drawn to a second misunderstanding (wilful or otherwise) in the same quatrain: Niall takes the reference in the first line of the poem to be to Echu Doimlén, father of the Collas. However, the Echu intended is in fact Echu Coba, ancestor of Méig Aonghasa; cf. O'Rahilly (1946), 499.

- (4) *Nár leam choisneas tú clú Chuinn* (Niall Mac Muireadhaigh), Cameron (1894) 297–9

A response to poem (2). Defence of the claim on behalf of the descendants of Conn by Ó Donnghaile is rejected. The exploits of Conall's descendants are listed. Eoghan, being a fool (*abhlaír*), should take to crafting *abhráin* and should never have challenged a poet with his ill-fashioned verse.¹³ Battles claimed for Í Néill should be attributed to the Leinstermen. The descendants of Niall should use the symbol of the nine fetters associated with their eponymous ancestor, Niall Naoighiallach. The hand belongs to the race of Colla and has brought honour and respect to them. It is booty for neither the descendants of Niall nor of Conall. That Eoghan is an author (*ughdar*) is deplorable and risible.

To these poems, a series of three separate quatrains preserved in an early eighteenth-century manuscript penned by Richard Tipper can be added as part of the controversy. These occur on pages 287 and 288 of NLI G 127, immediately after copies of poems (1) and (2) above, and the scribal heading indicates that the first quatrain was a response to poem (2). To my knowledge, they have not been noticed before in connection with the controversy and are printed here for the first time. They consist of acerbic remarks addressed to Eoghan Ó Donnghaile and Diarmaid Mac an Bhaird, each of whom contributes a quatrain on the other. A third quatrain was contributed by Eoghan (mac Diarmada) Mac an Bhaird, whose reference to the poets of Ireland (*Inis Fáil*) seems to exclude the Scottish Niall Mac Muireadhaigh's criticism of Ó Donnghaile (poem 4 above), and may imply that the controversy was more extensive than extant sources reveal.¹⁴

The indications are that these quatrains were intended as brief comments expressing the disdain the poets held for one another. The use of the word *rann* 'quatrain' in the scribal heading of the third quatrain may lend support to this view. We may note, however, that the rest of the page containing the second and third quatrains has been left blank.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the brevity of these responses is not entirely unexpected, as Pádraig Ó Macháin has recently drawn attention to the status of the single quatrain as 'a legitimate form within the bardic canon'.¹⁶

The metre in each of the three quatrains is *deibhidhe*, the first in *dán díreach*, the others in the looser form of *ógláchas*. The syllable count is

¹³ The couplet in question reads as follows: *na buail bos re bel filidh / do dhuain chros go ccoiridhir*. The last line is translated in *DIL* (s.v. *cros*) as follows 'until you emend your perverse poem'. I take it that there is also a pun intended here, based on the term(s) *crosán(tacht)*, in line with the portrayal of Eoghan as a buffoon in this poem.

¹⁴ Although I have not traced any further information about this poet, it does not seem extravagant in the context to suggest that he may have been the son of Diarmaid mac Laoisigh and so was coming to his father's defence.

¹⁵ Compare also the fragmentary nature of poem (1) above in this manuscript, which preserves only qq 1–3, while poem (2) has seventeen quatrains (cf. n. 7 above).

¹⁶ Ó Macháin (2010), 83–4.

irregular in the second quatrain (8¹ 8² 8¹ 7²); internal rhyme is lacking; but alliteration is found in all lines, although that in the last line does not meet the requirement of *dán díreach* that the penultimate and ultimate stressed words alliterate with each other. The second line of the third quatrain is a syllable long; alliteration occurs in the first couplet only; and there is assonance (*amus*) in both couplets (*uaisle, uaibh; féin, tréad*).

TEXT AND TRANSLATION

(i)

Freagra Diarmoda ar an tsaotharsa 'nar ndiaidh

Níor dholta díbh go domhain
 'san eólas nach uarabhair
 le do sbrúileach bhuid a-bháin
 ar cúilleath uird gan anáir.

MS: Fregra dermoda ar an tsaotharsa nar ndiaigh

Níor dholta díbh go domhain / san eolus nach bhuarabhar / lé do spruidhleach bhuid amháin / ar cúl leith uird gan anáir.

‘Diarmaid’s response to this work [is given] below:

You should not have delved deeply into the knowledge you did not receive with your mere table-crumbs at the rear end of [the] order [of poets], without honour.’

(ii)

Freagra Eoghain a[i]r sin

A tiobraid na dtrí dteora ban,
 ré n-óltar gach foras fíorghlan,
 níor ibhis dígh lé bhfaghtar fios:
 do mhéadaigh go mór h’ainbhíos.

MS: Fregra eogain ar sin

Attioibraid na ttri tteora bán / re noltar gach forais fíorghlan / níor ibhis dígh lé bhfaghtar fios / do mheadaigh go mór hainbhíos.

‘Eoghan’s response to that:

From the well of the three triads of women, at which all truly pure wisdom is imbibed, you did not drink a draught whereby knowledge is acquired: it has greatly increased your ignorance.’

(iii)

Freagra Eoghain mheic Diarmoda Mheic an Bha[i]rd ar an rann thuas

Sgolta uaisle Inse Fáil
 ó nach creidtear uaibh i n-aoncháil
 mínigh féin red réasún beag
 's do thréad anu[r]radh lánsbreag.

*MS: Fregra eogain meic diarmoda mheic an bhard ar ann rann thúas
 Sgolta uaisle innsi fail / onách ccreidter uaibh anáonchail / mínigh féin réd resún
 béag / sdo thréud anuraigh lanspreg.*

‘Eoghan son of Diarmaid Mac an Bhaird’s response to the above quatrain:

Since the noble schools of Ireland are not credited by you in any respect, assuage [them] with your trifling intellect and rouse your flock of outsiders.’

NOTES

1a *díbh*: 2 pl. prep. pron. *de* (for *do*), expressing the agent of the verbal of necessity.

b *'san eólas nach uarabhair*: With the condemnation meted out here, contrast the praise of Ruaidhrí Ó hEadhra: *Ó* [sic leg.] *ghuthaibh sgagtha na scol / fuair sé eolas na n-ughdor* ‘From the careful teaching of scholars he has studied the authors’, in McKenna (1951) II 3427–8; cf. also II 3435, 3490.

d *ar cúilleath uird gan anáir*: The phrase *ar cúilleath uird* ‘at the rear end of [the] order [of poets]’, if interpreted correctly, would seem to allude to Eoghan Ó Donnghaile as being of very low rank. This and the following phrase, *gan anáir* ‘without honour’, presumably refer to the fact that he did not belong to a hereditary family of poets. Other examples to hand of the compound *cúilleath* ‘back’ are: *is mo chúilleath re croich nDé* ‘and stand with my back against His Cross’ (*AithdD.* no. 62 q. 29b), and *ucht na fer re cúilleth caigh* ‘the men’s chests at the back of the others’ (*IT* no. 7 q. 17c).

2a This line refers to the Muses. Such references are relatively common in eighteenth-century verse, as in the following lines by Pádraig Mac a’ Liondain (on Séamas Dall Mac Cuarta): *Ó na trí triar sin tobair niamhghlain Chastália d’ibh / an file grianach, an deoch a riar tart ar ball a ghaibh; / is gach tuile a thriallann ón tiobraid chéanna uaidh ag fás mar mhil, / ag friothamh siansa na heagna diamhaire ón mbánsruth thoir* (Mag Uidhir 1977, 12).

b *ré n-óltar*: The use of non-classical *ólaidh* alongside classical *ibhidh* (line c) might be regarded as unusual. If so, we may be justified in reading

n-o[i]lt[e]ar and translating ‘by whom all truly pure wisdom is cultivated’, where the preposition *re* indicates the agent (the Muses) (see *DIL* F 420.56ff., and for confusion of *re* and *le* see *SNG* III §13.14 and V §6.1). For scribal fluctuation in indicating palatal and non-palatal consonants, see (ii) l. 2 and Ó Cuív (1950), 215 l. 211 v.l. (eidar), 220 ll 359, 364, 369, 372 v.ll. (eidar, aithrach(a), braithracha).

3a *Sgolta*: Note the non-classical nom. pl. form of this noun with dental inflexion, historically an *ā*-stem.

c *mínigh*: The meaning ‘assuages’ seems preferable here, since *sgolta* in line *a* may be taken as the object. The verb *mínighidh* also has the sense ‘explains’, but this seems less likely in the context as no suitable object is to hand. The idea that Eoghan should, or even could, assuage the schools with his deficient intellect is, of course, facetious.

red réasún beag: The use of the nominative of the noun *réasún* (as shown by non-mutation of the following adjective) is sound, since its nom. and acc. sing. are identical; see Ó Riain (2010), 102 1c n.

d *anu[r]radh* (MS *anuraigh*): The restored reading is tentative but suitable in the context. The single *r* of the manuscript may be explained by weakening in intervocalic position, while the terminations *-adh* and *-aigh* had been reduced to schwa in the scribe’s speech (cf. O’Rahilly 1932, 65–6 and Ó Cuív 1950, 231). The phrase *tréad anurradh* ‘flock of outsiders’ is taken to refer to other untrained poets potentially susceptible to the workings of Eoghan’s feeble mind, and contrasts with *sgolta uaisle* ‘noble schools’ of the first line.

An alternative emendation to the manuscript reading would be *i nu[a]radh*, where the *a* supplied may have been omitted through haplography. The line could then be translated as ‘incite your flock to calm’, with ‘flock’ in that case facetiously referring to the poets (*sgolta*) as Eoghan’s people, or to the Í Néill with whom Ó Donnghaile’s family had a genealogical connection (see MacLysaght 1957, 121–2). For the sense, compare the following quatrain from *Iomarbhágh na bhfileadh*, where the term *uaradh* occurs: *Brobhadh leabhar eirigh [sic] as / a Lughaidh dár léir eolas / déanaidh fuaradh ná tairg troid / ’s is d’uamhan Thaidhg a-támaid* ‘Give up the scribbling of books, O Lughaidh to whom all lore is known. Calm thyself. Seek not quarrel. It is owing to (our) fear of Tadhg (destroying you) that we are (entreating you)’ (McKenna 1918, no. 11, q. 16).

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ABBREVIATIONS

- ABM* See McManus and Ó Raghallaigh (2010).
AithdD. See McKenna (1939–40).
FFÉ See Comyn and Dinneen (1902–14).
IT See Fraser (1931).

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