A POEM ON THE MUTILATION OF BRIAN ÓG Ó NÉILL (d. 1449)

BY

GORDON Ó RIAIN

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of the poem edited here, Brian Óg Ó Néill, was a son of Brian (d. 1401/2) and grandson of Einri Aimhreidh (d. 1392). The branch of the Ó Néill to which he belonged was antagonistic to the reigning Ó Néill, Eoghan, and presented a threat to his rule. In 1435 Brian Og allied with Neachtain Ó Domhnaill against Ó Néill on two occasions, the second of which provides the background to our poem. Neachtain precipitated the second alliance of that year by endowing Brian Og with Ballyshannon Castle. Brian Og broke faith with Neachtain, however, and parleyed with Ó Néill under the protection of the latter’s newly appointed ollamh Conchobhar Ruadh Mac Con Midhe. Upon his arrival at Ó Néill’s stronghold Brian Og was seized, his hand and foot severed, and two of his sons mutilated, one of whom died immediately. On the basis of the present poem we know Brian Óg’s limbs to have been interred in Derry, although Brian Óg himself was to survive until 1449. All this took place in violation


2 This is exemplified in AFM s.a. 1366; AU s.a. 1369; AU, AFM s.a. 1370; AFM s.a. 1395, 1396; AFM s.a. 1402; AU, AC (§7), AFM s.a. 1410; AU, AC (§5), AFM s.a. 1414; AC (§11) s.a. 1418, AU, AC (§§2, 20), ALC, AFM s.a. 1419, AC (§16), AFM s.a. 1420; AU, ALC, AFM s.a. 1432, AC s.a. 1433.6. For Ó Néill see ODNB s.n., Simms 1999, 167-8 and 2000, 151-3.

3 The first incident led to a short-lived victory for Brian Og and Neachtain who were ultimately defeated after Brian Og was seriously wounded; see the account of this incident in AU, ALC, AFM s.a. 1435.

4 Maoil Íosa Mac Con Midhe, ollamh of Ó Néill, died in 1434 (AFM s.a.) and Conchobhar Ruadh seems to have been appointed his successor, Conchobhar was a son of Eachmharcach Ruadh who died in 1420 (AFM s.a.) as stated in AU, AFM s.a. 1493 (obit of Conchobhar’s son, Tadhg).

5 According to Misc. Ir. Ann. (s.a. 1437.7) Einri Ó Néill (Eoghan’s son) sent for Brian Óg: O Néill, Henri mac Eoghan, do cur Mic Con Midhe ar ceann Brian Og Ó Néill, γ a cor γ a lam do buain do Brian Og tar saraghadh Mic Con Midhi ‘Ó Néill, Einri son of Eoghan, sent Mac Con Midhe to fetch Brian Og Ó Néill, and cut off Brian Óg’s foot and hand in violation of Mac Con Midhe’. The dating of the incident in this source is incorrect (see ibid. 115 n. 1).

6 His death is noticed in AU, ALC and AFM s.a. 1449. Further details of his career may be consulted in AU s.a. 1418 and AFM s.a. 1432, 1434, 1437. Ó Reilly 1820, p. cxxxi, incorrectly considered the present poem to be an elegy of Brian Óg.
of Mac Con Midhe’s protection provoking him to satirize Eoghan Ó Néill’s sons:

Brian Og mac Briain meic Enri h. Neill do gabaiul do claint
Eogain h. Neill 7 a dias mac mar oen ris ar lar longphuirt h.
Neill fein, 7 a cirbad fo deoid ar slanaigeacht Meic Conmide, 7 a
n-acraid trid comaith.

*Brian Og son of Brian son of Enrí O Neill and his two sons were captured by the sons of Eogan O Neill in the midst of O Neill’s own stronghold. They were eventually maimed, in spite of the guarantee of Mac Conmide. And they were reviled as well on this account.*

The incident resulted in Mac Con Midhe’s exile to Connacht where, presumably, he composed the poem edited here in 1436. Still in exile seventy years later, Mac Con Midhe attempted reconciliation with Enrí (son of Éoghan) O Neill by addressing to him the poem beginning *Cionnas do rothfínn ri Olligh*, the outcome of which is not known. Citations in the Grammatical Tracts bear witness to the high regard in which both these compositions were held. Their author died in 1481 and was noted by the annalists as a master of poetry, a scholar and a teacher (*saif fhír dana 7 fhoghlaimnil[gh] 7 oide*).  

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7 AC s.a. 1435.12; see also AU, ALC, AFM s.a. 1435 and n. 5 above. The sons of Éoghan Ó Néill are mentioned as the perpetrators only in AC; AU and AFM state that Ó Neill (i.e., Éoghan) seized Brian Og.

8 See ALC s.a. 1435: Mac Conmide. i. Conchobhar Ruadh, do theacht go Connacht fo an scathad sin Bhriain I Neill in hoc anno ‘Mac Conmide, i.e. Conchobhar Ruadh, went to Connacht on account of this mutilation of Brian O’Neill in hoc anno.’ This part of the entry is written in a hand other than that of the scribe (Brian Mac Diarmada) and has been misplaced in the manuscript; see ALC II 156 n. 2. References in the poem establish Mac Con Midhe in a ‘foreign territory’ (*i dîr andhethaigh*), presumably Connacht, and date the incident of 1435, discussed above, to ‘last year’ (*a-muraíth*); see qq 14, 15 and 17.

9 Ed. Ó Ríain 2007.

10 For the two citations from the present poem (identified in McManus 1997, 95) see notes to qq 2cf and 10cf below. Q. 4cf of *Cionnas do rothfínn ri Olligh* is cited in IGT III 155 as noted in Ó Ríain 2007, 55 n. 7, 70 q. 4cf n. A further two poems are attributed to Conchobhar Ruadh in the Book of O’Conor Don in a hand other than that of the main scribe (ff 239v and 261r); I hope to discuss the authorship of these poems on another occasion.

11 His obit is given in AU, AC (§4), ALC s.a. 1481.
THE POEM

Jonnhain taise á-tá i nDoire opens with an elegiac depiction of Brian Óg’s hand and foot in their final resting place of Derry. The poet eulogises the limbs while portraying the great loss to Ulster incurred by reason of their amputation (qq 1-13). This section is comparable in style with various elegies which treat of severed members (all instances of decapitation). Addresses by Eochaidh Ó hÉidhhasa and Padraigh Haicéad, respectively, to Aodh Mág Uidhir’s wounded hand and Eamann ‘an Chuirnin’ Buitléir’s broken leg, should also be mentioned in this connection. Mac Con Midhe’s apostrophe to the hand (qq 9-11) represents a striking feature of this section for it is at once a literal address to the limb and an instance of metonymy. There follows a brief description of the poet’s plight as an exile and of how the maining has personally affected him; this includes a remarkable comparison of the poet’s suffering with Christ’s Passion (qq 14-16) which may recall the depiction of Jesus as unjustly judged. The horror of the unprecedented mutilation is taken up again in qq 17-19 where it is compared to that of an ancestor of Brian Óg, the famous Brian Ó Néill, who was slain in the Battle of Downpatrick in 1260 and beheaded. The poem closes with reference to an ancient prophecy, which, as we understand, Brian Óg had seemed likely to realize, with

12 Examples are: Miomn súr Éireann i náth Clícha (Cameron 1894, 302-3); Truagh sin, a chion n ro chrodhle (e.g. RIA 17 (23 M 27), 267); Uaidheach sin, a cheanna Aodha (Book of O’Conor Don f. 225v) (the latter poem is discussed by Bretnach 1997, 36-7). Compare also Aodhde no chrodhle ceann Britain (GB no. 13) (see below q. 9c). O’Hara no. 28, L.Brain no. 42 and 43 and SVBDL no. 12.

13 Copies of Ó hÉidhhasa’s poem, beg. Slán fíd lot, a lánadh Aodha, are found for example in Book of O’Conor Don f. 215v-17r and RIA 2 (23 F 10) pp 6-8; a brief account of the poem is given by O’Grady 1926, 454-5 (§102). The address to Eamann an Chuirnin, beg. Slán fíd chriostilim, a chos deir, is edited in Ni Cheallaigh 1962, no. 15. See also the stanza on the poet’s own broken leg, edited ibid. no. 16. Neither poem finds manuscript support for Haicéad’s authorship; see ibid. pp xx-xxi. Compare further the poems on Martha Stafford’s injured hand, edited in LCB no. 31 and 32.

14 The literary figure of metonymy is discussed in TDJ 1 p. 14 and Bretnach 1997, 64-96. An interesting example of sustained metonymy is the address to Conall Ó Mórdha’s hand recently edited by Ó Macháin 2008, who, however, suggests the hand may represent a heraldic symbol (ibid. pp 65-6). A further example is the short poem (5 q) by Domhnall Ó Lorcáin beg. Geall gach láthair ag lánadh Geartail (L. Brain. no. 71).

15 See accounts of the battle in AU, AU, AC (§2), Ann. Clohn., ALC, AFM, Ann. Clyn s.n. 1250 and Misc. Fr. Ann. s.n. 1261; Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe’s lament on Brian (GB no. 13) and the elegy on a number of chieftains slain in the battle (McKenna 1947). McKenna’s edition is based on a single inferior copy of the poem by Aodh Ó Dalaigh (viz. TCD 1291 p. 109), but far superior copies are preserved in TCD 1381, 60 and BL Add. 40766, 71v. Brian Ó Néill’s death is employed as an object of comparison in the

16 For a discussion of this genre, see Murphy 1939, 42-4. The best known example is Giolla Brighde Mac Con Midhe’s longóith mhi aisléim i nEamhain (ed. Murphy 1943, and GB no. 15).

17 For a comparable evocation of a patron’s grave in Munster while the poet remains in Connaught, see the elegy beginning Leabha churad i gCóraígh by Maol Chaoilinn na nUrisgeál Ó hUigín (ed. Bretnach 1986).

18 In addition to ‘sleep’, tóirich has other meanings, all of which seem to resonate in the poem; see discussion at q. 2h n. For the use of the word in the context of an aisléim see GB no. 15 q. 4.

19 See Ó Riaín 2007, 66 q. 23 and discussion at p. 59.

20 See notes to qqs 1d, 2b, 4d, 6d, 7c, 8o, 11d, 16d, 17, 19d, 21.

poem beginning Truagh sin, a chion n ro chrodhle (see n. 12 above) and is also referred to in McKenna 1948, 486 q. 17. His career is briefly discussed in Simms 1978, 78-81, 1999, 157-8 and 2000, 136-40.

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supporters rallying to his cause. Although the poet wishes the prophecy may yet be fulfilled, his hopes for Brian Óg have been dashed prematurely, and the poem ends on this despondent note (qq 20-21).

Two literary aspects of this well-wrought piece should be singled out for mention here. (i) The poem may take as its model the genre of the prophecy-aisling in which a sleeping poet has a vision of his patron that presages some future greatness on the part of the latter. The initial evocation of the limbs in Derry (qq 1-13) takes on something of the nature of a vision, since the poet is in ‘a foreign territory’ (tir andathleteadh), presumably Connaught. This fact coupled with the occurrence of the terms tóirich ‘sleep’ and aisléim may serve to set the composition in the oneric mould of the aisléim. The allusion to the prophecy at the close of the poem is a further consideration in the context of his later poem seeking reconciliation with Éinri Ó Néill by reference to biblical grounds. Instances of ambiguity in the present composition are discussed in the textual notes to the edition, but it has of course been impossible to reproduce their effect in the translation.
TRANSMISSION AND EDITION

The poem is transmitted in two seventeenth-century manuscript anthologies: the Book of O’Conor Don (ff.138v-39r), penned by Aodh Ó Dochartaigh in Ostend in 1631 (henceforth C), and the Book of O’Gara (RIA 2 (23 F) 16) pp 140-41), written by Fearghal Dubh Ó Gadhra, O.S.A., between 1655 and 1659 in Lille and Brussels (henceforth F).21 There is a nineteenth-century copy of F in British Library, Egerton 111 (Eg.) which has no independent value.22 The copies in C and F diverge significantly from one another in places, and the text presented below is a composite one. Each of the manuscripts contains a number of unique unmetrical or ungrammatical readings: 1b (C), 2d (C), 4c (C), 17a (F), 19b (F), d (F), 21b (C), c (CF), d (F). In other instances, one or other of the copies gives superior sense: 4d (F), 5b (C), d (F), 10a (C), 11a (C), 13c (C), 17c (C), 19c (F). A number of sound variants also occur (the preferred reading is indicated in brackets), notably 6a (F), c (F), d (F), 8d (C), 12a (F), 20b (C), c (C); see also the minor variants at q.3c (F), 6b (C), 9b (C), 10d (F), 11a (C), 14d (F), 20d (C). The order of quatrains 5 and 6 is inverted in C. When citing variant readings below leonition marks are represented by italicized h and tall e is represented by underlined e.

The usual editorial conventions are followed,23 but with the following modifications: (i) final unstressed closed vowels of stressed words are rendered as -e(a)- throughout; (ii) final unstressed open vowels of stressed words are always rendered as -e; (iii) initial leonition of proper nouns has not been supplied without manuscript support since metrically confirmed examples of non-mutation occur.24 Furthermore, in instances where permitted variant forms of the same word occur in the manuscripts the older form or the form not current in the modern language is preferred as the lectio difficilior.25

21 These manuscripts are described in Hyde 1915, and RIA Cat. Fasc. I 6-18 (T. F. O’Rahilly), respectively. The copy of our poem is dated 7/1657. 28. mar.” in F (p. 141).
22 See the description of this manuscript in O’Grady (1926) 339-405; our poem is discussed at pp 369-70 (§46) where q.19 is printed with translation. O’Grady (ibid. 369 n. 1) incorrectly gives Brian Óg as a son (recte grandson) of Einri Aimhridh Ó Neill.
23 Cf. TD 1 pp. xix-xvi, viii.
24 On the latter point see Breathnach 1973, 49 q. 14a n. and examples in Ó Ráin 2007, 60 n. 39.
25 I am grateful to the Editor and to an anonymous reader for comments on this article.
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5 An lámh dá mbéadh mar do bhi ar an maceson mhie Eíneí do-ghéanadh cáil tar an gcois, tráth a dhéanamh dá ndearndais.

6 An chos a chail 'n uaisbh, a-tá ar an geor gcead naisín; mo shlán a haithighin d'fhaghail láthair déirbh an t-ainm mh'iongabháil.

7 An t-aoghe láimhe a-tá thall san bhaile ar bhleannaigh Colam, giodh i m' anam an t-aoghe, ní lamhama in d'éagaine.

8 Ós i beart do bhi 'n ar gcionn a buain de – giodh oile fhuingéam – maith leam ar lár a háirimhe láthair do-fhearr ar n-anáire.

5. If the hand were as it was on that grandson of Éinri, men would overlook the foot, if at some time they had to do so.

6. The foot I behold as remains is in the same state: I defy (anyone) to find a hand comparable to that which experienced my protection.

7. The strange hand is beyond in the place where Colam established a church; although (this) stranger is beloved of me, I dare not lament it.

8. Since the deed that was destined to happen was that it be severed from him – although I bear (it) badly – I prize the hand from which I (received) the greatest honour at the height of its fame.

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9 Ris an bhfheadh a-taoi i dtalamh a-tá cáil gan cheannsighadh; truagh nach mothaighthe a ráith ribb, a lámh mothaighthe an Chúigidh.

10 Fa meince do leigthe líb re hucht Samhna uair 'cigín, a lámh na leannán bhfolaigh, teannál fá chlár g-Conchobhair.

11 Nior theirce lat uair oile aírthi re hucht mBealtaine, a lámh asar mhó ar meanma, dód ló a-táim gan tigheadn.

12 Má rug bhall do na ballaíth i geataighb rib i geomhlaínaibh éntroigh in Uíltaibh tar ais, déantar Uíltaigh 'nach na-éagmhais.

9. Owing to your depth in the ground, all men are unruly; it is a pity you cannot hear this being said to you, O hand that upheld the province (i.e. Ulster).

10. More often did you loose a blaze before Samhna throughout Conchobhair’s plain (i.e. Ulster), at one time, O hand of secret lovers.

11. No more rarely, at another time, did you (make) plunders before Bealtaine, O hand that instilled in me the highest of spirits; since your loss I have no master.

12. If one of (his) limbs took a single step backwards into Ulster during battles or conflicts, let the Ulstermen make do without them.
13. However the province of Rudhraigh was formerly divided, it would not be so divided again if these limbs were on Brian (still).

14. Had I remained with them beyond in Tir Éoghaín for the duration of my life, I would not be here as I am; I would mention neither the foot nor the hand.

15. I would not have abandoned my homeland to be allowed only to mourn, having entered a foreign territory; (that is) little honour for a chief-poet.

16. I suffered, not long ago, a passion like God the Creator at the end of Lent — the iniquity of the transgression is not short-lived.

17. Deeds (like those) of last year were never before committed; every yesteryear was good till now; this has no part in true good.

18. Till Doomsday the hand and foot of the warrior of the Mourne will be remembered; (these) two disasters that befell the people of Tir Éoghaín have deprived them of (the supremacy of) Ireland.

19. The beheading of Brian at Dún (and) the mutilation of Brian owing to envy — woe are they who are not fully reconciled concerning them — these are the two impediments (to obtaining) Ireland.

20. Fionn prophesied long ago that a king bearing spears would come from Tir Éoghaín to rule over the province (i.e. Ulster); may the prophecy come to pass.
21 Before we met with disaster, all men were pledging themselves to Brian Ó Néill; it was no time to suffer misfortune.

21 b Line: go bhfuaran an toilbheag C; do fiaaramar F c aga MSS bforail C; bfiolair F d ní tráth F

NOTES

1b Bhéaraíthe This epithet is generally taken to be a placename (in Killaloe, Co. Clare, or the Boro river, Co. Wexford; see HDGP s.n.) chiefly associated with southern families, but also applied ‘vaguely’ to others, as here: see TD II 341, Knott 1960, 65 and e. g. Mag. no. 19 q. 42b, IT II no. 19 q. 236; it is possible that in some instances the term has reference to the tribe imposed on the Leinstermen described in literary and historical sources (for which see EHB 164-6), implying that the patron is, or was, capable of exacting such a tribute.

c do chin ar gach fear The absence of nasalization after acc. goch (cinidh < cinigdhl implies motion; see GGBM 2073-5 and SnmG IV §101) is explicable as a nominative form in accusative position as countenanced by the tracts when both these forms are identical; see IGT I §81, Mag. xxi, O Ríain 2008, 40 q. 3 a and q. 15b below.

d bhríghaidh ghill ‘riches’ — For the phrase b. g. see McKenna (1940) 68. The dead are specifically termed b. g. (p.) on occasion, notably in the elegy D bhríghaidh uaim i mhnis (Aithid. no. 14) and AFM V pp 1788-90, where the iadhdh is that they are captives who can no longer be ransomed, and this may be intended here. Other examples of the phrase occur in Aithid. II 222 (no. 14 q. 13c n.); O R Poems I 1163; Ó Cuiúv 1993, 103 q. 14d and L. Brun., I 4020.

2b toirchimh This word has various meanings: (i) ‘sleep, slumber’; (ii) ‘numbness, death, stupor’; (iii) ‘affliction, disaster’ (see DL s.v. toirchimh and Aithid. II 332 s.v. toirchimh); and is also used (iv) with reference to the last judgement (see PB 214 no. 5 q. 47c n.). All of these senses may resonate here. For the resonance of (i) see p. 4 above. The meanings ‘numbness’, ‘stupor’ or ‘affliction’ seem clear enough in the context. ‘Death’ is also a possible sense, as certain poets adopt a conceit comparing an injustice suffered at the hands of their patron to ‘mortal wounding’ (murphaidh) or ‘death’ (oilghaidh); see McKenna 1948, 84-5 q. 5, 7, 11, 14 and Aithid. no. 40 q. 7. The resonance of (iv) may be that the event has been a veritable Doomsday to the poet (compare a similar usage of the phrase mo l’á bríthim in Mag. no. 10 q. 37).

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c conchláinn [...] air The 3 sg. masc. prepositional pronoun ar refers to the fem. noun conchláinn (IGT II §12). The noun also has a masc. counterpart conghláinn (IGT II §11), however, and we have here an example of a syntactic licence (termed insigne aircstice in the tracts) whereby a noun with forms in two genders may be referred to by pronouns of either gender. This licence and our example are discussed in McManus 1996, 173 n. 30, 176 §5.2 (i).

cd This couplet is cited in IGT II 222.19, 13b.1 and IGT II 530 as an example of insigne aircstice. In the latter it is accompanied by the comment: lochdach marab c. d’brusci aircísth ‘incorrect unless correct by reason of i.’ a.

3b dar ghill an gaisgeadh For the verb gaisgeadh in the sense translated ‘(lit. which valued served)’ see DL G 79.32-41 (used with gal ‘value’). Further examples of the present phrase are found in DDáine no. 80 q. 24c; IGT III 723; NLI G 992, t. 44v (q. 22d and compare qq 23-5).

4b aisitige For ar. in the sense ‘an (un)wonted’ see MD II 239 s.v. aisling.

d na nduaith (na dhiaigh C) The poss. pron. (3 sg. masc.) in C either (i) refers to Brian Óg (c), this being unacceptable since the phrase would mean that Brian had died (a reading possibly implied by the unmetrical variants at q. 1b in C), or (ii) takes taise as sg., although it is phrased tamnaim according to IGT II §180.

7b moscain (mascan MSS) Alternatively read mAistcín. However, enclitic gin is more frequently accompanied by progressive assimilation of quality than regressive assimilation according to Armstrong 1981, 667.

Éirtí (ruaidh F; c. crúidhri Egr.) The reading of F is difficult to explain and the following suggestions are tentative. It may represent a psychological slip on the part of the scribe arising from the similarity of the final element of the personal names Éirtí and Ruaidhri. A palaeographical explanation whereby the initial e of Éirtí was mistaken for c and an n-stroke was then reinterpreted as a suspension stroke and expanded as crudhaidh may also be possible.

c do-théannad (I. iar For do-thair in the sense ‘do without’ or ‘neglect’ see TD II 200 (no. 2 q. 19 n.); DDáine no. 32 q. 17b; DDÉ no. 18 q. 8a; O.Hara I 2863; Aithid. no. 38 q. 7b, no. 77 q. 18b.

d tráth a dhéanamh (do dhéanamh C) I take tráth as adverbial and a as poss. pron. 3 sg. masc. with general reference to the proposition in line c. The reading of C is difficult to account for.

5a an (a C) chois For the article, C has a 3 sg. masc. poss. pron, referring to Brian. The article is preferred on the model of q. 5a.

c a haitheghin (aithheghin C) The proleptic poss. pron. 3 sg. fem. refers to fáthn (d). The reading of C represents either the article (an a.) or a 3 pl. poss.
pron. (a n.-a.). The former might be acceptable in the context but seems less suitable than the reading of F.

d lámh dáirbh (or C) aitbnidh mh 'tongubháid 'hand which experienced my protection'—The translation is made in light of the historical context of the poem. However, a translation 'hand which was accustomed to protect me' may also be possible in the encomiastic setting of this quatrains. Given the relations between the ruling I ÍNeill and the descendants of Í Mhaidhrigh, a former association between the poet and Brian Óg may seem doubtful, but the phrase a lámh na leannan bfhéileadh (q. 10c) seems to imply a clandestine relationship between the pair; in this case the past tense here and in q. 8d might be better taken as modal (for a study of the modal preterite see Quin 1974).

7b san bháite ar bhceannaígh Colain Ar is permitted a reduced form of the preposition i and the relative pronoun before 'regular' verbs in the past tense (ai tuar, 'nár'), for which see BST 11.20-2. Other examples of this form are Mag. q. 1.3c, AithidD. no. 12 q. 4a, no. 23 q. 3a, no. 40 q. 34b; PB no. 25 q. 30c; and L. Br. 1, 3975; see also DIL 1 70-73. For the phrase aitbhrainnadh i is patron of, 'has a church at', 'exercises ecclesiastical functions', see Seáal. Chéitíon 90b (no. 19.1 24 n.) and DIL B 77.28-33.

c goidh i m anam an t-aoidhe This line consists of a copula identification sentence in which the pers. pron. (3 sg. fem.) refers in anticipation to the predicate anam (here fem., cf. IGT II §§ 8, 19) rather than the subject aoidhe; for discussion of this syntactic feature in Old Irish see GOI §§ 478, 815.

m tanaim 'beloved of me'—For anam in the sense translated compare go bhfiauir m anam na náthach 'until my darling met his death', GB no. 4 § 11d (= McKenna 1946, 372, 376), Breanach 1942, 167-8 q 3b, 7d and IBP no. 22 q. 1a. The literal meaning (‘soul’) may also have a part in the word-play adverted to in the Introduction.

aoidhe The term a. ‘stranger’ is occasionally applied to the dead in elegiac contexts where it may convey a sense of emotional and/or geographic separation, as in GB no. 2 q. 22: Ubraidh aitha Cruachain Cúan / fie a deire Dhuíochleat, / aoidhe caomh i gerthaith Doire, / cu r uasailte Bhriain Bhóirimhe. ‘The apple of the apple-tree of Cruachain of Conn is under the dark- red earth of Doire of Colum, a fair guest in the soil of Doire, a berry of the branch of Brian Bóirimhe’. In the present poem, the term contrasts sharply with the adjective aithnídh ‘known’ in q. 6d.

8a beaith The poet probably employs this noun not only in the sense of ‘deed’, but also with the figurative connotation ‘burden, weight of grief, etc.’; see DIL 8x. 1 bert.

b goidh olc fhlaingeam I construe this phrase as a chevile where ole is used adverbially and an object is not expressed. Alternatively, ole might be considered a substantive object antecedent of the verb in apposition to beaith (line a); transil. ‘although it is a wrongdoing which I suffer’. The use of the subjunctive is conditioned by goidh; see SnaG IV § 73.1.

10c ar lár a hámhir ‘at the height of its fame’—An alternative translation is ‘while (lit. in the midst of) recounting it’, where the poss. pron. could refer to

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beair in line a or lámh in line d. (The F text in line d theoretically allows for the first translation only, since the occurrence of the verbal noun aireamh (gen. sg.) in both c and d would introduce the metrical fault known as coaiche reamn (see IGT V § 108 and BST 230.11, 15b.14): this arises when the word (tirn) of the first line in a couplet of dethbhíthe is identical in form and meaning to the second element of its rhyming counterpart (airdelm).)

10b le dhíthen ar t-aithnídh (an lámh do bhfearlainmhe F) Both MSS provide a possible text for this line. The use of anair in C presages, while providing an artistic contrast with, q. 15d and is preferred over F’s somewhat banal construction (transl. ‘the hand worthiest of mention’). The absence of the article before a noun (lámh C) defined by a relative clause, although not the norm (cf. GOI §§ 471 and DIL I 188.86-189.25), is paralleled in q. 6d (compare its presence in q. 3b, 7d and AithidD. no. 6 q. 5a).

9b The idea is that people cannot be mollified since the hand (having been severed). (There seems little question of a translation ‘for as long as you have been buried, since the possibility of an historic present indicative of the substantive verb is doubtful at best; see IGT III §7 and Ó Buachalla 1977, 102 n. 31.)

b a-tá cás (aithní F) The reading of F is also acceptable. However, Ó hEadhúsa (GBGM 2009-13) states that a sg. verbal form is more commonly used with a collective noun than a pl. form.

cd The motif of a severed body-part being unable to hear is paralleled in GB no. 13 q. 7: m 'eallach gion go gcúime. a chin, / níl aithní na do chuirfín 'though you do not hear me, O head, I would give all my wealth to redeem you’.

8d an Chúigídh. Here, as often, an Cúigíadh refers to Ulster, see TD II 221 (no. 7 q. 29 n.) and DIL C 293.49-56.

10, 11 The idea is that Brian engaged in military campaigns all year round, despite the fact that Winter is considered an arduous time to conduct martial activity (as in CRR 8 §§ 6, 62 §§5). For similar sentiments see AithidD. no. 7 q. 18. and no. 15 q. 33.

11b Fu museice (ni mearní F) The reading of C is contiguous with Niartheach (q. 11a) and clearly required in the panegyric context (see 10, 11 n. above). (Note also the occurrence of a positive construction in F for C’s negative at q. 13c.)

cd This couplet is cited in IGT II 943 where the reading ‘tug’ (in place of ‘a’) is inconsistent with the text provided by C and F.

d fa (um C, IGT) The reading of F is preferred as the prep. fa in the sense ‘throughout’ represents the older usage to judge from the entries in DIL F 169.55-77 and 1 103.76-81.

11a lít (leat F) The form in F is also acceptable.

nair (là F) olc The readings of both MSS are metrically sound. However, C’s repetition of nair is preferred, as the adjective nair ‘another’ refers back to nair eogin (q. 10b).
The phrase do ló X means ‘since X died’; see Breandháin 1942, 182 q. 5b n.

1.a rug (tug C) F’s reading is adopted on the basis of the phrase ni rucus treig techd in TBC II 2735-6, TBC St. L 2757 and Best 1915 280. It is likely, however, that the verbs (i) beidh (rug) and (ii) do-bheir (tug) are interchangeable here as in phrases with the noun céim (a synonym of -treigh ‘step’), e.g. (i) IT II no. 6 qq. 22c, 26c; DDána no. 88 q. 1c; BST 219.17; (ii) Mag. no. 10 q. 5d; IBP no. 17 q. 45c.

b nó We would expect nó.

c The syntax of this line which shows a passive verb (deátaír) used in an active sense is unusual, but can perhaps be compared to: Gleo don Muimneach mana teimn / teicr ar teith co hAllim (‘Battle is given (lit. comes) to the Munsterman having arrived at Allim’); IT II no. 6 q. 24b). The phrase do-ní i n-éagsbais also occurs in DDána no. 30 q. 21a.

13 The premise of this quatrain is that Brian, if unmutilated, would unite Ulster. As such the reading of F (do bhfáidh) in line c is unsuitable. (Compare the variants at q. 10a above and see n. on line.

13b cuigeadh Chloine Ruddrithghe Refers to Ulster. For the etymology see EHHM 349.

14 a m’ainmire For airmhear in the sense ‘lifespan’ see DIL A 132.15-9.

áca 1 take the 3 pl. prep. pron. as referring to the people of Tir Éighe (l. b) and specifically to the ruling l Néill in the context. For another example of a 3 plur. prep. pron. used with (sg.) place-name as referent see Ó Cuív (1987) 48 q. 39d and n.

b nó (nó C) The conjunction nó in negative constructions, is preferred over nó as an anticipation of the following negative clause. Comparable examples are found in Aithid D, no. 21 q. 23c; Breandháin 1977-8, 173 q. 8d and Ó Ríain 2007, 67 q. 28a. However, distinctions between nó and nó are obfuscated to a certain degree (see DIL N 513.10; GOI §865 and q. 12b above) and the reading of C may also be acceptable.

15b ar d-eaccht i dtir-anfhobair. Although the proposition i is preceded by a verb of motion the noun tir is not in the accusative as evidenced by the absence of subsequent nasalization. Non-accusative inflexion is, however, countenanced by the tracts if the nominative and accusative forms of a noun are identical; see q. 1c n. above.

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d anáir ‘honour, respect’ – This word also has connotations of the ‘indulgence’ poets expected to be afforded to them. See discussion of this important concept by Breandháin 1983, 39.

16, 17 The terms olc and maith clearly resonate in a moral sense in the context of these quatrains and we should probably read the same terms in q. 8 in a similar light.

16d tomarchbais Although used in a general sense of ‘transgression’, this term is most frequently applied to original sin (e.g. DDó no. 24 q. 20b (and n.), GB no. 20 q. 14b, PB no. 16 q. 2d); see DIL s.v. immaturus. The line may be sententious.

17e ‘nurahd This agraphic form of the temporal adverb anuraidh is paralleled by the form of the adverb anamh in Butler’s L. 378; gus ‘night mar dhia-nisidh Mairgrig. Similar forms are also found in Mid. It.; see O’Brien 1958, 100 n. a. McLaughlin 2008, 205 and Breandháin 2008, 31 q. 34c n.

gus (acht F) Logic demands the progression in time inherent in C’s reading, rather than the equation of ‘nuraidh and a-nos implicit in F.

d The fronted prepositional phrase don mhb. bh stands as antecedent to relative bheannus. For further examples of relative clauses of this type in bardic poetry see Ó Ríain 2008, 40 q. 2d n.

18b Modhlaire The river Mourne in Co. Tyrone.

c d a chreidhinn The hand and foot (line b) constitute the two calamities referred to here.

19 There is possibly a pun in this quatrain between dh(bheanannadh ‘beheading’ and the literal meaning of the phrase ‘na gceann ‘about their head(s)’.

a nDún Downpatrick, Co. Down.

c coimhthéid ‘na gceann For combh- in the sense ‘fully’ see Murphy (1953) 243 s.v. combh-. O’Grady (1926, 369) translates the present line as: ‘alas for such as concerning [the equal importance, or, the similar character of] these [two] events are not agreed!’

d allbheinn Here, and in q. 21, it is difficult to decide whether the meaning ‘scandal, offence’ or ‘impediment, obstruction’ is more suitable in the context; see DIL s.v. allbheann (b), (c). I translate the present line with the second meaning, based on the premise of q. 18 which implies that these acts have rendered the sovereignty of Ireland unattainable. See further q. 21 n. below.

20a Fiánn Reference is to Fiann mac Cumhalach who is commonly referred to as a prophet; see for example IBP no. 43 q. 10-23 and EHHM 326-40.

b do Thir (attrib F) Éigheín I take do in the sense ‘of, from’ (de) and understand the prophecy to refer to a man from T. E. acquiring the provincial kingship rather than that a king of the province will enter T. E. as implied by F’s reading.

c an (ar F) The reading of F is best explained as a 1 pl. poss. pron. including the poet among the men of Tir Éigheín; transl. ‘our prophecy (i.e. the prophecy applicable to us)’.
d geóigeadh (cogaidh F) 'F's form is also acceptable.

21 I have translated oíthbhéim in a general sense (‘disaster, catastrophe’) here. However, as noted above (q. 19/1 n.), (i) ‘scandal, offence’ or (ii) ‘impediment, obstruction’ are also possible meanings. In the former case we should translate ‘bd’ before I was affronted’ and ‘it was no time to be affronted’, taking the lines as a reference to the poet. In the latter case we should understand the lines as continuing the idea of qg 18 and 19 that Brian's mutilation has made the domination of Ireland impossible; trans. ‘before we were thwarted’; ‘it was no time to be thwarted’. It is hard to imagine that these meanings are not also intended here.

21b seil do-nuaramar oíthbhéim (go bhfuaramar an tuilleadh C) A minor emendation to C’s reading (viz. go n-uaramar an t-óíthbhéim) would make it metrically acceptable. However, F’s reading, with Classical retention of simple (rel) form of the verb after seil, appears to be the lectio difficultior.

c bfhraíl (bfraíl C; bhfolaí F) Emendation made for rhyme with òighbháil. Alternatively read òighbháil: bfhraíl (C) or bhfolaí (F). For the various forms in question see ÍGT II §§148, 149.

d niúr (nú F) The reading of F (pres. tense cop.) represents an anacoluthon with the past tense established in the opening couplet.

ABBREVIATIONS


AtlhD.  Lambert McKenna, Aithdheoghlúin dánta. 2 vols (ÍT3 37, 40). Dublin 1939-40.


CBR  Edmund Hogan, Cath Ríosa na Rí for Brúna. Dublin 1892.


DDé  Lambert McKenna, Dúnn Dé. Baile Átha Cliath [1922].

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DIL  Dictionary of the Irish Language: Based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials. Dublin 1913-75.

EIHM  Thomas F. O’Rahilly, Early Irish history and mythology. Dublin 1946.


GGBM  Parthalán Mac Aongáin, Graintín Guaileil na mBróthar Miúr. Baile Átha Cliath 1968.


OSB  Osborn Bergin, Irish Grammatical Tracts I-V, Supplement to Érlit 6-10, 14, 17 (1915-55).


LCAB  Tadhg Ó Donnchadha, Leabhar Claonaire Aodha Buidhe. Baile Átha Cliath 1931.


NLI National Library of Ireland.

ODNB Oxford dictionary of national biography.


PB  Lambert McKenna, Philip Bocht Ó hUigríon. Dublin 1931.

RIA Royal Irish Academy.


SVBDL W. J. Watson, Scottish verse from the Book of the Dean of Lismore. Edinburgh 1937.


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