

SIR JOHN RHŶS MEMORIAL LECTURE

Thinking in Threes: The Triad in Early Irish Literature

FERGUS KELLY

Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies

I. Introductory

I AM VERY HONOURED to have been asked to give the Sir John Rhŷs Memorial Lecture for the year 2003, and wish to present on this occasion a study of the triad in early Irish literature. I have been interested in the collections of triads in the Celtic languages for many years, in particular the Old Irish text entitled in some manuscripts *Trecheng Breth Féne*, ‘a triad of judgements of the Irish’, normally referred to simply as *The Triads of Ireland*. It was edited in 1906 by the great German scholar Kuno Meyer,¹ but it is very much in need of another visit in the light of advances in scholarship and the discovery of other versions of the text.² It contains two hundred and fourteen triads, three duads, seven tetrads and one nonad. At the beginning of the text, there are also thirty-one single items relating to the monasteries of Ireland.

The arrangement of ideas in groups of three is attested from most recorded literatures, both oral and written. Thus we find triads in Greek, Latin, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Russian, English, Chinese, Japanese and many other languages. However, nowhere—to my knowledge—does one get

Read at the Academy 9 October 2003.

¹ Kuno Meyer (ed.), *The Triads of Ireland* (Todd Lecture Series, 13, Royal Irish Academy Dublin, 1906).

² Meyer based his edition on six versions, and refers to another three in his Introduction. A further four versions have since come to light. In general, the best version of *The Triads of Ireland* is in a part of the Yellow Book of Lecan written in 1407.

triads in such profusion as in the Celtic languages. This is particularly the case in Irish and Welsh, but the *genre* is also well represented in Scottish Gaelic, Breton and Cornish. In previous lectures on the Irish triads, I have made comparisons with three-headed Gaulish deities, and various other threefold sculptural representations from throughout the Celtic world.³ But when preparing for this occasion, doubts began to creep in, and I found myself wondering whether it was really valid to make a connection between Celtic art-forms and the literary conventions employed at a much later period by Irish and Welsh authors. Furthermore, there are marked divergences between Irish and Welsh triads, so we are not even justified in distinguishing a specific Celtic variety of triad. The main Irish collection—*The Triads of Ireland*—dates from the ninth century, and contains a miscellany of material covering law, nature, geography, human behaviour, etc. By contrast, the main Welsh collection, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, ‘the triads of the island of Britain’, put together around the twelfth century, is much more restricted in its subject matter, being concerned almost exclusively with British history and legend.⁴ There is therefore not a great deal in common between the surviving Irish and Welsh collections. Occasionally, we find triads in the two languages which agree quite closely. For instance, a triad in the fourteenth-century White Book of Rhydderch reads: ‘three things which subdue a man: bad land and a bad woman and a bad lord’,⁵ which is similar to Triad 72 in *The Triads of Ireland*: ‘three unfortunate things for a householder: proposing to a bad woman, serving a bad lord, exchanging for bad land’. However, the sentiments are too commonplace for there to be any question of a direct connection between these two triads. I should also mention another important difference between Irish and Welsh practice: Welsh authors—particularly of law texts—are very fond of the nonad (three threes), whereas this unit is rare in Irish texts. Instead, the authors of the Old Irish law texts commonly employed the heptad, with seven items. One of the longest of the surviving law texts is the Heptads (*Sechtae*), which consists of miscellaneous legal material arranged in sevens.⁶ There is

³ See examples illustrated in P. Mac Cana, *Celtic Mythology* (London, 1968; 2nd edn., 1983), pp. 17, 44, 70–1, 91.

⁴ Rachel Bromwich (ed.), *Trioedd Ynys Prydein: the Welsh Triads* (Cardiff, 1961; 2nd edn., 1978).

⁵ E. G. B. Phillimore, ‘A fragment from Hengwrt MS. No. 202’, *Y Cymmrodor*, 7 (1886), 89–154 at 138, § 80; Nesta Lloyd and Morfydd E. Owen (eds.), *Drych yr Oesoedd Canol* (Caerdydd, 1986), p. 214, ll. 54–7.

⁶ D. A. Binchy (ed.), *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (hereafter *CIH*) (Dublin, 1978), i. 1.1–64.5 = R. Atkinson *et al.* (ed.), *Ancient Laws of Ireland* (Dublin, 1901), v. 118–351.

little doubt that the use of the heptad form was introduced with Christianity, as the number seven was sacred to both Jews and Greeks. In the introduction to his edition of *The Triads of Ireland*, Kuno Meyer also proposed an extraneous origin for the triad form in Irish literature. He argued that the Old Irish triads were modelled on those of the Old Testament, especially the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Ecclesiastes. But the problem here is that there are actually very few triads in the Old Testament—tetrads are much commoner. All in all, therefore, the question of the origin of the triad form in Celtic literature remains shrouded in uncertainty. The case for a special Celtic cult of threeness is unproven, as is the attempt by Meyer and other scholars to establish a biblical origin.

II. The Triads of Ireland

Leaving aside such speculations, I will now concentrate on the texts themselves. As we have seen, the text of *The Triads of Ireland* starts off with a list of the characteristics of thirty-one Irish monasteries. Some of these are straightforward: no. 1 Armagh (*Ard Machae*) is designated as ‘the head of Ireland’ (*cenn Éirenn*), and no. 2 Clonmacnois (*Cluain macu Nois*) as ‘the dignity of Ireland’ (*ordan Éirenn*). Others are more obscure: why, for example, is no. 30 Kilroe (*Cell Ruaid*)⁷ listed as ‘the reproach of Ireland’ (*aibéimm Éirenn*)? Apparently something went on in this monastery of which the author did not approve, but no convincing explanation has yet been put forward. The inclusion of no. 7 Kells (*Cenannus*) in this list indicates a composition date after the year 807, when the monastery of Kells was founded. This fits in with the linguistic evidence which suggests a ninth-century date.⁸

After the list of monasteries, the text proceeds to a series of thirty geographical triads which includes places from all over the country. Most

⁷ Two manuscripts—the Book of Ballymote and the Book of Uí Maine—give this monastery as *Cell Rúadá(i)n* ‘the church of Rúadán’.

⁸ The following linguistic features indicate a date of composition in the Old Irish period, probably ninth century. The numbers in brackets refer to the triad in which the form is found. (a) Survival of the deponent: *foilsigedar* (197). (b) 3 plur. pres. indic. rel. in *-te*: *sluindte* (131–2); *fichte* (145); *coillte* (166). (c) 3 sing. pres. indic. rel. *téte* (167). (d) Relative forms of preverbs: *ara-tiagat* (169); *ara-gellat* (171); *immi-folngi* (194, 195). (e) *n*-stem nom. plur. in *-ann*: *airnadmán* (125); *fuammán* (146). (f) *r*-stem nom. plur. in *-ir*: *seithir* (136, 206–15). I propose to carry out a detailed linguistic analysis of the text in a forthcoming edition.

of these triads are fairly predictable: Triad 40⁹ gives the three rivers of Ireland as ‘Shannon, Boyne and Bann’ (*Sinann, Boand, Banda*), while Triad 58 gives the three uneven places of Ireland as ‘Breffny, the Burren, Beare’ (*Bréifne, Boirenn, Bérré*). But others provide information on such matters as economic activity and population patterns in early Christian Ireland. Triad 35 gives the three fairs (*óenaige*) of Ireland as the fair of Tailtiu (Teltown, Co. Meath), of Cruachu (Rathcroghan, Co. Roscommon), and of Colmán Ela (Lynally, Co. Offaly).¹⁰ It is noteworthy that Triad 43 puts the three unpopulated places in the northern half of the country—‘the three deserted places (*dithruib*) of Ireland: the Great Wood in Cooley (in the north of the present Co. Louth), the Wood of Déicsiu in Tuirtre (Co. Tyrone), and the Wood of Moithre in Connacht’.

Apart from the list of monasteries (nos. 1–31) and the geographical triads (nos. 32–61) the only other section of *The Triads of Ireland* to deal with a single topic is the legal series (nos. 149–86). This section gives us some idea as to how the compiler set about his work. Some of these legal triads are known to have had a previous existence as triads before being incorporated into *The Triads of Ireland*. For example, three consecutive triads (nos. 183–5) are taken from the eighth-century law text *Bretha Crólige* §§ 16, 25, 44.¹¹ Significantly, these triads are in the same order in our collection as in the original law text. It seems, therefore, that the compiler worked through a complete copy of *Bretha Crólige*, and took out three triads which appealed to him. His versions are somewhat simplified, but the meaning is not affected. Thus, *Bretha Crólige* has ‘there are three women in the territory who are not entitled to sick-maintenance or fines though injury be done to them: a woman who does not care with whom she sleeps, a woman who steals from every law-abiding person, a basilisk of sorcery’.¹² This is simplified to ‘three women who have no right to honour-price: a woman who does not care with whom she sleeps, a thieving woman, a sorceress’.¹³ In another series of legal triads, by contrast, the compiler has copied the original text practically word for word. *Triads of Ireland* nos. 116–23 contain most of the triads dealing with the

⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, all triads quoted are from the Old Irish collection, and numbered as in Meyer’s edition. I sometimes follow a different MS reading from that chosen by Meyer.

¹⁰ This fair must have been held at *Lann Ela* (Lynally), the monastery founded by the saint Colmán Ela.

¹¹ D. A. Binchy (ed.), ‘*Bretha Crólige*’, *Ériu*, 12 (1938), 1–77.

¹² Binchy, ‘*Bretha Crólige*’, § 44, *Ataat .iii. mna i tuaith nad alet otrus na fiacha cia forruastar friu: ben lasambi cuma cip cia las fia, ben gadas ar cach recht, baislec aupta* = *CIH*, vi. 2298.8–10.

¹³ Triad 185, *Téora mná na dlegat díre: ben lasmbi cummae cipé las fia, ben gatach, ben aupthach*.

qualifications of various professions from the eighth-century law text *Bretha Nemed Toísech*.¹⁴ For example, the following strange triad appears—possibly in a sarcastic spirit—to confer some sort of supernatural status on the lowly trade of comb-maker: ‘three things which confer status on the comb-maker: racing a dog in contending for a bone, straightening a ram’s horn by his breath without fire, chanting over a dunghill so that he summons on top what there is below of antlers and bones and horns’. There are no serious discrepancies between the version in *The Triads of Ireland* and that of *Bretha Nemed Toísech*.¹⁵ The same applies to the best known of the triads in this series: ‘three things which confer status on a harpist (*cruitire*): music to make one weep (*goltraige*), music to make one smile (*gentraige*), music to make one sleep (*súantraige*)’.¹⁶ Apart from the position of the verb, the versions in *The Triads of Ireland* and in *Bretha Nemed Toísech* are identical.

As well as triads which had existed previously as triads before being incorporated into our collection, there is a number of triads which are based on previously existing written texts, and were presumably converted into triads by our compiler. Most of these are legal, but one of them (Triad 62) refers to the greatest saga of early Irish tradition, the Cattle-raid of Cooley (*Táin Bó Cúailnge*). It reads: ‘three wonders concerning the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*: the *Etymologiae* came to Ireland in its place, the dead related it to the living, i.e. Fergus mac Róich recited it to Ninníne the poet in the time of Corbmac mac Fáeláin, one year’s protection for him by whom it is recited’. The first element of this triad refers to Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae*, which exerted a great deal of influence on early Irish learning, and gave rise to the practice of etymological glossing, extensively cultivated in the law schools. The second element refers to the tradition that the hero Fergus mac Róich came back from the dead to recite the *Táin* to the poet Ninníne.¹⁷ The third and most mysterious element refers to a belief that the recitation of the *Táin* confers one year’s protection (*coimge*) on the reciter: an unexpected power in a secular text.

In general, however, it is my belief that most triads in the collection were composed by a single individual. This is of course impossible to

¹⁴ *CIH*, vi. 2219.32–2220.16.

¹⁵ *CIH*, vi. 2220.5–7 = Triad 117.

¹⁶ *CIH*, vi. 2219.34–5 = Triad 122.

¹⁷ Another tradition holds that it was recited to Muirgein, son of the poet Senchae Torpéist: see T. Ó Máille, ‘The authorship of the Culmen’, *Ériu*, 9 (1921–3), 71–6; K. Meyer, ‘Die Wiederauffindung der Táin Bó Cúailnge’, *Archiv für celtische Lexikographie*, iii (1907), 2–6.

prove, but I feel that some of the more striking and unusual of these triads have a definite personal stamp. I suggest that the characteristics of their author include a rather cynical wit, a subtle feeling for nature, and a lively adventurous type of mind. He is interested in shape, texture, mood—and sometimes links quite unlikely images in a dramatic way, using his observations of nature to illustrate aspects of human behaviour. He is especially fond of paradox. This can be seen, for instance, in Triad 75, which reads ‘the three slender things which best support the world: the slender stream of milk into a pail, the slender blade of green corn above the ground, the slender thread over the hand of a skilled woman’. The author is fascinated by the paradox that slender things like a thread or a blade of corn or a stream of milk support the vast phenomenon of life. The effect is achieved through striking visual imagery and verbal elegance. In Triad 147 he lists ‘three wealths in barren places: a well in a mountain, fire from a stone, riches in the possession of a mean man’. Here he identifies three wealths which are normally wasted because of their location. A well in a mountain is of little value by reason of its remoteness, but may occasionally be drunk from. A spark is perceived as remaining uselessly within a stone until it is struck to produce fire. By definition, a mean man seldom parts with his wealth. There is also a paradox based on observation of nature in Triad 68 ‘three sorrows which are better than joy: the sorrow of a herd of pigs eating acorns, the sorrow of a ripe field of corn, the sorrow of a wood in fruit’. The author is asking us to picture the bowed heads of corn, and the trees weighed down with fruit which have the appearance of heaviness and travail. Yet these ‘sorrows’ are better than ‘joy’ because they are signs of a good harvest. In the same way, we must visualise a herd of pigs, grunting and squealing until they reach a part of the wood where the ground is covered with acorns—and then the heaviness of contented feeding descends. Again this can be regarded as a ‘sorrow’ which is better than ‘joy’, because fat pigs meant good feasting for the early Irish.

The presence of an introductory section on monasteries suggests that the compiler of *The Triads of Ireland* was a cleric. If so, he was one who had a fair acquaintance with the secular world. In Triad 91 he encapsulates the predicament of a betrayed husband with a memorable juxtaposition of images: ‘three smiles which are worse than sorrow: the smile of the snow melting, the smile of your wife to you after another man has been with her, the grin of a hound ready to leap’. Imaginatively, he links three totally unrelated phenomena to achieve a dramatic effect. Switching to a wife’s point of view in Triad 126, he seems to be expressing a general sympathy for a wife’s lot in marriage. It reads ‘three drops of a married

woman: a drop of blood, a tear-drop, a drop of sweat'. I assume that he intends the drop of blood to refer to bleeding at the rupture of the hymen on the wedding night, and that the tears and sweat refer to the sorrow and hard work which characterise a wife's existence. The 'blood, tears and sweat' triad is older than our collection, and may have been adapted by the author from the eighth-century devotional tract *Apgitir Chrábaid* 'Alphabet of Piety'. This text contains the following triad: 'he (the penitent) cannot enter the Kingdom of God unless he pass through three pools: a pool of tears of repentance, a pool of blood drawn in penitential discipline, a pool of sweat in labour'.¹⁸

In addition to being versed in matrimonial matters, the supposed clerical author of *The Triads of Ireland* was well acquainted with the alehouse. One triad contains a clearly heart-felt reference to the gloom of the man who is paying for the drinks: 'three sorrowful ones of the alehouse: the man who is giving the feast, the man for whom the feast is given, the man who drinks without being satisfied'.¹⁹ He also includes a triad which wittily conjures up a vision of a squalid guest house—'three idiots that are in a bad guest house: the chronic cough of an old hag, a brainless tartar of a girl, a hobgoblin of a gillie'.²⁰ Another area of the secular world in which the author took great interest was that of etiquette and good manners. He clearly had a deep antipathy towards any form of rude or boorish behaviour. In Triad 90 he gives the three signs of a lout (*chíanaige*) as 'interrupting stories, a rough game, jesting so as to raise a blush'. Disrespect towards a lord is similarly castigated in Triad 221: 'three things which are indecorous for a person: driving his horse before his lord so that he muddies his clothes, speaking to him without a summons, staring at him while he is eating'. There is likewise contempt in Triad 103 for the fop (*meraige*) who is characterised by three signs: 'the track of his comb in his hair, the track of his teeth in his food, the track of his stick behind him'. Clearly, attention to the hair was frowned upon in the early Irish male, and he was apparently expected to down his food by the mouthful rather than nibbling at it in a precious manner. The track of his stick behind him suggests an unacceptable swaggering or mincing gait. Likewise concerned with physical appearance is Triad 222 which gives the three proper handbreadths as 'the width of a hand between a person's shoe and his leggings, the width of a hand between his ear and his hair,

¹⁸ V. Hull (ed.), 'Apgitir Chrábaid: the Alphabet of Piety', *Celtica*, 8 (1968), 44–89 at 74, § 30.

¹⁹ Triad 94. It is not clear to me why the man for whom the feast is being given (*fer dia ndéntar*) should be sorrowful.

²⁰ Triad 114. I reproduce Meyer's vivid translation verbatim.

the width of a hand between the bottom of his cloak and his knee'. Proper treatment of a guest is touched upon in Triad 70—again a paradox—‘three welcomes which are not welcomes: having a handicraft in the same house as the family, water which is too hot on the feet, salty food without a drink’. A somewhat idiosyncratic triad (no. 89) gives the three accomplishments of Ireland as ‘a witty verse, a tune from a harp, shaving the face’. However, most pictorial representations of males from this period—in manuscripts such as the Books of Kells, Durrow, and Dimma—show a full beard. In another unusual triad (no. 137) the author displays his enjoyment of experimentation with language by using onomatopoeic interjections to provide two of the three elements: ‘three brothers of fear: hush! hist! listen!’ (*tri bráithir úamuin: sta! sist! coiste!*).

The Triads of Ireland reveal a good deal about the structure and workings of ninth-century Irish society. Some triads merely express sentiments which are standard in early Irish literature. For example, Triad 96 gives the three ruins of a territory as ‘a lying king, an unjust judge, a lustful priest’. These categories of person are repeatedly targeted in the law texts and elsewhere. But other triads provide an original slant on public affairs. Triad 242 intelligently sums up the ingredients of a successful king’s reign: ‘three things which are best for a king: justice, peace, an army’. Triad 200 expresses with a clear eye the means whereby order and stability were maintained: ‘three rocks to which lawful behaviour is bound: monastery, lord, family’. Triad 255 comments with perhaps a hint of asperity on the affluence of certain classes in Irish society: ‘three storage-pits whose depth is unknown: the pit of a king, the pit of the Church, the pit of a great poet’.²¹ As in early Irish literature generally, the world is viewed from towards the top of the social scale in *The Triads of Ireland*. This is in contrast to the proverbs of later centuries where the position of the underdog is taken. This is exemplified by the bitter nineteenth-century triad: ‘three things which cannot be trusted: the hoof of a horse, the tooth of a hound, the word of a gentleman’.²² In *The Triads of Ireland* the emphasis is quite different, the churl (*aithech*) and slave (*mug*) being objects of contempt and distrust. This attitude is exemplified in triads such as no. 191, ‘three things which tell a humble person: poverty, shabbiness, servility’. Triad 232 lists those most difficult to talk to as ‘a king

²¹ If the compiler of *The Triads of Ireland* was in fact a cleric—as suggested above—it seems strange that he should have included what could be taken as a criticism of the Church’s wealth. However, as this triad comes near the end of the collection it may be a later addition.

²² T. Ó Máille (ed.), *Sean-shocla Connacht*, 2 (Baile Átha Cliath, 1952), 240, § 4122. A number of variants of this triad are given.

about his booty, a foreigner in a breastplate, a churl under patronage'. The third item contains a sneer at the officiousness of the churl when he gets the authority of a person of status behind him. Marrying above one's station is similarly frowned upon. Triad 71 includes 'marrying the daughter of a noble (*ócthigern*)' as one of the three unfortunate things for the son of a churl. Some of the triads in the legal section also reflect society's disapproval of socially unequal unions. Triad 167 states that the queen who sleeps with a churl makes a base person (*dóer*) of herself, losing the privileges of her rank. According to Triad 152, if a free man has a child by a slave woman, this child is not entitled to a share in his father's property. However, the lower grades were tolerable if they were industrious or good craftsmen. Thus, Triad 84 gives the three fair things which hide ugliness as 'good manners in the ill-favoured, skill in a serf (*dóer*), wisdom in the misshapen'.

I suggest that the main body of the text of *The Triads of Ireland* is an original literary composition, reflecting the author's acquaintance with other texts—particularly law texts—and his own unique view of the world. There is little sign of folk origins in this collection. Early Irish literature contains many proverbs and sayings which seem to derive from common speech. This is sometimes explicitly stated: the ecclesiastical law text *Cáin Adomnáin*, 'the law of Adomnán', describes the expression: 'every cub is well-behaved under its dam' (*caín cech culén fo shaidh*) as an 'old saying' (*senfhocul*).²³ Likewise, the eighth-century poet Bláthmac uses the proverbial phrase 'it was denial after recognition' (*ba sénae iar n-aitite*), remarking that 'this is one of the sayings (*ressa*) of this kingly island', i.e. Ireland.²⁴ Popular sayings of Irish origin are even used in texts in Latin. In the preface to his *Life of Patrick*, Muirchú compares his embarking on this task to 'boys making their first appearance in the assembly', which he describes as 'a proverb of ours' (*iuxta hoc nostrorum prouerbiū*).²⁵ To my mind, very few of *The Triads of Ireland* are likely to have a popular origin. One of these is Triad 125: 'three agreements with after-sorrow: co-operative farming, vying in feats of strength, a marriage-alliance'.²⁶ This may have been a triad in general currency picked up by

²³ Kuno Meyer (ed.), *Cáin Adomnáin: an Old-Irish Treatise on the Law of Adamnan* (Anecdota Oxoniensia, Mediaeval and Modern Series, Part xii, Oxford, 1905), p. 6, § 8.

²⁴ J. Carney (ed.), *The poems of Bláthmac son of Cú Brettan* (Irish Texts Society, vol. 47, Dublin, 1964), p. 34, § 99.

²⁵ L. Bieler (ed.), *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Scriptores Latini Hiberniae, vol. 10, Dublin, 1979), p. 62.

²⁶ *Tri airnadmán iardubai: comar, coicles, clemmas.*

the compiler, and incorporated into his collection. A similar Modern Irish triad is recorded—evidently from speech—in a nineteenth-century manuscript. This version has ‘three things which are bright at first, speckled in the middle, and black in the end: co-operative farming, a marriage alliance, and living in the same house’.²⁷ The last item is different, but there is enough agreement to suggest a connection. Might both versions have come independently from oral tradition? Or does the Modern Irish oral version ultimately derive from the Old Irish collection? The same questions can be posed in relation to Triad 93 in the Old Irish collection, which reads ‘three fewnesses which are better than plenty: a fewness of fine words, a fewness of cows in grass, a fewness of friends in an ale-house’.²⁸ A metrical version of the same triad—with one different item—is found in a Modern Irish collection of Ulster proverbs: ‘a little seed in a good seed-bed, a few cows in good grass, and a few friends in an ale-house, the three best things in the world’.²⁹ There is clearly a connection between these two triads, but it is impossible to be sure of the exact relationship.

III. Structure and usage

I turn now to a discussion of the differences of structure and usage between various collections of triads in the Celtic languages. Early collections of triads tend to attract later additions. Thus, an Irish manuscript transcribed by Micheál Ó Longáin in 1818 contains a copy of *The Triads of Ireland* followed by a selection of modern triads, probably from oral tradition.³⁰ The most noticeable difference between the modern triads and those of the Old Irish collection is their treatment of the third item. As far as I can judge, the three elements of a triad are intended to have equal weight in *The Triads of Ireland*. This is supported by the fact that they often appear in a different order in the various manuscripts.³¹ In later triads, on the other hand, the third item often contains a climax or punch-

²⁷ T. F. O’Rahilly (ed.), *A Miscellany of Irish Proverbs* (Dublin, 1922), p. 68, no. 237, *Tri níthe bhíos geal ’na dtosach, breac ’na lár, agus dubh ’na ndeireadh .i. cómhár, cleamhnas agus éintigheas.*

²⁸ *Tri úathaid ata fherr sochaidi: úathad dagbriathar, úathad bó i féor, úathad carat im chuirmathig.*

²⁹ Énri Ua Muirgheasa (ed.), *Seanfhocla Uladh* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1907), p. 2, no. 1, *Beagán síl i n-áirídh chóir / beagán bó i bhféar mhaith, is beagán cáirde i dtigh an óil / na trí nídh is fearr ar bhith.* Ua Muirgheasa translates *cáirde* as ‘credit’, but this does not seem to make such good sense.

³⁰ National University of Ireland, Maynooth, MS Murphy, 48 (3. E. 4), pp. 346–56.

³¹ e.g. Triads 33, 35, 36, 37, 39, 41, 45, 54, 55, 64, 70, 76, 100, 111, 122, etc.

line. This can be illustrated by a triad from the Glens of Antrim—the territory of the MacDonnells: ‘the three finest sights in the world: a field of ripe wheat, a ship in full sail, and the wife of a MacDonnell with child’.³² This development also lends itself to humorous treatment, and we find many examples where the third item contains a humorous climax or anticlimax. A good example of an anticlimax is to be found in O’Rahilly’s *Miscellany of Irish Proverbs*: ‘three kinds of men who fail to understand a woman: young men, old men and middle-aged men’.³³ Similarly sexist is another triad in this collection: ‘three things which leave the shortest traces: bird on the tree, ship on the sea, man’s company on woman’.³⁴ Here the lover uses the triad form to bewail the faithlessness of the object of his devotion—it is as if he had never existed! The physical attributes of women form the anticlimactic punch-line of a triad in this collection ‘three things which are best if small: a beehive, a sheep, and a woman’.³⁵ The mother-in-law is the butt of another Modern Irish triad which has been recorded in many variants. A Connacht version has ‘the three sharpest eyes which exist: the eye of a cat after a mouse, the eye of a mason after a stone, the eye of an old woman after her daughter-in-law’.³⁶ A nice example of a humorous anticlimax is to be found in a Scottish Gaelic triad in the Campbell collection: ‘the three most pleasant things which ever happened to me: my mother, my home and my purse’.³⁷ A triad in a modern Breton collection likewise contains a humorous anticlimax in the third item: ‘three points which sustain the world: the point of the breast, the point of the ploughshare, and the other point which you know’.³⁸ Like many in the Old Irish collection, this triad relies for its effect on the use of paradox. In this case, human life is viewed as being sustained by three small ‘points’: nipple, ploughshare and penis, which are the producers of milk, bread and seed. One can compare the Old Irish triad (no. 75) discussed above which refers to the three ‘slender things’—the stream of milk, the blade of corn, the thread—which support the world. Another triad from the Old Irish collection which can be compared is no. 148 ‘the three renovators of the world: the womb of a

³² Meyer, *The Triads of Ireland*, p. x.

³³ O’Rahilly, *A Miscellany of Irish Proverbs*, p. 75, no. 262.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67, no. 233.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 68, no. 238.

³⁶ T. Ó Máille (ed.), *Sean-fhocla Connacht*, vol. 2 (Baile Átha Cliath, 1952), p. 238, § 4110.

³⁷ D. E. Meek (ed.), *The Campbell collection of Gaelic proverbs and proverbial sayings* (The Gaelic Society of Inverness, 1978), p. 139, § 748.

³⁸ M. L. Sauvet, ‘Proverbes et Dictons de la Basse-Bretagne: première série’, *Revue Celtique*, 1 (1870–2), 243–55 at 252 (no. 67).

woman, the udder of a cow, the moulding block of a smith'. I assume that in both this triad and in the Breton triad, the ploughshare (made by the smith) is viewed as a crucial element in the production of bread. It is worth noting that in one recension of *The Triads of Ireland*, 'the womb of a sow' (*brú birite*) has been substituted for 'the womb of a woman' (*brú mná*) of the original.³⁹ Scribal error can hardly be blamed, so it seems that the redactor made the change in the interests of delicacy, disliking the juxtaposition of the womb of a woman and the udder of a cow. Some of the general effect of the triad is lost in the change.

Both *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* and *The Triads of Ireland* make use of contrasting pairs. No. 32 of the *Trioedd* gives the three fortunate assassinations of the island of Britain, which is followed by the three unfortunate assassinations in no. 33.⁴⁰ There are many such pairs in *The Triads of Ireland*. For example, Triad 84 lists the 'three fair things which hide ugliness', and is followed by Triad 85: 'three ugly things which hide fairness'. There is even a series of contrasting pairs in this collection. Triad 206 gives the three youthful sisters as 'desire, beauty, generosity', which is followed by Triad 207, which gives the three aged sisters as 'groaning, chastity, ugliness'. Triads 208 and 209 give the three well-bred and three ill-bred sisters, and so on.⁴¹ This series is followed by another contrasting pair on the subject of marriage. Triad 216 gives the three woman-days (*tri banlæ*) as Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and explains 'if women marry men on those days, the men will love them better than they the men, and the women will outlive the men'. Triad 217 gives the three man-days (*tri ferlæ*) as Thursday, Friday and Sunday, and explains 'if women marry men on those days, they will not be loved, and their husbands will outlive them'. Saturday is an equally fortunate day for both sexes. The institution of marriage is beset with superstitions of all kinds in many societies, ancient and modern, but I have never met a parallel elsewhere for this particular tradition in Irish or other sources.

Triads 217 and 218 are also good examples of triads which include *all three* of a particular category of person, thing or idea: there are no other 'woman-days' than Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and no other 'man-days' than Thursday, Friday and Sunday. It is however more usual

³⁹ I distinguish an A Recension of *The Triads of Ireland* (main MSS: Yellow Book of Lecan, 23.N.10) and a B Recension (main MSS: Book of Lecan, Book of Ballymote, Book of Ui Maine). All the B MSS have *brú birite* (*beiridí*) in this triad.

⁴⁰ Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, pp. 68–70.

⁴¹ Triads 211 and 212 are contrasting pairs, as are Triads 214 and 215. Triads 210 and 213, on the other hand, are not paired with other triads in this series.

in this collection for triads to provide *three samples* from a larger number of possibilities. Thus—as we have seen—Triad 89 gives the three accomplishments of Ireland as ‘a witty verse, a tune from a harp, shaving the face’, but the author could no doubt have chosen other skills and achievements associated with this country. Many triads in the collection give the three best or worst or most remarkable of its type. Triad 227 lists the three which are best in a house as ‘oxen, men, axes’. The author is not suggesting that there is nothing else of value or importance which may be present in a house—but for the purposes of his triad, these are the top three.

A feature which is more common in medieval Welsh than in Irish literature is the addition of a fourth element to a previously existing triad, thereby turning it into a tetrad. In the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein* this is always a person who is greater or more notorious than the original three. No. 80 gives the three Faithless Wives of the Island of Britain as ‘the three daughters of Culfanawyd, that is Essyllt the fair-haired, and Penarwan, and Bun, wife of Fflamddwyn’.⁴² One manuscript then goes on to add that there was a wife who was more faithless than those three, Gwenhwyfar, the wife of Arthur, since she shamed a better man than any. In these triads-cum-tetrads, the additional person is generally either Arthur himself, or somebody connected with him. In her edition of *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, Rachel Bromwich suggests that these additions reflect an increased interest in Arthurian tales on the part of the scribes.⁴³ There is only one example of this phenomenon in *The Triads of Ireland*. This is in a complex double tetrad—no. 248 in the collection: ‘four hatreds of a king: a silly flighty man, a slavish useless man, a lying dishonourable man, a talkative man who has no story to tell. For a king does not grant speech save to four: a poet for satire and praise, a chronicler of good memory for narration and story-telling, a judge for giving judgements, a historian for ancient lore.’ This tetrad was evidently based on a triad in the Old Irish tale *The Conversion of Lóegaire* which gives only the poet, storyteller, and judge.⁴⁴ It seems therefore that this triad has been expanded into a tetrad as a result of the compiler’s desire to make a clear distinction between the rôles of storyteller and historian.

Another way in which a triad can be expanded is by the addition of explanatory material. In the early version of the *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*,

⁴² Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 200.

⁴³ Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. lxxxi; cf. pp. 36, 38, 142.

⁴⁴ C. Plummer, *Revue Celtique*, 6 (1883–5), 162–72 at 165.10–13 = R. I. Best and O. Bergin (eds.), *Lebor na hUidre: Book of the Dun Cow* (Dublin, 1929, repr. 1992), 294.9788–91.

represented principally by Peniarth 16, such explanatory material is rare. For example, the early version of *Trioedd* no. 8 merely lists the three Prostrate Chieftains of the Island of Britain. However, two later manuscripts—the White Book of Rhydderch and the Red Book of Hergest—add an explanation as to how they acquired this unusual appellation.⁴⁵ We find a similar situation in the Old Irish collection. Only nine of the triads, most of which occur towards the end of the collection, contain explanatory material.⁴⁶ They are likely to be additions to the main body of the text.

Triads are to be found in large numbers in the Welsh law texts—even more abundantly than in early Irish legal material. Sometimes the Welsh legal triads are grouped together in long series,⁴⁷ on other occasions they are dispersed among the texts.⁴⁸ They are mostly strictly legal, but a few are more general in character. For instance, one triad gives the three incitements to revenge as ‘screaming of female relatives, and seeing the bier of their relation, and seeing the grave of their relation without compensation’.⁴⁹ Apart from the reference to compensation (*ymdiuwyn*), this is not strictly a legal triad. Another triad with minimal legal content gives ‘the three covered things of a court: a mead vat, and a sentence (of judgement), and a song, before they are presented to the king’.⁵⁰ Samples of legal and other categories of Welsh triad are given in *Drych yr Oesoedd Canol* by Nesta Lloyd and Morfydd Owen.⁵¹ The *Trioedd Cerdd*, triads about poets and poetry, have a certain amount in common with the series of triads in the Old Irish law text *Bretha Nemed Toisech*, listing the three skills required of poets, musicians, and other professionals.⁵² There are also some similarities between the Medieval Welsh collection of twenty-nine gnomic triads in the White Book of Rhydderch and *The Triads of Ireland*. Both contain material on the general themes of human behaviour,

⁴⁵ Bromwich, *Trioedd Ynys Prydein*, p. 14.

⁴⁶ They are Triads 135, 216, 217, 218, 220, 235, 236, 237, 251.

⁴⁷ S. J. Williams and J. E. Powell (eds.), *Llyfr Blegywryd* (Caerdydd, 1942), pp. 107.18–126.18 = M. Richards (ed.), *The Laws of Hywel Dda: The Book of Blegywryd* (Liverpool, 1954), pp. 101–15.

⁴⁸ Williams and Powell, *Llyfr Blegywryd*, p. 40.1–4; pp. 78.24–80.6 = Richards, *The Laws of Hywel Dda*, pp. 51–2; pp. 80–1.

⁴⁹ Williams and Powell, *Llyfr Blegywryd*, p. 111.29–31 = Richards, *The Laws of Hywel Dda*, p. 104.

⁵⁰ Williams and Powell, *Llyfr Blegywryd*, p. 118.20–22 = Richards, *The Laws of Hywel Dda*, p. 109.

⁵¹ Lloyd and Owen, *Drych yr Oesoedd Canol*, pp. 76–80, 151–2, 208–16.

⁵² *CIH*, vi. 2219.32–2220.16. Some of these triads are included in *The Triads of Ireland*, nos. 116–23.

lordship, the characteristics of women, and natural phenomena. In the Welsh collection we find psychological insights such as ‘the three meanings of a whisper: power and treachery and humility’,⁵³ and occasional flashes of wit, such as ‘the three sweet things of the world: mead and success and sin’.⁵⁴ As in *The Triads of Ireland*, elements from the natural world may be combined with an element from human society: ‘three things which cannot be dispensed with no matter how much harm they do: fire and water and a lord’.⁵⁵ Finally, the series of *Trioedd arbennig*, ‘the principal threes’, displays an ingenious elaboration of the triad form.⁵⁶ It starts off with the three principal Ones, that is, ‘One God, One Death and One Grave to which everybody goes’, and then gives the three principal Twos, that is, ‘Adam and Eve, the Sun and the Moon, Heaven and Earth’, and then the three principal Threes, that is, ‘the three persons who are in Heaven, and the three kings who worshipped Christ—Jaspar, Melchior, Balthasar—and the three divisions of the world—Asia, Africa, Europe’, and so on up to the three principal Tens. Many of the items listed agree with Late Latin numerical schemes, such as *De Arithmetica*. However, the arrangement of the numbers one to ten in groups of three seems to be a Welsh innovation.

IV. The place of *The Triads of Ireland* in early Irish literature

I conclude this lecture with a few general remarks on the place of *The Triads of Ireland* in early Irish literature. Where does this collection fit in? Why was it compiled at all? The period between the seventh and ninth centuries was one of great literary activity in Ireland, and many different types of text were produced in both Irish and Latin—sagas, annals, religious poetry, histories, law texts, penitentials, etc. In modern discussions of early Irish literature, *The Triads of Ireland* (*Trecheng Breth Féne*) is categorised as a wisdom text, and grouped along with a few others to form a rather disparate group of compositions. The earliest of these is *Audacht Moraimn* ‘the testament of Morann’, which can be dated to

⁵³ Lloyd and Owen, *Drych yr Oesoedd Canol*, p. 214, ll. 79–82.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, ll. 75–8.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, ll. 70–4.

⁵⁶ Morfydd E. Owen, ‘Y Trioedd Arbennig’, *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies*, 24 (1972), 434–50.

around the seventh century AD.⁵⁷ This is essentially a text on how to be a good king, with emphasis on the crucial importance of the king's justice (*fir flathemon*). If the king is just there will be peace and stability in the kingdom, and nature will reward him and his people with abundance of fruit, corn, fish, milk yields, fertility of women, and absence of plagues and lightning.

The importance of the king's justice is also touched upon in a later wisdom text entitled *Tecosca Cormaic*, 'the teachings of Cormac', probably composed in the ninth century, and therefore roughly contemporaneous with *The Triads of Ireland*. It deals with a variety of topics, including the rights and duties of kings, proper behaviour at a feast, how to plead a law case and other miscellaneous items of advice and observations on human behaviour. To give an idea of the general flavour of this text, I quote here part of a section on the care of the body—a rather odd passage essentially advocating moderate behaviour and clean living:

What is worst for the body of a person? Sitting too long, lying too long, long standing, heavy lifts, exertions beyond one's strength, . . . , running too much, leaping too much, frequent falls, sleeping with one's leg over the bedrail, swift racing, gazing at glowing embers, stepping in the dark, wax, beestings, new ale, bull-flesh,⁵⁸ curds, dry food, bog-water, rising too early, cold, sun, hunger, drinking too much, eating too much, sleeping too much, sinning too much, grief, running up a height, shouting against the wind, a blow beyond one's strength, drying oneself by a fire, summer-dew, winter-dew, beating ashes, swimming on a full stomach, sleeping on one's back, a deep drink, frenzy, foolish romping.⁵⁹

We have seen that the material on ecclesiastical sites at the beginning of *The Triads of Ireland* suggests a monastic connection. *Tecosca Cormaic*, on the other hand, strikes me as being the literature of a royal court: the king is advised on how to organise his household—not to employ an alcoholic cupbearer or a bad-tempered doorkeeper, for example.⁶⁰ There is also considerable emphasis on the military demands of kingship, including the advice that he should carry out raids across the borders of other kingdoms—this is very unlike the generally pacific tenor of *The Triads of Ireland*. The author of *The Triads of Ireland* conveys a fairly sympathetic attitude towards women, whereas whoever wrote *Tecosca*

⁵⁷ F. Kelly (ed.), *Audacht Morainn* (Dublin, 1976), p. xxxii.

⁵⁸ The word *tarb* 'bull' presumably refers here to 'bull-flesh', as Meyer suggests.

⁵⁹ K. Meyer, (ed.), *Tecosca Cormaic: the instructions of King Cormac Mac Airt* (Todd Lecture Series, 15, Dublin, 1909), pp. 38–40, § 21.

⁶⁰ Meyer, *Tecosca Cormaic*, p. 50, § 34.

Cormaic comes across as an extreme male chauvinist. This is apparent in his 122-line diatribe of unremitting ferocity directed against women. It is crude and unpleasant material—containing little wit or insight—and leads to a resounding climax of hatred:

better to trample upon them than to fondle them, better to crush them rather than to cherish them; . . . they are waves that drown you, they are fire that burns you, they are two-edged weapons that cut you, they are moths for sticking to one, they are serpents for cunning, they are darkness in light, they are bad among the good, they are worse among the bad.⁶¹

From the point of view of the student of early Irish literature, the main interest of the passage lies in the fact that it does not seem to belong to the monastic anti-feminine tradition where women are regarded as forbidden fruit and the chief menace to clerical vocations. This appears rather to be the product of an environment sated with female company and contemptuous through familiarity. The feminine behaviour objected to, for instance, includes such faults as being sulky on a journey, tearful during music, craving for delicacies, and sorrowful in an alehouse. From the perspective of the author of *Tecosca Cormaic*, the important things in life are war, statecraft, law and feasting—the typical concerns of a royal court. I therefore suggest that in *Tecosca Cormaic* we have an early example of Irish court literature.

Different in tone, content and date as these wisdom texts are, they all have connections with the law texts, and medieval Irish scholars regarded them as an extension of the legal canon. The thirteenth-century lawyer Giolla na Naomh mac Aodhagáin advocates in a poem of advice to a student of law that he should memorise not only the law texts but also the wisdom-texts, of which he identifies *Audacht Morainn* (here called *Teagasga Morainn*, ‘the teachings of Morann’), *Senbriathra Fíthail* ‘the ancient sayings of Fíthal’, and *Tecosca Cormaic*.⁶² All Irish wisdom texts contain some purely legal material, as we have seen to be the case particularly with *The Triads of Ireland*. But it must nonetheless be stressed that the wisdom texts and law texts are essentially different in their basic aim. The general intention of *The Triads of Ireland* is to set out a code of behaviour, both for the good of society as a whole and for the benefit of the individual. For example, Triad 100 gives the three darknesses into

⁶¹ Meyer, *Tecosca Cormaic*, pp. 28–34, § 16.

⁶² Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha (ed.), ‘An address to a student of law’, in *Sages, saints and storytellers: Celtic studies in honour of Professor James Carney*, ed. D. Ó Corráin, L. Breatnach and K. McCone (Maynooth, 1989), pp. 159–77 at 165 (§§ 8, 10, 11).

which women should not go as ‘the darkness of mist, the darkness of night, the darkness of a wood’. This is clearly not a legal statement—a woman attacked under such conditions has fully the same entitlements to compensation and atonement as if it were broad daylight. What the author is doing is *advising* women to avoid such dangerous situations. There is an element of advice—explicit or implicit—in a large proportion of *The Triads of Ireland*. But occasionally there seems to be no particular message: the author is simply observing how people behave. For example, Triad 233 gives three whose spirits are highest as ‘a young scholar after having read his psalms, a youngster who has put on man’s attire, a maiden who has been made a woman’. Here he is not advising or moralising, but merely observing how young people are wont to react at certain occasions in their lives. Sometimes his observations are purely scientific and have no relevance to the human condition. Triad 145 gives the three cold things which bubble as ‘a well, the sea, new ale’. One would of course expect a bubbling liquid to be at boiling point, but the author here is intrigued by the paradox of finding three *cold* liquids which bubble.

In conclusion, *The Triads of Ireland* can be described as a hotchpotch of ideas—some banal, some highly original—on human psychology, the structure of society, the workings of nature, the geography of the country, and other topics. There is no apparent attempt to organise the material under headings or in any particular order. So, for example, the thirty geographical triads near the beginning of the text follow no pattern that I can identify. This style of presentation is characteristic of Irish wisdom texts generally—*Tecosca Cormaic* contains a similar jumble of topics, as do two other partially overlapping wisdom texts *Senbriathra Fithail*, ‘the ancient sayings of Fithail’,⁶³ and *Briathra Flainn Fhína*, ‘the sayings of Flann Fína’.⁶⁴ All these wisdom-texts—and in particular *The Triads of Ireland*—are of great interest to the student of early Irish literature as well as to the social historian.

Note. I am most grateful to Morfydd Owen for generously providing me with information on the Welsh collections of triads.

⁶³ R. Smith (ed.), ‘The *Senbriathra Fithail* and related texts’, *Revue Celtique*, 45 (1928), 1–92 at 1–61.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1–92 at 61–92; C. Ireland (ed.), *Old Irish wisdom attributed to Aldfrith of Northumbria: an edition of Briathra Flainn Fhina maic Ossu* (Tempe, Arizona, 1999).

The Triads of Ireland cover a vast range of subjects. Triads 1-31 are about monasteries, 32-61 cover geography, and 149-86 law. The rest are a miscellany with no apparent overarching structure. Though they are all called triads, only 214 of the 256 of the triads form groups of threes. There are also three duads, seven tetrads, one nonad and 31 single items relating to monasteries at the start of the collection.[2]. The following example is Triad 91: TrÁ gena ata messu brÁ³nÁ Thinking in Threes: The Triad in Early Irish Literature", Proceedings of the British Academy, 125: 1â€“18 , audio recording of lecture via www.britac.ac.uk. Further reading[edit]. Sims-Williams, Patrick (1978), "Thought, Word and Deed: an Irish Triad", Å%riu, 29: 78â€“111, JSTOR 30007767. Modern adaptations[edit]. Thinking in Threes: The Triad in Early Irish Literature", Proceedings of the British Academy, 125: 1â€“18. , audio recording of lecture via www.britac.ac.uk. Further reading. Sims-Williams, Patrick (1978), "Thought, Word and Deed: an Irish Triad", Å%riu, 29: 78â€“111. Modern adaptations. A parody of the triad form can be found in Flann O'Brien's novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939). An illustrated adaptation of selected Triads specially designed as gift book or for children: Fergus Kelly (introduction), Aislinn Adams (illustrator). *The Three Best Things*. Appletree. 1994. External links. Early Irish Wisdo Irish: TÁjin. When do triads occur in both stories/what do they describe? Noticeable differences in usage? Is samlaid do-meil Conchobor a (f)laith : trian ind laÃ oc dÃ©icsin na macraide, a trian n-aill oc imbirt (f)idchille, a trian n-aill oc Á³ul chormae, conid gaib cotlud de. Welsh: Branwen. New sources. Morfyd Owen, 'Welsh Triads'. Fergus Kelly, 'Thinking in Threes: The triad in early Irish literature'. Chosen stories. â€ˆSef dial a wnaethant, gyrru Branwen o un ystavell ac ef, aâ€™™y chymell y bobî yn y llys, a pheri yâ€™™r kygyd, gwedy bei yn dryllyaw kic, dyvot idi a tharaw bonclust arnei beunyð. That early Irish literature was afterwards much corrupted may be admitted, without throwing doubt upon all records because of interpolations and changes, through indiscreet zeal, or love of the marvellous. Spenser, though an Englishman, did justice to Ireland when he wroteâ€™™It is certain the Irish hath had the use of letters very anciently and long before England." Let us acknowledge with Faber, that "fictions of ancient poetry . . . will be found to comprehend some portion of historic truth."Â The Irish Academy and other literary institutions have done excellent service in translations. Walker's *Irish Bards* and Miss Brooke's *Reliques of Irish Poetry* may be consulted with advantage, as well as Hardiman's *Irish Minstrelsy* .