
ACALLAM NA SENÓRACH
AN IRISH COLLOQUY
FOR CHORUS, GUITAR AND BODHRÁN

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THE LIBRETTO

This English text, unless otherwise noted, is based mostly on ‘Tales of the Elders of Ireland’ (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), translated with an introduction and notes by Ann Dooley and Harry Roe, which I adapted especially for this musical setting. This reworking was made with the invaluable assistance of Geraldine Parsons, who, in addition to reciting the Middle Irish poetry in order that I be able to set it musically, provided me with a general understanding of the narrative and its context

The Middle Irish poetry is taken from ‘Acallamh na Senórach’, edited and partially translated by Whitley Stokes in *Irische Texte mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1880-1909), edited by Whitley Stokes and Ernst Windisch.

Other sources consulted in the preparation of the libretto include ‘A golden treasury of Irish poetry: A.D. 600 to 1200’ (London and Melbourne: Macmillan, 1967), edited and with translations by David Herbert Greene and Frank O’Connor and ‘Silva Gadelica (1-31): a collection of tales in Irish with extracts illustrating persons and places’ (London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1892), edited and translated by Standish Hayes O’Grady. Both these texts were brought to my attention by Kay Muhr, who provided some additional assistance with this project.

PART ONE

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PROLOGUE TO PART ONE

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THE FÍAN

After the battles of Commar, Gabair, and Ollarba, the *Fían*¹ was destroyed. The survivors scattered across Ireland and, by the time our story begins, only one of the nobles of this ancient *Fían* was still alive: Caílte. Sixteen of the *Fían* warriors travelled with him across the wooded and flower-covered slopes of the Fews.

Patrick was reciting his office. Then seeing Caílte and his men approaching, was first seized with fear and horror at the sight of these warriors of an earlier age. But then Patrick, apostle to the Irish, arose and sprinkled holy water on these great men, for a thousand legions of demons had been above their heads. The great men then sat down.

‘Well, my friend, there is something I would ask you,’ said Patrick to Caílte. ‘Find us a well of pure water close by, so that we might baptize the peoples.’ Caílte took Patrick by the hand and together they went over the ramparts of the fortress. Just nine steps from the portal they saw a lovely crystal-clear spring.

‘Do you know why you have been brought to speak with me?’ asked Patrick. ‘Indeed I do not’ replied Caílte. ‘So that you might submit to the Gospel of the King of Heaven and Earth.’ Patrick then poured on him the waters of baptism and Caílte recited these lines:

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THE SPRING

*‘A thoibur Trágha dhá bhan
álaind do bhílar barrhglan.
ó ro tréigedh do chnuas ort
nír’ léiced fás dot fochlocht,*

*Is uait dochuadar in Fiann
dar’ marbad Coinchenn coimfial,
dar’ cuireadh ár Feinde Find
isin mhadain ós Maolghlenn.*

*A(r) marbadh chon ocus fer
ar n-athchuma laoch láingheal
co cuala glaodh Gharaidh ghlain
adhaigh re taobh in topair.’*

‘O spring of Tráig Dá Ban,
lovely your bright cress sprigs;
Since your pruning was neglected,
your brooklime has multiplied.

From you the *Fían* set out,
when generous Coinchenn was slain,
When Finn’s *Fían* was slaughtered,
in the morning above Maelglenn.

After the slaughter of dogs and men, after the
wounding of shining warriors,
Garad’s cry was heard at night
beside the spring.’

Caílte put his hand to the rim of his shield and gave Patrick, in payment for his baptism, and that of his companions, a block of red, flame-like gold from the land of Arabia. ‘This was my last gift from Finn mac Cumhaill, Chieftan of the *Fían*,’ said Caílte, ‘and I give it to you, Patrick, for the good of my soul, and the soul of the chief of the *Fían*.’ This block of gold reached from the end of Patrick’s hand to the top of his shoulder. This is the gold that was later used on the psalters and missals of Ireland.

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RECITATIVE

‘What shall I and my warriors do?’ asked Caílte. ‘You are welcome to spend a month, a season, or a year with me,’ said Patrick, ‘for I am beholden for ever to you and to your poetry and stories.’

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CAS CORACH

Then Patrick asked of Caílte, ‘Were there musicians with the *Fían*?’ ‘Cas Corach,’ said Caílte, ‘the finest in Ireland. He came to me to learn knowledge and true lore, and he remains with me still.’ ‘Play for us, then, Cas Carach,’ said Patrick.

‘I will,’ said Cas Corach, ‘but give me a reward, holy cleric, for my music.’

‘You shall have Heaven,’ said Patrick, ‘though a man of your art may encounter great inhospitality, through music the inhospitality will disappear.’

‘Never has it pleased me more to perform before anyone else, holy cleric,’ Cas Corach said. And so Cas Corach played.

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GUITAR INTERLUDE I

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THE SÍD

At that time drowsiness and sleep fell upon the cleric from the beguiling music of the *síd*.² Cas Corach finished his music and put his dulcimer away.

‘Good is the art that you have performed for us, even though the magic of the *síd* is in it. For if there is music in heaven,’ said Patrick, ‘there should also be music on earth.’

When Patrick rose early the next morning, a great and heavy snow had fallen and a grievous cold had descended. It twisted the branches of the russet-leaved trees like withes, so that strong men were unable to journey.

As cold storm arose, Caílte found Patrick and recited the following verse:

*‘Is fuar geimred, atracht gaeth
eirgid dam discir dergbaeth,
ní te anocht in sliab slan
gé beth dam dian ic dordan.*

‘Winter is cold; the wind has risen;
the fierce stark-wild stag arises;
not warm tonight is the unbroken mountain,
even though the swift stag be belling

*As maith chodlus in dam donn
fuil is a chnes re coronn,
mar do beth fá thuind tuaidhi
deredh oidche induaire.*

Well sleeps the brown stag
Who rests his side on Corron,³
as though he were beneath the wave of Tonn Tuaighe⁴
at the end of a cold night.

*Atlochar do rígh nime
do Mac Muire inghine,
dobeirinn mór sochd ar sluag
ge ber anocht co hadfuar.’*

I thank the King of Heaven,
Son of the Virgin Mary:
often used I to still armies,
though I be tonight very cold.⁵

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RECITATIVE

‘And you shall have Heaven for your poetry and your art,’ said Patrick to Caílte. ‘But tell me why is that spring at the end of the lake called the Spring of the Company of Women?’

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NÍAM

Caílte answered as follows: ‘Níam, the daughter of the King of Munster, eloped and fled with Oisín, the son of Finn, to that spring. Whilst Oisín was hunting, Níam and her thirty women would wash their hands and faces in that clear blue water.

Meanwhile the King of Munster was greatly offended that his daughter had eloped with Oisín. So, he assembled five battalions, each of three thousand men. They pursued the *Fían* as far as this, where Níam and her women were washing at that spring.

As Níam saw the battalions, she said, “Sad is that!” Happy the one who would find death, rather than her father and the nobles of the two provinces of Munster would see her thus.

Níam then put her face to the ground and died there together with her thirty women. Her heart came out through her lips in a gush of blood. From that time, this hill is called the Hill of the Slaughter and that spring is called the Spring of the Company of Women.

Then Caílte recited:

*'Atá 'sa chnoc in rigan
sochaide rissa digal,
Cnoc ind áir óssin ille
baile chaich 'na comnaide.'*

'The queen lies on the hill,
a company came to avenge her,
its name is Hill of the Slaughter ever since;
the place where all remained.'⁶

PART TWO

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PROLOGUE TO PART TWO

One cannot count the number of stories and verses that Caílte related of the local lore of each hill and region that Patrick asked about, as well as the great deeds of valour and prowess he had done, or the tales of the nobles of the *Fían*.

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GUITAR INTERLUDE II

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RECITATIVE

'I shall speak of Cáel, a warrior of Finn mac Cumail's retinue, and Créde, his wife,' said Caílte.

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CÁEL AND CRÉDE

'She looked after the sick and wounded of the *Fían* when we fought in Ventry. On the last day of the battle a tragedy occurred; Cáel was drowned, chasing his opponent into the sea. After he had drowned, he was washed ashore and his wife and the nobles of the *Fían* found him. Créde came and lay beside him and said, with great mourning and lamentation, "Why should I not die here, mourning for my husband? Look! The wild creatures die recklessly in sorrow too."

She then recited the following poem:

*Saeth lim Cáel
do beith a richt mairbh rem thaebh,
Tond do thoct tar a thaebh geal
is ed rommer, mét a aebh.*

'I grieve that Cáel lies,
now as a corpse, beside me:
since the wave swept over his gleaming side,
the greatness of his beauty has driven me to madness.'⁷

'Créde then lay down beside Cáel and died of sorrow. They were buried together in a single grave,' said Caílte, 'and it was I who raised the stone above their grave, still called the Grave of Cáel and Créde.'

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CAÍLTE

‘Discover for me the true state of my existence, for I am old and at the end of my life,’ asked Caílte. ‘What are the number of years that remain to me?’

Patrick then answered with this verse:

*‘Secht mbliadna déc ón ló aniu
duit, a Chailte co cáemchlú,
co taethais ic Lind Temrach
cid doccair leissin teglach.*

‘From today seventeen years remain to you,
O Caílte with fair fame,
until you fall at Tara’s Pool,
Sad will the household be.’⁸

Then Caílte said, ‘may you have victory and blessing, dear Patrick, for that is the same prophecy that was made by my chief, Finn mac Cumail.’

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GUITAR INTERLUDE III

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PATRICK

‘You have lightened our spirits and our mind, even though our religious life has been disrupted and our prayers neglected,’ said Patrick. Aibelán and Solusbrethach, his two guardian angels, then came to Patrick and he asked them if it were the wish of the King of Heaven and Earth that he listen to these tales of the *Fían*.

The angels answered him with one voice: ‘Dear holy cleric, this ancient warrior recalls only fraction of his tales, for he is from an earlier age. Have these stories written down on scribes’ tablets in the language of poets; the hearing of them will delight the lords and commons of later times.’ The angels then left them.

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RECITATIVE

At that time Cas Corach said, ‘Well, my dear cleric, my dear Caílte, it is time for me to leave now.’ ‘May you be blessed,’ said Patrick, ‘Rise up and take your dulcimer.’ As Cas Corach made ready to go, a paternoster was sung:

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FÍAN PATERNOSTER

*Pater noster, qui es in caelis:
sanctificetur Nomen Tuum;
adveniat Regnum Tuum;
fiat voluntas Tua,
sicut in caelo, et in terra.
Panem nostrum cotidianum da nobis hodie;
et dimitte nobis debita nostra,
Sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris...*

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us...

Patrick then said to Caílte, ‘The men and women of Ireland will meet in Tara soon. Go there and meet them, so that you can tell them of the *Fían*. Tell them of your deeds and those of Finn mac Cumail.’

Well, Caílte agreed to that and said, ‘Everything I have promised, I shall do.’ Then Patrick said, ‘you are dearly beloved by me.’

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EPILOGUE

Caílte bade farewell to Patrick, then went to Tara and told much knowledge and true lore, until his passing. And all that he said was preserved by the ollaves⁹ of Ireland.

¹ *Fíán*: a band of warriors

² *Síd*: the underworld

³ Corron: a district in Co. Sligo (translates as ‘the crown’)

⁴ Tonn Tuaighe: the Bann estuary (one of the ‘Three Waves of Ireland’)

⁵ ‘A golden treasury of Irish poetry: A.D. 600 to 1200’ (London and Melbourne: Macmillan, 1967), edited and with translations by David Herbert Greene and Frank O’Connor

⁶ ‘*Silva Gadelica* (1-31): a collection of tales in Irish with extracts illustrating persons and places’ (London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1892), edited and translated by Standish Hayes O’Grady

⁷ Adapted from a translation by Kay Muhr

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ollaves: People of learning