

ACALLAM NA SENÓRACH: AN IRISH COLLOQUY

THE TEXT

Acallam na Senórach, a Middle Irish narrative dating to the late 12th or early 13th century, translates to English as ‘The Colloquy of the Ancients’ or ‘Dialogue of the Elders’. It is one of the most important texts to survive from that period and is one of the longest surviving works of original medieval Irish literature.

The original text tells the story of St Patrick’s interactions with two of the last-surviving members of a *fián* (band of warriors) once led by Finn mac Cumail: Caílte and Oisín. They are still alive centuries after the famed battles in which they fought (traditionally assigned to the third century) and no explanation is given as to why they are still roaming Ireland, with their followers, at the time of St Patrick’s arrival in the fifth century.

The conversation between the saint and Caílte (who takes a significantly larger role in the dialogue than Oisín), as they journey around Ireland, provides a frame in which are embedded approximately 200 shorter narratives describing incidents in the era of Finn and his *fián*.

Acallam na Senórach survives in five manuscripts, which date from the 15th and 16th centuries: two in the Franciscan Collection at University College Dublin, two in the University of Oxford and one in Chatsworth House.

THE MUSIC

In writing this musical setting of *Acallam na Senórach* I was drawn to the evenness of the dialogue. Instead of St Patrick simply converting the pagan warriors, he is encouraged to listen to Caílte’s stories and poems of an earlier time, in which the saint delights.

This secular/sacred osmosis is maintained unwaveringly throughout the entire text. By the end of the narrative, one has witnessed not only the arrival of a new religion in Ireland, but also a richly-recounted secular narrative map of the entire island: the peaceful and enriching shaking of two great hands.

In preparing the libretto (the sung text), I have focused on only a few of the shorter constituent tales. This decision was born of the practical constraints of duration. I have, however, kept the skeleton, albeit smaller, of the overall frame in place. Finally, for the sake of simplicity, Oisín is removed from the primary narrative.

The characters are not assigned specific voices. The narrative as a whole is carried by a persistently changing combination of voices and guitar. The one exception is Cas Corach, the musician of the *síd* (underworld) who is most closely embodied, throughout this setting, in the solo interludes for guitar.

The music itself is not ethnographically inclined; that is, I have not attempted to reconstruct theories on Irish music of the period from which *Acallam* stems. However the score generally, and especially in the guitar writing (the editing of which was by Stewart French, who performed the guitar solo for the premiere) is imbued with an air of Arab and Persian influence.

The dulcimer, which Cas Corach plays, is thought to have been similar to the Iranian *Santur*. A potential antecedent of the *bodhráin* (Irish frame drum), for which I have written two parts in this work, is the North African *bendir*. Considering that the surviving manuscripts of the *Acallam* stem from a period in which Ireland maintained some contact with North Africa and the Near East, both of a friendly (trade) and hostile (piracy) nature, perhaps some variety of

cultural exchange (not dissimilar to that between St Patrick and Caílte) influenced the extant transcriptions.

Acallam, after all, tells us that, following his baptism by the saint, Caílte repays Patrick with a block of gold from the 'Land of Arabia'. This is, no doubt, a reference to the Holy Land (from a different era altogether). For me, however, that precise moment, where continents, cultures, material goods and spiritual blessing intersect evenly, is the kernel of the entire work and, from my first reading of the text, served as the catalyst for this musical rendering.

SYNOPSIS

PART ONE begins with a prologue (I), after which we witness Patrick, newly-arrived in Ireland, meeting Caílte, an ancient warrior, and his retinue for the first time (II). Caílte is baptised by Patrick and repays the saint first by reciting a poem and then with a large block of gold. We are told that it is from this gold that the subsequent decoration of the psalters and missals of Ireland was crafted.

Caílte then introduces Cas Corach (III), a fine musician of the síd (underworld), who plays for Patrick (IV), lulling the saint to sleep. He awakes to a fierce storm in the morning (V). After the storm has subsided, Patrick asks Caílte about a nearby spring, which prompts the warrior to tell the tale of Níam and Oisín (VI).

At the start of PART TWO (VII), we learn that a great number of stories and verses have been recited by Caílte to Patrick (VIII) including the sorrowful tale of Cáel and Créde (IX). This prompts Caílte to ask Patrick of his own mortality (X) and Patrick answers, giving the warrior the number of years he has left to live.

After some time (XI), Patrick worries that he has been neglecting his duties (XII). However, he is reassured by his two guardian angels that the stories of Caílte are important and should be preserved. At this signal (XIII), Caílte decides to leave for Tara, which Patrick has already foretold to be the warrior's final resting place.

The setting closes with the parting of Patrick and Caílte (XIV).

Tarik O'Regan , January 2011