



**Review—*The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Medieval Irish Saga*, by Ralph O’Connor**

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Just as the image of the sun is thrown  
Upon the haze, before it rises, so  
Great destinies send out their harbingers.  
And in today, tomorrow’s spirit walks.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps like no other medieval Irish saga, *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* ‘The Destruction of Derga’s Hostel’ epitomises the incontrovertibility of fate, which entangles the saga’s audience just as much as it does its royal protagonist, Conaire. In turn, the reader witnesses Conaire’s rise to and fall from power as Ireland’s high king as a path which has been laid out before him, and over which Conaire exerts next to no control.

Cautionary tale, tragedy or political allegory, interpretations of the *Togail* have been manifold. Yet, Ralph O’Connor’s study is the most comprehensive which has appeared to date. In ten chapters, O’Connor demonstrates the impressive scope of his analysis. The first chapter sets out the textual background of the story, situating the saga within its manuscript context, yet taking care to address both an expert and a general readership. Chapters 2 (“A Child of the Otherworld”) to 7 (“Sovereignty Shattered”) comprise the core of O’Connor’s work. Through close reading of the text, O’Connor enables the reader to accompany Conaire on his journey, beginning with his unusual conception and birth and culminating in his death at Da Derga’s Hostel. Chapters 8-10 look beyond the text: Chapters 8 and 9 focus on the Latin and specifically the Biblical dimension of the *Togail*, reviewing the question of classical and Biblical versus vernacular influence on the structure and ethos of the story; while Chapter 10 revolves around the reception of the text by its original audience, providing a historical framework for contemporary concepts of kingship.

*The Destruction of Da Derga’s Hostel* is a work which wants to be understood and appreciated by more than just a Celtic Studies audience. O’Connor has supplemented the general index with a glossary of jargon and Latin and Irish terms, and has made ample use of tables and figures to elucidate the intricate structure of the story. His writing style is lively and engaging. His chapters are broken up into sections, which are rarely longer than 8-10 pages, thus presenting the discussion in digestible portions. All quotes from the numerous languages O’Connor uses are accompanied by either in-text or footnote translations, making the work more accessible to students.

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<sup>1</sup> This passage appears at the beginning of chapter 5 of O’Connor’s book (“The House of Death”); who in turn takes it from Schiller, F. (1979) *The Robbers and Wallenstein*. Translated by: Lampert, F.J. London: Penguin., p.456.

Further, O'Connor revisits questions and challenges assumptions, which are central to the discipline of Celtic Studies in particular. Most provocative is his calling into question of the long-held belief that textual inconsistencies in a medieval saga must necessarily point to a lack of skill on the part of the compiler. Rather, O'Connor starts out with the postulate that the work was structured "for its author's own reasons" (p.15), highlighting the various parallels, climaxes and narrative devices which form the building blocks of the story. On a more general note, he challenges the assumption that the "[...] very appropriateness of literary analysis requires defending from the ground up" (p.18).

In the same way that Greek tragedy uses prophecy to steer its characters towards their doom, Irish saga uses *geisi*. These (usually royal) taboos are injunctions placed upon the sovereign-to-be or hero. What is more, they are a kind of contract with the Otherworld, any breach of which will result in destruction and, ultimately, death. Thus, one of the saga's central issues is the determinist nature of kingship as evidenced by the career of Conaire. This topic has previously received attention from Thomas Charles-Edwards (1999, pp.38-59), who viewed the preoccupation with a preordained fate, and the characters' struggle to escape it, as intrinsic to early Irish culture and literature. O'Connor extends Charles-Edwards's argument by showing that Conaire's fate is reflected in the structure of the saga itself, and that Conaire's journey is further mirrored in the movements of his enemies, culminating in the final battle at Da Derga's Hostel.

In his chapters on the Latin and Biblical dimensions to the *Togail*, O'Connor cautions against assuming an *a priori* relationship between traditional Irish narrative and the Bible solely on the basis of the latter's prestige, or a superficial resemblance of motifs or characters. He thus revisits the question of Biblical influence on the *Togail*, specifically with regard to kingship ideology. Looking at the Old Testament, O'Connor examines King Saul's rise to and fall from divine grace, which, he argues, served as a structural model for the description of Conaire's reign and fall from power. Yet, he does not neglect the most striking difference between the two stories: in many ways, the ill-fated Saul paves the way for his successor David; yet Ireland is without a king after Conaire's demise. As O'Connor points out, Conaire is an amalgam of both Old Testament kings: an Irish King David slowly turning Saul (p.261).

O'Connor's book represents a great accomplishment not only to the discipline of Celtic Studies, but also serves as a bridge to more general medieval literary criticism. Yet, there is one minor point, which needs to be addressed. O'Connor states that his analysis is to demonstrate that narrative compilation is a creative act and not evidence of lack of skill. It is therefore deplorable that an article (forthcoming at the time of the publication of this book), which examined the various so-called 'inconsistencies', was published separately at a later stage (2013, pp.1-48). Considering that this piece strengthens O'Connor's argument considerably, it would have been more fitting as part of the discussion in this work. This is particularly the case since, as O'Connor states himself, some of these 'inconsistencies' "play a purposeful role in the narrative, even if they are technically contradictory." (p.44).

The inclusion of this material would further have bolstered his argument that historiography and literary accomplishment need not be mutually exclusive.

Since no critical edition of the text has appeared to date, O'Connor used Eleanor Knott's 1936 edition of the *Togail* for citations. While this lack of a critical edition is a deplorable state of affairs for the discipline as a whole, it has not undermined O'Connor's work. Rather, it has sustained his criticism of the common perception that editorial groundwork needs to be completed before literary criticism becomes feasible.

O'Connor's book is an appreciation of one of the finest works of medieval Irish written culture. It is further one of the few monographs in medieval Irish studies dedicated to any single text (other than the traditional edition-commentary-glossary publications) with the purpose of engaging primarily in literary criticism. Given the impressive range of material covered, and its previously noted accessibility, it is to be hoped that the publication of *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel* will increase the attention paid to medieval Irish (and Celtic) literary criticism by scholars in the field, as well as spark more enthusiasm from literary critics and medievalists in general.

### **Bibliography**

- Charles-Edwards, T. M. (1999) 'Geis, prophecy, omen, and oath', *Celtica*, 23, pp.38-59.
- O'Connor, R. (2013) 'Compilation as Creative Artistry: A Reassessment of "Narrative Inconsistency"', *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 65, pp.1-48.
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