The Book of Lismore

The Manuscript
For almost two hundred years this fifteenth-century manuscript in the Irish language has been known as the Book of Lismore from its association with Lismore Castle. Its original designation as the Book of Mac Carthaigh Riabhach arises from the fact that it was written, in part at least, for Finghin Mac Carthaigh Riabhach (ob. 1505) and his wife Caitlin (ob. 1506), members of the Mac Carthaigh Riabhach family, the Carbery branch of the Mac Carthys, whose principal seat was Kilbrittain Castle in west Cork. On the evidence of a poem composed for the couple, and an accompanying note, at least part of the book was compiled between the years 1478 and 1506, the period from the succession of Finghin Mac Carthaigh to the Lordship of Cairbre to the death of his wife Caitlin. The Book of Lismore was compiled for a lay person or persons and not for the library of a monastery or of a professional scholar. It may be compared with other fifteenth-century manuscripts compiled for lay persons, such as the Book of Fermoy, produced for the Roches of Cork, and Bodleian MS Laud Miscellany 610, produced for members of the Butler family of Ormond. Like the other great books from the period 1350–1500, the Book of Lismore consists mainly of texts composed centuries earlier, with less material that was contemporary. The newest composition seems to be the poem for the manuscript’s patrons mentioned above – in its complicated diction and subject-matter, it is unlikely to have been readily understood by them. Indeed, much of the manuscript content may have been opaque to its patrons, who would, nevertheless, have appreciated the importance of its materials, and their significance in representing Irish ecclesiastical and secular history, as well as Irish contacts with the wider world.

The Scribes
Comparatively few scholars have scrutinized the Book as an artefact, so a full examination of its script has yet to be undertaken. According to the present state of knowledge, an unnamed main scribe has written most of folios 1–89 (with some

Opposite: Poem for Finghin Mac Carthaigh Riabhach, f. 158r
household; his kinsman Eoin Ó Callanáin is credited as scribe of a fragmentary medical treatise written mainly at Kilbrittain about a half-century before the compilation of the Book of Lismore.\(^4\) Aonghas Ó Callanáin himself seems to have collaborated in the translation of a medical tract into Irish in the year 1503.\(^5\)

**Description of the Codex**

The manuscript as it now exists comprises 198 folios. These folios, of vellum, measure 14 ¼ inches in height and 10 inches across. The last surviving folio (fo. 198) is a mere fragment. The manuscript’s unusually high number of foliations and paginations – 18 in total – have been noted and analysed by scholars. Some are original, others reflect the manuscript’s chequered history in the nineteenth century.\(^6\)

Missing now from the manuscript are an unknown number of leaves, some, at least, of which were purportedly removed when the manuscript was discovered in Lismore in 1814 (see below). Gaps in foliation, as well as a lack of continuity in some texts in the manuscript, are evidence of these losses. In addition to the damage which had already been caused to the manuscript when it was discovered, and damage of various kinds inflicted on it subsequently, the use of chemicals in the attempt to improve the legibility of the writing also affected the manuscript. The scholar and scribe, Edward O’Reilly, for instance, admits in the 1820s that ‘Part of the ms. that was illegible I have restored...’\(^7\). Some interference may also have happened while a transcript was being made for the Royal Irish Academy in 1839.\(^8\)

All pages, with one exception, are in double columns. The manuscript now has a modern binding, dating from the 1940s, consisting of leather-covered boards with ornamental tooling and with the title in gold lettering on the front cover and spine: BOOK OF MAC CATHARTY REAGH COMMONLY CALLED THE BOOK OF LISMORE

**The Contents**

**I. General**

Although a significant portion of the original manuscript has been lost, the Book of Lismore as it survives is still a substantial codex. For this reason, a detailed account of all of the texts which it contains cannot be given in this essay.\(^9\) It is possible, however, to evoke the collection’s richness and variety by making an initial survey, followed by a closer look at four sections of particular interest.

The first part of the manuscript concerns nine saints’ Lives (discussed in Section II below). Immediately following this, there are several religious texts: anecdotes of the saints Brendan, Colum Cille, Patrick, Cuimhinne Fota, Mochutu, Moling, Ciárán and Baithine; and brief stories concerning asceticism, prayer and the afterlife.\(^9\) After these comes the unique copy of the oldest version of the cosmological work known as *The Ever-new Tongue* (see Section III),\(^9\) and then three religious poems: an enumeration of the
eight deadly sins by Mael Ísu Ó Broichán (died 1086), a description of the Day of Judgment, and a poem on turning to religion in later life.

Some thirteen folios are next taken up with an Irish translation of the History of Charlemagne, a twelfth-century legend which was fathered on the eighth-century bishop Turpin of Reims. This work, dealing with Charlemagne’s wars against the Saracens in Spain, opens and closes with affirmations of the sanctity of the church of Santiago de Compostela: it was evidently regarded as an essentially religious text, and appears in conjunction with other such texts in Irish manuscripts in which it is attested. Here, it is followed by an account of the establishment of the feast of All Saints and the consecration as a church of the Pantheon in Rome, by a tract on Antichrist, by anecdotes concerning Saint Caimnech and David and Solomon; by an Irish version of a widespread story concerning two children, one Christian and one Jewish; and by another anecdote concerning Saint Comgall.

The next nine folios contain The History of the Lombards, a translation of the account of the Lombards given in the seventh book of the Golden Legend of Jacobus de Voragine; the text breaks off near the end, with the death of Hugh of St Victor in 1142. This is followed by the Irish version of the Travels of Marco Polo (see Section IV).

At this point, about halfway through the manuscript, there is a shift to secular concerns. There is a series of tales and poems concerning Diarmaid mac Cerball, king of Tara (died circa 565); two poems on the qualities required of a king; the tale Fingen’s Night-Watch, concerning the omen which attended the birth of the legendary king Conn of the Hundred Battles; and a copy of the treatise on royal prerogatives known as The Book of Rights. All of these texts share a concern with kingship, especially the kingship of Tara.

After a handful of short texts relating to churchmen and eschatology, the manuscript proceeds to give an incomplete copy of The Battles of Cellachán of Cashel, an account of the exploits of a tenth-century Munster king which has been identified as a work of propaganda written in the interests of the Mac Carthaigh dynasty in the years 1127–1134. This is followed by a blank page on which the nineteenth-century Cork scribe Donnchadh Ó Floinn (see ‘The manuscript in Cork’, pp. 29–31 below) wrote a poem of his own, followed in its turn by a folio containing a poem which vindicates the right to lordship of Finghin mac Carthaigh, the manuscript’s patron (see ‘The manuscript’, p. 13 above).

Two tales deal with Tadc mac Céin, a Munster hero who was regarded as their ancestor by the Cianachta of the Midlands: the first describes Tadc’s visit to a paradisal Otherworld, while the second concerns the battle of Crinna in which he won his future territory. There follow legendary accounts of the Otherworld adventure of Loegaire mac Grimthainn, of the gaining of the kingship of Ulster by Conchobur mac Ness, and of the first poem composed in Ireland.

The next pieces are all concerned in various ways with Munster. The Siege of Druim Damghaire describes the druid Mug Roith’s successful resistance of an invasion of the province by the Tara king Cormac mac Airt; there is a treatise on the topography of Fermoy; and thereafter three poems relating to Mug Roith, to the Cashel king Cormac mac Cuilennáin (died 908), and to his legendary predecessor Ailill Ólomm.

There follows a group which is more difficult to classify: the story of the massacre of the kings and nobles of Ireland by the upstart Cairep of the Cat-head; six poems on various subjects; a copy of the strange story of an underwater monastery, called The Tale of the Pig’s Patter; The Burdensome Company of Guaire, a famous tale of a visit by a troop of extortionate poets to an early king of Connacht; a tract on the stringent qualifications demanded for admission to the ian, or company, of the great hero Finn mac Cumall; and another tract on the lifespans of various creatures.

The manuscript concludes with two more texts relating to Finn: the so-called Little Conversation, a story about the heroes Caille and Ossín, and the much more celebrated Conversation of the Old Men (see Section IV), of which it is a version.

II. Lives of Saints

As it survives, the manuscript begins with a series of nine saints’ Lives: the saints in question are Patrick, Colum Cille, Brigit, Senán of Scattery, Finnian of Clonard, Finnchua of Brighown, Brendan of Clonfert, Ciarán of Clonmacnoise, and Mochua of Balla. This is the most extensive, and the most important, collection of saints’ Lives in the Irish language to be preserved in any medieval manuscript.

As is often the case, the Lives are written in the form of sermons: each begins with a passage from the Bible, accompanied by commentary (this is known as a sermon’s ‘exordium’), and concludes with a prayer on behalf of the preacher and his hearers (the ‘peroration’). Thus the Life of Patrick begins by quoting, in Latin, the words ‘The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light’ (Isaiah 9:2); goes on to interpret this as a prophecy of the coming of Christ to shed light on the darkness of paganism; and then finds a further application for the prophecy in the missionary work of Patrick among the Irish:

One of the rays which the Sun of Righteousness shed into this world, the ray and the flame and the precious stone and the blazing lamp which has illuminated the west of the world, is the exalted one whose feast and commemoration is taking place at this juncture and time, namely, Saint Patrick son of Calpurnius, the chief apostle of the west of the world, the father of baptism and belief of the men of Ireland.
It is then specified that Patrick's feastday is the seventeenth of March. The peroration at the end, also characteristically, invokes the splendours and terrors of the Day of Judgment:

Patrick was buried, however, in Down, with honour and with reverence, with marvels and with daily miracles. Although his honour is great now, it will be greater at the assembly of Judgment, in the fellowship of the apostles and the disciples of Jesus, in the fellowship of the nine ranks of the angels of heaven, in the fellowship of the divinity and humanity of the Son of God, in the fellowship of the holy Trinity, that is, Father and Son and Holy Spirit. I beseech the mercy of almighty God that we may attain that fellowship, world without end, amen.41

Patrick, Colum Cille and Brigit are of course the three greatest of the Gaelic saints, and are often grouped together for this reason: copies of these three Lives also appear in the manuscript named An Leabhar Breac, written several decades earlier.42 Various of the other saints in the series – Senán, Finnchua and Brendan – have strong associations with Munster, which may be the reason for their inclusion.

It is related how Senán, after prolonged wanderings, arrives at Scattery Island in the estuary of the Shannon, where God has ordained that he shall establish his chief church. The island has been kept pure from all human sinfulness until the time of Senán's coming through the paradoxical agency of a monster, which has prevented anyone else from settling there:

Ugly, unheard-of, wicked, very fearsome was the beast that arose there. It had the forequarters of a horse. A blazing, flaming eye in its head; and it was keen, fierce, vengeful, angry, sharp-edged, very red, bloody, truly savage, volatile – anyone would think that its eye would go through him, when it was gazing upon him. Under it were two feet, very ugly, very fat, behind its forequarters. It had iron claws, which would strike sparks of fire from the rocks when they used to go across them. It had a fiery breath, which would burn like embers; a belly like a blacksmith's bellows; the tail of a sea-beast behind.43

When Senán makes the sign of the cross over the monster's gaping maw, it does not dare to venture further against him. He banishes it, forbidding it to do any further harm, and it departs never to return.

Finnchua is one of the fiercest and most uncanny of Irish saints: when anger seizes him, he seems himself to be like a monster, or like the ancient hero Cú Chulainn in the grip of battle-frenzy:

Then the nature of the cleric arose against them, so that kindling sparks of red-maned fire burst forth from his teeth, and that fire burned the shafts of the spears, and the hands and the forearms of the raiders, so that they were silent and cruelly maimed.44

When he was still in the womb, we are told that Finnchua recited a verse in cryptic language after his mother had been refused a drink of ale, causing the hoops to spring from the barrels and the ale to be spilled upon the floor. Almost exactly the same story is told elsewhere of the pre-Christian poet Aithin – a clear example of the overlap between saintly cursing and the destructive magic of satire.45

The nine Lives are preserved as a nearly continuous block of text, apart from a fragmentary account of the destruction of Jerusalem, clearly misplaced, which breaks into the middle of the Life of Patrick, and three scraps of text – fragments of the ‘Rule of Saint Patrick’ and the ‘Alphabet of Devotion’, and a prophecy of the wickedness of the last days – between the Lives of Ciárán and Mochua. At the end of the Life of Finnchua there is a note stating that ‘the Friar Ó Buagacháin wrote this Life from the Book of Monasterboice’. At one point it was believed that one of the scribes of the Book of Lismore was naming himself here; but the presence of a version of the same note in another, and better, copy of the Life of Finnchua shows that Ó Buagacháin must rather have been the scribe of an earlier source manuscript.46 The mysterious ‘Book of Monasterboice’ seems only to be mentioned in connection with the Life of Finnchua, so that there is no reason to imagine that any of our manuscript’s other contents were drawn from it.
III. The Ever-New Tongue

The Ever-new Tongue (In Tenga Bithnua) is another text which is framed as a sermon. In this case, the scriptural verse which provides a starting point is the first sentence in the whole of the Bible: ‘In the beginning, God created heaven and earth’ (Genesis 1:1). This is appropriate on two levels. On the one hand, The Ever-new Tongue is, as we shall see, an account of the mysteries and marvels of the universe, so that it is only fitting that it should commence with a reference to God’s creation. On the other, the creation narrative in Genesis is the first of the readings for the vigil of Easter; and the text is permeated with references to Easter, and to the miracle of the resurrection as a bringer not just of human salvation but also of cosmic renewal. The Ever-new Tongue is a treatise about everything; and it is one of the most extravagant and fantastical products of the medieval Irish imagination.

The narrative part of the text begins by describing a great gathering of kings, bishops, wise men and other dignitaries, held over a period of a year and four months in the vicinity of Jerusalem. Suddenly, on the vigil of Easter, there is a startling apparition:

Something was heard: a noise in the clouds like the sound of thunder, or it was like the roaring of a fire and of the sea; at the same time it was a thunderous wind. Suddenly something was seen: a sunlike blaze, like a radiant sun in the midst of the noise. That bright sunlike blaze was turning upon itself too fast for the eye to follow; for it was seven times brighter than the sun. Suddenly thereafter something was heard, for the eyes of the host were gazing upon the noise, for they thought that it was a sign of the judgment. Something was heard, a bright voice which spoke in angelic language: HEC HABIBA FELEBE FE NITEIA TEMNIBSE SALIS SAI. that is, ‘Listen to this tale, sons of men! I have been sent from God to speak to you.’

The ‘wise men of the Hebrews’ now learn that the terrifying manifestation which confronts them is the soul of the apostle Philip, who has descended from heaven ‘to make plain to you the wondrous tale which the Holy Spirit related by means of Moses son of Amram, concerning the making of heaven and earth, together with the things which are in them’ — in other words, to clarify the description of the universe in Genesis. The strange language in which he speaks, consistently written in enlarged letters in the manuscript to indicate its sacred character, is ‘that in which the angels speak, and every rank of heaven. And sea-creatures and beasts and cattle and birds and serpents and demons understand it, and that is the language which all will speak at the Judgment’.

Opposite: A page from The Ever-new Tongue which incorporates several of that text’s interesting features: passages in “angelic language”, bits of Latin, and a description of the sun’s nocturnal journey beneath the earth, f. 9sv.
Philip's exposition more or less follows the order of the six days of creation, going on to speak of the Day of Judgment, of hell and heaven, and of the nature of God Himself. He begins, however, with a description of the nothingness which preceded the creation – even this being rendered vivid by the fire of the author's imagination. Philip explains

that there was no ordering of the radiant mansions; that the earth with its mountains and peoples did not exist, nor the sea with its islands, nor hell with its torments, before it was said that there should be creatures; that the circuits of the seven heavens did not exist, nor clouds for watering the earth, nor trembling, nor scattering of storms; that there were no lands on which they could pour; that there was no rain or snow; that there were no lightnings, nor blowing of wind, nor thunders; that the course of the sun did not exist, nor the phases of the moon, nor the spangling of the stars; that there were no sea-monsters; that there was no sea for them to swim in; that there were no streams nor flocks nor beasts nor dragons nor serpents.  

But then comes the creation, commencing when God 'thought a thought. That thought had no beginning. He thought something; that it would be nobler that His power and glory be seen – that which was inexpressible, that which existed in no other thing though He existed Himself. The litany of wonders which follows includes descriptions of miracle-working springs and magical jewels, of tribes of monstrous men and women in distant countries, of fiery dragons in the heavens, of lands on the under-side of the earth which the sun illuminates at night. At one point a voice of scepticism is raised; but the doubter is immediately blinded and destroyed by a burning wind, while the survivors are told: 'If you were to put all your kindred to the sword – sons and daughters, mothers and fathers – and then set them to roast so that you might eat their flesh, it would be seven times easier to forgive that than to forgive blasphemy against God, and disbelief in Him with regard to His creatures and His miracles.  

This remarkable work, drawing on sources ranging from the Bible to lost apocryphal texts, but characterized above all by an exuberant and audacious creativity, seems to have been composed in the course of the ninth century, or perhaps early in the tenth. It was revised again and again, retaining an extraordinary popularity: copies were still being enthusiastically produced a thousand years later. The Book of Lismore is the only manuscript to preserve the earliest version.

IV. The Travels of Marco Polo

The Book of Lismore also contains the unique copy of an Irish translation of The Travels of Marco Polo. Parts have been lost, both at the beginning and the end: some six chapters in the latter case, but evidently only a single leaf in the former, as our text begins with the final segment of the preface:

...There was a king's brother in the habit of Saint Francis in the city at that time, named Franciscus. He was brought, then, to the place yonder where the nobles were, and they asked him to translate the book from the language of the Tartars into Latin. 'I have fear,' he said, 'to spend the labour of the mind on the deeds of idolaters and unbelievers.' They beg him a second time concerning the same matter. 'It will be done,' he said. 'for although un-Christian tales are revealed here, they are the marvels of the true God'.  

The 'Franciscus' referred to here is Francesco Pipino, who did in fact produce an abridged Latin version of the Travels at the beginning of the fourteenth century. He was not however a Franciscan, but the archivist of the Dominicans of Bologna; and he did not make his translation from the language of the Tartars but, rather less exotically, from French.  

This is not the only departure from its source by the Irish Travels: it further abridges the text, and occasionally modifies it in other ways as well.

Thus, according to Pipino, 'it is said that of old the kings of the Zorzianians were born with the sign of an eagle on the shoulder'; while the Irish version says that this mark is found on the shoulder of every newborn Zorzianian. Where Pipino merely uses salamandra as a term for asbestos, going on to echo Polo's words that 'I heard nothing in the eastern regions of the serpent [called] salamander', the Irish version speaks of 'a very high mountain in that region, and there are salamanders upon it. Those are small beasts: they make thread to be generated upon the earth in unclean places, and it used to be gathered by the people of the region'. But not all of the divergences from Polo's testimony are due to the Irish translator: when he changes the brand-marks on the faces of the Christians of Abascia to crosses of gold on the foreheads of their kings, he is following a flight of fancy of Pipino's.  

At some points in his account Polo turns from geography to narrative; and here the Irish version may introduce some elements of native style. Just before a great conflict, we are told that Genghis Khan 'commanded his enchanter and astrologers to predict the outcome of the battle that was to be'. In the Book of Lismore, 'the druids went upon their hurdles of knowledge, and summoned to them demons and gods of the air', recalling such accounts of indigenous magic as that which is found at the beginning of the saga The Battle of Findchurad.  

When Polo describes a battle fought by Kublai Khan against his uncle Nayan, the Irish text replaces his account of military tactics with the alliterative, ornamental rhetoric favoured by Gaelic taste:

Those armies took their bright blue greaves of grey iron, and their strong infrangible corslets, and their helmets under their diadems polished, fair to see. They stretch their warlike variegated emblematic banners against the riveted long lances; and every good warrior closed up round his king and his chieflain, and they filled with glamour the hills and plains on every side. And then the battalions joined with each other, and a bright cloud rose from their golden-
coloured hand-swords, and from their plaited collars of red gold, so that there was a shining lightning in the roof of heaven above the heads of the heroes on either side. There rose, too, a grey cloud, awful, icy, from the other side of the air, between diadem and greaves, between spear and axe. They break from the battalions into the other division like cataclysms against rocks, so that a crack of doom in the cliffs and caves was the roaring of the heroes upheaving their efforts of battle, and the noise of their arrows from the bowstrings, and the rush of their darts through the air, and the screams of their horses at being wounded, and the groans of their warriors at tasting death.57

From the translation of the Travels of Marco Polo: the opening of an account of the Mongol tent city of Caracorum, f. 122v.

Despite such divergences, and the omission of a great deal of Pipino's already shortened text, the Irish version when regarded as a whole is a reasonably faithful rendition of Polo's account. As such, it vividly brings a kaleidoscopic vision of the Far East into the furthest West: the splendours of the palace of Kublai Khan; the alien spectacle of images 'with three heads on them, or with four faces on a single head, or with ten arms on a single body, or even a hundred arms — they believe that for every multiplicity of shapes that is on their gods, their power is the more';58 the austerities of the Brahmns of Lar, who 'cut no tree or fresh leaf, because there are souls in them'.59

The keenness of medieval Irish interest in the wider world is reflected in a variety of sources, such as the long poem in which the scholar Airbertach mac Coise Dobrain (died 1016) summarised the geographical lore which he had extracted from the writings of Orosius and Isidore of Seville.60 Later in the Middle Ages, we find Irish translations of the forged letter supposedly written by Prester John, an imaginary Asiatic emperor, as well as a translation of the fanciful Travels of Sir John Mandeville — the translator in the latter case having been an aristocratic Munster scholar writing in 1473.61 It may also be relevant that our manuscript is associated with a Franciscan community: as we have seen, the Irish version changes the original translator from a Dominican to a Franciscan; and all of the most notable medieval travellers in Asia apart from Polo himself — John of Plano Carpini, William of Rubruck, Odoric of Pordenone, John of Monte Corvino — were Franciscans as well.

V. The Conversation of the Old Men
The Conversation of the Old Men (Achallam na Senórach) is generally recognised to be one of the greatest compositions in the Fenian cycle of heroic tales, and indeed one of the masterpieces of medieval Irish literature as a whole. At its heart is the confrontation — ultimately harmonious and fruitful — of old and new, of native and foreign, of pagan and Christian. The copy in our manuscript is not the oldest, and the rodents which infested its hiding place in Lismore Castle have devoured the conclusion. But it is still the most complete version, and has served as the indispensable basis for study of the text since the publication of the first edition by Standish Hayes O'Grady in 1892.62

It is related how a band of the last surviving followers of Finn mac Cumall (traditionally believed to have lived in the third century), led by Finn's son Osin and by his chief warrior Caite, stray anomalously into the fifth-century Ireland of Saint Patrick. At first, these refugees from the past cause only alarm, like the ghosts which they very nearly are:

> The clerics saw them approaching, and fear and horror seized them on account of the big men, with their big dogs with them, for they were not men of the same era or time as themselves. Then there arose the salmon of sovereignty and the pillar of lordship and the terrestrial angel, Patrick son of Calpurinus, apostle of the Gaels; and he took an asperrigillum to shake consecrated water on the big men. For until that day there had been a thousand legions of demons above their heads. And the demons went into hills and clefs, and into the borders of the territory, and were banished from them on every side; and the big men sat down after that.63

The ancient heroes submit to Patrick's authority, and Caite becomes the saint's companion as he travels throughout Ireland. Wherever they go, Patrick plies Caite with questions: usually about the origins of placenames, the lore known in Irish as dinnseanchas, but also on other topics. Early on, Patrick worries that curiosity about the pagan past may be a culpable distraction from more properly spiritual concerns, only to be reassured by his guardian angels:
Those ancient warriors yonder do not relate more than a third of their tales, on account of oblivion and forgetfulness. And let them be written down on the tablets of poets, and in the words of masters; for listening to those tales will be entertainment for multitudes and for noble folk at the end of time.  

Cailte and his companions have themselves somehow come adrift in time; and indeed the same could be said for The Conversation of the Old Men as a whole. Is it really set in the days of Saint Patrick? Medieval Irish tradition was fairly clear concerning the names of the rulers of the chief regions of Ireland at the all-important time of the island’s conversion to Christianity, but none of these are mentioned in the Conversation. Instead, the various provinces are subject to kings who figure nowhere else in Irish history or legend – with one jarring exception, the high king of Ireland as a whole. Every other source is agreed that the high king in Patrick’s time was Loegaire, son of Niall of the Nine Hostages; but here he is said to be Diarmait mac Cerbaill, well known to have died in the second half of the sixth century. Diarmait is as much out of his proper time as are Cailte and Osian, and this is by no means the only anomaly of this kind. A young boy whom Patrick restores to life early on in the text reappears later as a grown man, although for the other characters only a few weeks, or at most a few months, have passed.

Compared with this fluid ‘present’ of temporal discontinuities and fictitious monarchs, it is the legendary ‘past’ of Finn and his followers which seems stable and consistent. The author seems to be playing a subtle game with us. A clue to his agenda may be offered by the first bit of dinnsheanchas in the text, where we are told that Cailte went to the Estuary of Becc the Mariner, which is now called the monastery of Drogheda. Becc the Mariner, the son of Airist, fell there: the son of the king of the Romans, who came to conquer Ireland, and the wave of the flood tide drowned him there.  

There is no other evidence that Drogheda was ever called ‘the Estuary of Becc the Mariner’, nor any trace of a tale of Becc son of Airist: these are more of the author’s fabrications. But they are fabrications with a point. The ‘monastery of Drogheda’ referred to is Mellifont: this was the first Cistercian monastery in Ireland, established in 1142, and a spearhead of the movement of church reform which was sweeping across Europe under the leadership of a reinvigorated papacy. The reformers were vociferously critical of Ireland, two of the principal targets being its monastic culture (including its concern with native legend) and its marriage laws (with their flexible approach to divorce and polygamy).

Seen against this background, the description of Mellifont as the scene of a (failed) Roman bid to conquer Ireland looks very much like a snide
contemporary reference. The *Conversation* as a whole presents, and celebrates, a benign alternative to the reform critique: Patrick, emissary of Rome and of the pope, embraces the storytellers from the pagan past and seeks to learn all he can from them. The author is also concerned to show — flying in the face of the testimony of the older tales — that Finn and his followers were models of matrimonial respectability: on one notable occasion, Calte draws upon his ancient knowledge of herbs to reawaken desire for their wives in the hearts of straying husbands.\(^{66}\) At one of the culminating moments in the tale, Patrick celebrates his first marriage in Ireland; and it is surely again symbolically significant that this ceremony unites a king of Connacht to a woman of the immortal race of the old gods.\(^{67}\) The world of the *Conversation* is one in which every aspect of native tradition can receive the blessing of the faith.

In the event, it was the hard-liners of Mellifont who won: within a few generations the old monastic order had largely passed away, and the tales and lore of Ireland had passed into the keeping of secular learned families. But time can bring many changes. It is in its own way moving to find a manuscript linked with the Franciscans, another of the orders which came to Ireland from the Continent, preserving this vision of the harmonious synthesis of old and new.

**The History**

After its compilation, the Book of Mac Carthaigh Riabhach seems to have been kept as a family possession in Kilbrittain castle. We know that the manuscript was still in west Cork in June 1629 when the Franciscan scholar, Michéal Ó Cléirigh, one of the Four Masters, copied some texts from ‘Leabhar Mheg Carthaig Riabhagh’ in the Friary in Timoleague.\(^{68}\) It may have been deposited temporarily in the Friary for the use of Ó Cléirigh, the family of Mac Carthaigh Riabhach having been patrons of Timoleague since its foundation in 1240. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that Timoleague may actually have been the place of compilation of the Book for its patron. There certainly was a close association between Timoleague Franciscans and the family of Mac Carthaigh Riabhach whose tomb was in the middle of the choir. Moreover, Timoleague’s acceptance of Observant reform, and the building of a library there in the late fifteenth century,\(^{69}\) provide a likely context for the availability in west Cork of a broad range of textual material (see above).

Michéal Ó Cléirigh’s interest was solely in the hagiographical content of the manuscript, which must have been returned to Kilbrittain within a short time.\(^{70}\) What ensued in the following decades is unrecorded. However, the manuscript’s fate may have been decided in the course of conflict in Munster in the 1640s. J.T. Collins, on the evidence of a letter in the Lismore archives, proposes that the Book of Mac Carthaigh Riabhach was the manuscript appropriated by Lord Kinalmkey after the capture of Kilbrittain Castle in 1642. This manuscript was presented by Kinalmkey to his father, Richard, Earl of Cork, and forwarded to the Earl’s Lismore seat.\(^{71}\)

We have a plausible context, therefore, for the transfer of the manuscript from Kilbrittain to Lismore. However, the aftermath of its arrival in Lismore remains in the realm of speculation. Brian Ó Cuív has drawn attention to textual indications that some of the Book’s contents were copied by an east Cork scribe. Dónall Ó Tuimuthnúin, in a manuscript dated 1712/3.\(^{72}\) Moreover, a calculation including the date 1745 in the top margin of folio 56v seems to indicate access to the Book in that year. Why or when it was walled up in Lismore Castle remains a mystery. While John O’Donovan conjectured in March 1840 that it was probably built up in the wall to preserve it from destruction during some disturbance in the country subsequent to the year 1745, no illuminating evidence is known to survive.\(^{73}\)

In 1814 structural alterations were undertaken at Lismore Castle, by that time the Irish residence of the Dukes of Devonshire. Workmen reopened a doorway that had been closed up with masonry years previously, and behind it discovered the manuscript, enclosed in a box, together with the crozier of an eleventh-century bishop of Lismore.\(^{74}\) According to Eugene Ó’Curry, the manuscript ‘had suffered much from damp, and the back, front and top margin had been gnawed in several places by rats or mice’. Moreover ‘it was said that the workmen by whom the precious box was found, carried off several loose leaves, and even whole staves of the book.’\(^{75}\) Such circumstances might account for the disappearance of some of the 40 folios lost from the beginning of the manuscript, as well as an unknown number from the end.

**The Manuscript in Cork**

After its discovery, the manuscript was in the care of Colonel Currey, the Duke of Devonshire’s agent, who gave it on loan in July of the following year to Donnchadh Ó Floinn (c.1760–1830) of Cork city. Ó Floinn, who had a grocer’s shop in what is now Shandon Street, was at the centre of his circle of Cork scribes and scholars, he himself being a collector of manuscripts, a small-scale printer, and an active promoter of the Irish language.\(^{76}\) In the words of his friend, the prolific scribe and poet, Micheál Óg Ó Longáin, the manuscript was acquired by Ó Floinn ‘íarna bhréagadh as láimhthabh na n-eiríceadh, agus sin rena dhiainnfhéinfein agus maile re coghnadh Dè’ (‘having enticed it from the possession of heretics through his own great merit, and with the help of God’).\(^{77}\)

Ó Floinn’s loan of the manuscript undoubtedly was a coup, greatly welcomed in Irish-language circles in Cork. On the evidence of its colophons, Micheál Óg Ó Longáin was transcribing from the Book of Lismore in Ó Floinn’s house between Christmas Day of 1815 and 6 January 1816, zealously availing of the holiday season when time could be spared from eking out a living.\(^{78}\) When the scribe subsequently fell into penury, a printed leaflet, dated 26 March, 1817, sought subscriptions ‘toward discharging the expenses of a faithful copy’ of ‘a voluminous Irish manuscript of the 10th century’ to be made by Ó Longáin, who, though ‘highly competent’ was, nevertheless ‘unemployed, neglected, poor, distressed and forgotten’. The appeal appears to have brought patronage from
anniversary of his acquisition of the manuscript, imply that its transfer to Cork had freed it from captivity and disregard. Ó Floinn is evidently proud of his role in the rehabilitation of the Book, and, indeed, of the fact that it was he who had designated it ‘Leabhar Leasa Moire’, ‘The Book of Lismore’. While he clearly was aware of its potential as a lifeline for impoverished scribes who were his friends, he also viewed his custody of the Book as a restoration of Ireland’s ancient learning to its practitioners. His verses also imply the hope ‘go gcasfair chum do charad dhill’, ‘that you (the Book) return to your dear friend’. His retention of a portion of the codex may reflect a similar hope.

The continuing presence in Cork of part of the Book seems not to have been entirely covert. Indeed, a deliberate smokescreen may have been erected, if we credit the following account, given by a gentleman named Clibborn sometime prior to 1854: ‘It [the Book of Lismore] was sent by a messenger to Cork who rode on a mule and he carried the book under his arm, and by the jolting of the mule the lost leaves fell out at various intervals and distances. An honest man happened to pass the same way and his eyes being attracted by the leaves, he picked them up and is supposed to have preserved them to this day.’

**Cork to Lismore: Reuniting the Codex**

Back in Lismore, Colonel Currey gave the returned manuscript on loan in 1824 to Edward O’Reilly, the lexicographer, in order to obtain a description of its contents and date of writing. O’Reilly’s account reflected the content which was returned from Cork, but this does not seem to have occasioned any imputation that some text had been removed. The issue was not raised until 1839 when the manuscript was placed on loan in the Royal Irish Academy to enable Eugene O’Curry make a transcript of it for the Academy library. O’Curry’s close study
led him to recognise that a number of leaves had been deliberately detached while the manuscript was in Cork, and he railed against Donnchadh Ó Floinn in particular for ill-treatment of the Book.

O'Curry instituted enquiries, and finally stumbled on the whereabouts of the lost leaves. On the death of Donnchadh Ó Floinn in 1830, they had been inherited by his son, who offered them for sale in 1853. Despite efforts to acquire them for the Royal Irish Academy, they were sold for £50 to Thomas Hewitt, of Summerhill House Cork. Hewitt, believing that his acquisition constituted an independent manuscript, had the folios bound. However, John Windele, in a publication of 1857, identified the material in Hewitt's possession as the abstracted portion of the Lismore manuscript. Windele seems to have played a role also in the Duke of Devonshire's reacquisition of the lost leaves from Hewitt in 1866. The folios were unbound and restored to the original manuscript. What remained of the Book of Mac Carthaigh Riabhach was once more intact.

Scholarship
In the first half-century after the Book's rediscovery, the emphasis is on the copying of its content. The following decades, however, see the focus shift from scribes to scholars, as the first printed editions of items of content appear. Cork plays a role in the histories of both script and print. Not only did its scribes produce and reproduce the manuscript's texts, but a Cork-based scholar was first to publish a textual edition in 1860. Owen Connellan, first professor of Celtic at the recently-founded Queen's College, Cork, published *Innleacht na Tromaithimh: The proceedings of the Great Bardic institution*, a text in the 'Cork' portion of the codex, then the possession of Mr Hewitt. Moreover, scribal activity does not cease once publication begins. Seosamh Ó Longáin, son of the scribe, Micheál Óg, examined the manuscript in Lismore Castle in 1858–59, and subsequently made a transcript for the Royal Irish Academy in the period 1864–66, for which he was paid either three or four shillings per folio.

The latter part of the nineteenth century saw a marked increase in scholarly activity. The deposit of the manuscript in the British Museum enabled Whitley Stokes to publish the monumental *Lives of Saints from the Book of Lismore* in 1890, a work which is still fundamental to the study of early Irish saints' cults. Moreover, Stokes provided in this work the first complete catalogue of the contents of the Book of Lismore. He went on to edit other major texts from the codex, in particular, the account of Marco Polo (1897), and the enigmatic sermon, *The Ever-new Tongue* (1905). A BM loan also enabled Standish Hayes O'Grady in *Silva Gadelica* (1892) to publish pioneering texts and translations of several works from the manuscript, including the famous *Acallam na Senórach* (see above). The work of textual edition and publication continued into the early twentieth century, though by 1927 acknowledgements indicate that the manuscript had been transferred from Lismore Castle to Chatsworth, the Derbyshire seat of the Duke of Devonshire, where it is now preserved.

Meanwhile, the Irish Manuscripts Commission, founded in 1928, had among its aims the production of facsimile copies of significant Irish codices, among them, the Book of Lismore. By 1936 the Book was once more in the British Museum, where photographic options for its reproduction were being explored in consultation with Robin Flower, the Museum’s Deputy Keeper of Manuscripts and an eminent Celtic scholar. While it was decided that a collotype facsimile should be produced, work was suspended on the outbreak of Second World War, and the Book of Lismore was stored, along with the British Museum manuscript collection, in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. Returned to the British Museum in the aftermath of the war, the Book's facsimile reproduction was further halted by Flower's enforced resignation from its editorship. On the appointment of R.A.S. Macalister to replace Flower, the manuscript was deposited in Cambridge University Library, to facilitate the editor, by then resident in Cambridge. The Irish Manuscripts Commission facsimile of the Book of Lismore was finally published in 1950, Macalister having died before he saw it in print.

Almost all of the manuscript’s contents have by now been published, in various scholarly books and journals, either directly from the manuscript itself, or indirectly from transcripts. One such transcript was owned for a time by Douglas Hyde, who used it in his edition of *Gabhailais Shearlaí Mhoir, The Conquests of Charlemagne* in 1917. Due to the damage caused to the leaves over the years, not all of the Book of Lismore texts are entirely complete, but some gaps may be filled where other manuscript copies exist.

A number of scholars have speculated about the contents of the manuscript's missing leaves. Ó Cúiv discusses the question at length. As already mentioned he claims that a manuscript, now in the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin (RIA 23 H 28), contains a number of texts which were more than likely transcribed directly from the Book of Lismore in 1712/3 by Cork scribe, Dónall Ó Teimhín. He further suggests the possibility that a number of other texts (26 in all) contained in Ó Teimhín's manuscript were also originally in the Book of Lismore. While Ó Cúiv makes a strong case for the possibility of at least some of these texts being in the Book of Lismore originally, it is clear, however, that his proposition can never be either totally proved or disproved unless the missing leaves which may have contained the material themselves come to light.

Meanwhile, the manuscript enters another new era. In the early twenty-first century digitisation, and the innovatory editorial techniques facilitated by advances in information technology, offer the possibility of fresh insights into its content and history. The Book of Lismore's arrival in Cork in the early nineteenth century left a lasting legacy of scribal activity. We hope that its return will likewise inspire new scholarship, and further extension of the frontiers of knowledge.

Máire Herbert and John Carey
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1  O’Cuív 1938a, 96–100
2  Careny 1978, 622–3
3  O’Cuív 1983, 281–3
4  Ó Fiannachta 1969, 69–71
5  Ó Gráda 1926, 222 and n.1; O’Cuív 1983a, 280, n. 25
7  Ní Sheaghdha 1961, 93.
8  Macalister 1950, x
9  Full discussions in Stokes 1890, pp. vi–xliii; Macalister 1950, pp. xvi–xxv.
10  Stokes 1890, pp. vii–xvi; Pokorný 1931.
11  Carey 2009.
13  Ó Keeffe 1907.
14  Hyde 1919.
15  Windisch 1884, p. 215 (from Leabhar Breac).
16  Hyde 1927.
17  Roche 1910; Meyer 1907, Grosjean 1934; Meyer 1921, p. 179.
18  Stokes 1890, pp. xx–xxii.
19  Meyer 1892, p. 229 (from Rawlinson B 512).
20  Part of the text published Meyer 1921, pp. 179–84; source identified by Flower 1926, p. 529.
21  For the most important of these, The Settling of the Manor of Tara, see Best 1908–10. Others in Ó Gráda 1892, i.66–82, ii.70–87 and 1923, ii.101–16; cf. Stokes 1890, pp. xxiv–ix.
22  Ó Donoghue 1921–3; idem, 1912 (from other MSS).
23  Vendryes 1953.
24  Dillon 1962.
25  E.g. De h-ide 1928.
26  Discussion: O Corráin 1974.
27  O’Cuív 1983.
28  Ó Gráda 1892, i.342–59, ii.385–400; i.39–26, ii.359–67.
29  Jackson 1942; Stokes 1890, pp. xxxiv–v; Thurneysen 1936, pp. 193–4 (from other MSS).
30  Sjoestedt 1926–7.
31  Ó Keeffe 1926–8, Power 1932.
32  Ó Raithbeartaigh 1932, pp. 122–32 (from the Book of Ballymote).
33  E.g. Meyer 1907a, p. 215.
34  Ó Gráda 1892, i.87–9, ii.94–6.
35  Connellan 1860, Joynt 1941.
36  Ó Gráda 1892, i.92, ii.99.
37  Stokes 1890, p. xli.
38  Hyde 1924.
39  Stokes 1890.
40  Ó Gráda, pp. 1–2. Unless otherwise noted, translations in this section are those of the present writer.
41  Ó Gráda, p. 19.
42  Stokes 1877.
43  Stokes 1890, p. 66.
44  Ó Gráda, p. 89.
46  Grosjean 1926–8, p. 162.
48  Ó Gráda, pp. 113–15.
49  Ó Gráda, p. 121.
50  Ó Gráda, p. 175.
51  Stokes 1897, p. 246.
52  There does not appear to be any modern edition of Pipino’s translation. I have consulted the edition of 1484, unfortunately unpaginated.
53  Stokes 1897, p. 248.
54  Ó Gráda, p. 260.
55  Ó Gráda, p. 424.
57  Ó Gráda, p. 367; here use Stokes’s translation.
58  Ó Gráda, p. 408.
59  Ó Gráda, p. 420.
60  Olden 1884.
61  Greene 1952, Stokes 1898.
63  Ó Gráda 1892, 195.
64  Ó Gráda, p. 101.
65  Ó Gráda, p. 95.
66  Ó Gráda, pp. 115–16.
67  Stokes 1900, pp. 219, 269–70. (This episode has not survived in the Book of Lismore’s copy.)
70  Walsh, 1937, repr. 2003, 357.
71  Collins 1947, 88. See also the accompanying essay in this publication.
73  Ó Gráda, p. 286.
74  Macalister 1950, ix.
75  1861, 196–200.
76  Ó Gráda, pp. 15–17, 1982a, 8–9; Ó Conchúir 1982, 69–77.
77  RIA 23 G 25, 35; Ó Conchúir 1982, 234.
78  Ó Conchúir 1982, 118.
80  NLIG 714.
81  Ni Urdail 1997, 190.
83  1861, 196–200.
84  Information supplied by Prof Breandán Ó Conchúir.
86  See n. 78 above.
88  Ossianic Society, Vol. V.
89  Ni Urdail 1997, 130 and n. 42.
90  Stokes 1890, vi–xlv.
92  Kennedy & McMahon 2009, 63, 83, 96–7
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