Bringing bardic poetry into the light
Eoin Mac Cárthaigh

Bardic poetry dominated the Irish literary landscape for four centuries, from 1200 to 1600, before entering into a period of decline. The standardised language and metres developed for it – and the poets’ sophisticated analysis of these – are among the outstanding achievements of Irish learning, on a par with more tangible products of Irish culture like the Book of Kells or the Ardagh Chalice.

Although the poetry is of great interest and beauty, and although it is a rich source of historical and linguistic material, many of the most important poems have yet to be fully edited and we still lack such basic infrastructure as a dedicated dictionary for the period. This is a challenging field with huge potential for further research.

Trinity has a long and distinguished track record in the field – from Eleanor Knott’s pioneering publications 90 years ago, to Katharine Simms’ comprehensive online index of poems and their contents, to the digitisation of published and unpublished poems under the direction of Damian McManus. (The index and the poems are now available at bardic.celt.dias.ie)

My work builds on this tradition of scholarship, mainly by editing bardic poems – a complex and demanding task involving the painstaking collation of manuscript copies and the application of a wide range of palaeographical, metrical, linguistic and cultural knowledge and skills to restore the poet’s original.

1641 through bardic eyes – I am currently editing the poems of Gofraidh Óg Mac an Bháird, a witness to the cataclysmic 1641 war. As well as their artistic and linguistic value as compositions from the end of the bardic period, these offer the historian a valuable insight into the perspective of the Gaelic nobility engaged in the conflict. For instance, an elegy on the death of the Donegal nobleman Maghnas Ó Domhnaill (brother of a Trinity student and son of the infamous Sir Niall Garbh) gives a detailed account of his military career from the outbreak of hostilities until his death at the Battle of Benburb in 1646. This complements and counterbalances English-language sources available from the time, including Trinity’s own 1641 Depositions, which are hostile to ‘Manus Ó Donnelle’ and describe him as one of the ‘principall Rebells in the presente Action in this Kingdome’.

The purpose of a bardic poem, composed in a turbulent society where life was precarious and no physical monument could be expected to last, was to immortalise its subject, and it gives me great satisfaction to be helping to do this by bringing poems back to public notice and by making them accessible to a modern audience.

Digital Humanities – I am also working with Prof. Elaine Úi Dhonnchadha, an expert in corpus linguistics in Trinity’s Centre for Language and Communication Studies, on a project which brings 21st-century technology to bear on bardic poetry, using sophisticated language analysis tools to annotate each word in the Irish Department’s corpus of poetry with automatically generated linguistic information. We hope that this will revolutionise the study of the language of the poems.

Eoin Mac Cárthaigh received his BA and PhD from Trinity and joined the Department of Irish as a lecturer in 1998. He is an Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Irish. He was elected to fellowship in 2016 and is the author of The Art of Bardic Poetry (Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2014), an edition of one of the most important and challenging texts from the Early Modern Irish period.

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BELOW – A stemma (family tree) of manuscript copies of the same poem by Gofraidh Óg. If the Flanders manuscript had not survived long enough to be copied, this and many other poems would have disappeared with it. As its owner was told: ‘noble is the ship’s cargo that you brought across the sea since, were it not for that great love you had for your native tongue, we would have lost this worthy work forever on top of every other loss’.

BACKGROUND IMAGE – An image from TCD manuscript 1411 (H.6.7) showing the start of one of Gofraidh Óg’s poems.
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