Researchers of folklore and of modern literature, in particular, will find that this collection is a valuable addition to the available scholarship.

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Togail Bruidne Da Derga is one of the better known medieval Irish narratives, and different aspects of this tale have attracted the attention of scholars: it has, for example, served as a source for medieval Irish ideas on kingship; it has been considered as a means of accessing pre-Christian mythology; and its structure has been seen as bearing the hallmarks of (somewhat unskilled) compilation. O’Connor’s monograph on the tale provides the first book-length discussion of this important text, and it makes a strong and well-considered argument for viewing the Togail as a deliberately and carefully structured narrative that highlights questions relating to kingship and the exercise of power. O’Connor takes into account previous research on the tale while presenting his own arguments, based on a thorough and convincing analysis of the text’s structure, in a clear manner accessible to both specialists and non-specialists with an interest in the subject. From a purely practical perspective, the book’s bibliography as well as O’Connor’s references to previous work on the tale provide a convenient and useful resource.¹ The monograph thus represents a very important contribution to the study of the Togail and, more generally, to medieval Irish tales on kingship while also offering ideas and methods of use to the study of other medieval Irish texts.

The book can be divided into two parts, the first (chapters 1–7) dealing with textual questions and the structure of the Togail and the second (chapters 8–10) dealing with the literary and historical context of the tale. O’Connor’s introduction places his treatment of the Togail within scholarly approaches to medieval Irish literature in general and to the Togail more specifically. This useful overview emphasises O’Connor’s view that form and content are related, but he distances himself from the idea that a single author also implies a single fixed meaning, a matter to which he returns in the Afterword at the end of the book. The specific problem of analysing a text as the product of a single author when that author drew on a variety of sources is addressed in the Introduction.

¹ See, in particular, the discussion of critical approaches to the Togail in the Introduction (‘The story and its critics’, pp. 8–16).

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with O’Connor choosing, as a solution to this problem, ‘to restrict the single-
author perspective to my discussion of the saga’s overall structure’ (p. 7), an
approach which is both justifiable and practical.

Questions do, of course, arise when considering O’Connor’s ‘methodolo-
gical assumption that it [the Togail] was structured like this for its author’s
own reasons, rather than because of a lack of skill’ (p. 15). The most obvious
question relates to the transmission of the Togail and texts like it. When a text
survives in multiple, differing versions, is an approach such as that formulated
by O’Connor feasible or is it necessary to consider each version on its own
terms? A particular tale can change over the course of transmission, with lin-
guistic developments, changing stylistic tastes and copying errors all playing a
role. More significantly, however, in terms of content and structure, tales could
be reorganised; sections could be added, removed or the tale could be given
a different emphasis for a variety of reasons, leading to distinct versions, or
recensions, as is the case with the Togail. This process of adaptation and rein-
terpretation means that the question of what is the “original”, or even whether
such an idea is appropriate, can become very complicated. This concern is ad-
dressed by O’Connor in the first chapter, in which he begins by discussing the
different manuscript versions, editions and translations. Examining the kinds
of variation between the surviving manuscript copies, O’Connor argues that it
is possible to see the Togail’s archetype, which he dates to the tenth or eleventh
century based on Máire West’s unpublished edition, reflected in the surviving
manuscript versions, as the same basic structure is upheld, and he outlines his
reasons for choosing Eleanor Knott’s edition as the basis of his analysis while
adhering more closely to the text of the Yellow Book of Lecan than Knott. In
the rest of chapter 1, which includes an interesting discussion of perceived in-
consistencies within the text, O’Connor focuses on the different recensions of
the Togail, on related texts and on questions of compilation. O’Connor’s argu-
ment in this introductory chapter is carefully considered; he clearly states that
the approach taken to analysing the Togail is by no means suitable for every
text, and he acknowledges the interest textual variation may hold from other
perspectives. This discussion is an example of the balanced approach taken by
O’Connor throughout the book.

The chapters that follow consider the saga’s structure in detail, focusing
on different aspects of the tale, such as Conaire’s otherworldly connections,
the plunderers and the idea of the sovereignty goddess. O’Connor presents an
impressive and convincing analysis of the structure of the Togail, bringing out
details and parallels and making a strong case for the coherence of the text.

His treatment of Étain and his discussion of the temporal structure of the text
may serve as examples here. O’Connor’s analysis in Chapter 2 of her descrip-
tion at the beginning of the tale highlights the regal aspects of her appearance,
relating it to the overall theme of kingship and her significance in terms of her
genealogical position. O’Connor also draws attention to the stylistic difference
between the description of Étain and the passages of the saga that follow, which,
rather than indicating unskilled compilation, he argues separates the Étain passage from the rest of the text and gives it greater prominence. This argument is strengthened by the connection that O’Connor makes between this passage and the description of Conaire – also stylistically and structurally conspicuous – at a later point in the saga: in Chapter 7, O’Connor highlights similarities in language and imagery between the two descriptions. Étain’s description is related effectively to yet another figure in the text, namely Cailb, the ugly prophetess, who visits Conaire at the hostel. Drawing on West’s connection between Cailb and the idea of the sovereignty goddess, O’Connor, in Chapter 5, relates Cailb’s and Étain’s features and their effect, showing up negative parallels between the two characters, with Cailb’s description representing an inversion of Étain’s and her threatening nature indicating the Otherworld’s withdrawal of support for Conaire. Similarly, the exposition of the larger-scale structure of the tale in Chapter 4, in particular the convergence of Conaire’s and the plunderers’ movements on their way to the hostel, is convincing and interesting. O’Connor discusses the temporal structure of individual episodes and the shortening of the time between them, as well as interlace techniques and the geographical positioning of the two groups, arguing that the structure of the tale works to heighten tension and emphasise the account’s movement towards an inevitable climax.

These two examples of O’Connor’s analysis show how his attention to structural features, verbal parallels and stylistic details can bring out connections between passages that might otherwise seem only loosely connected. This is important with regard to one of O’Connor’s main arguments, namely that To-gail Bruidne Da Derga is the result of a deliberate process of composition and that its structure is not merely dictated by its sources. There is still scope for applying this approach to other medieval Irish tales, directing attention to, as O’Connor puts it, ‘the “effects” created by a text’ (p. 7), and it can be a useful way of approaching different versions of a text.

O’Connor’s exposition of and conclusions on the structure of this tale are carefully researched and clearly presented; on occasion, however, certain ideas might have been phrased more carefully in order to avoid the impression that some statements are based not on analysis of the text but on O’Connor’s own views. For example, in his discussion of the plunderers’ journey in the context of the overall structure of the tale, O’Connor addresses a supposed doublet which seems to represent a contradiction within the text (see pp. 114–7). O’Connor offers an argument as to how this doublet might be accommodated in the overall structural pattern that he identifies in the saga, and while O’Connor is clear that the problems associated with the doublet cannot be ignored, his statement regarding the lack of certain necessary information in the passage that ‘either a sentence was accidentally omitted, or the author felt no need to give this information’ (p. 116) sounds more speculative than is necessary. Similarly, having considered the similarities between Nemglan and the bird-man who is Conaire’s father and having concluded that they have ‘functionally similar’ roles,
O’Connor states the following: ‘If this explication sounds tortuous, it only goes to show how successful the saga-author was in emphasizing simultaneously the mystery and the importance of Conaire’s divine paternity: the bird-father’s identity remains significantly hidden from Mess Búachalla, Conaire, and the saga-audience alike’ (p. 62). While the identity of the bird-man may indeed have been deliberately obscured for the reason given by O’Connor, the wording of this sentence appears to assume this intention on the saga-author’s part from the outset. However, this aside, it is entirely clear that O’Connor’s views are based on a thorough and careful analysis of the text, and his exposition of the structure of this tale provides important and convincing arguments for the deliberate nature of the text’s structure.

Having discussed the tale’s structure, O’Connor turns to what could be termed the “meaning” of the text, discussing the literary context of the Togail, as well as its possible historical context. He offers an interesting discussion of the possibilities of classical influence on medieval Irish literature in Chapter 7 as well as biblical influence, in particular from the Old Testament. The Old Testament connections lead to what is the main focus of the second part of the book, namely the theme of kingship, discussed in chapters 9 and 10, and, more specifically, the possible relationship between the Togail and the story of Saul in 1 Samuel. Saul’s story was influential in early medieval ideas on kingship, as O’Connor demonstrates by giving examples from Ireland and continental Europe. Not all of the parallels with 1 Samuel that O’Connor draws are necessarily convincing, as some of them are fairly general and some motifs are found in other texts and cultures, too. This is acknowledged by O’Connor, and his conclusion ‘that the Togail was not modelled in its entirety on 1 Samuel, but that the biblical text may have inspired the shaping of some aspects of the Togail’ (p. 261) seems reasonable and is strengthened by the discussion of the importance of Saul and David to medieval ideas concerning kingship.

O’Connor’s discussion of the historical context of the Togail in Chapter 10 is, in fact, a discussion of the literary and thematic context of the tale, closely connected to the discussion in Chapter 9. O’Connor’s reasons for avoiding placing the Togail in any specific context are very good; he cites the impossibility of assigning an exact date to the text as well as the more fundamental problem of identifying one particular set of historical circumstances as the defining context for a given text: ‘The combination of ambiguous dating evidence and a patchy, often unreliable historical record makes it, in my view, unwise to tie down the primary meaning of the saga definitively to any single localized set of “known” events’ (p. 288). Even when approaching tales with the aim of assigning a more general function to them, O’Connor advises caution, highlighting the fact that texts may have multiple meanings, especially once they are transmitted by later generations.

O’Connor’s discussion connects well to his consideration of the links with Samuel and ideas about sacred kingship in the preceding chapter. He discusses the Togail in the context of other medieval texts from Ireland and elsewhere, as
well as referring to such authorities as Isidore and Augustine and considering the possibility of viewing the Togail as dynastic propaganda and of associating the tale’s pre-Christian setting with the Old Testament period. He is careful with regard to the saga’s exemplary function and is at pains, as elsewhere in the book, not to close off possible interpretative avenues, pointing out that reading the Togail as an exemplum would not have stopped audiences from viewing it as history, too. The Togail’s exemplary function is considered in the context of other texts relating to kingship, including hagiography and tecosca. In the discussion, O’Connor takes into account generic differences between texts, coming to the conclusion that the Togail was able to address certain tensions pertaining to ideas of social hierarchy and kingship because of its narrative form.

One of the points O’Connor identifies in the texts discussed is the requirement of a ruler to be, at the same time, strong and merciful. He cites Brian’s depiction in Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh,² warlike and saintly at the same time, as well as referring to Diambad messe bad rí réil,³ which lists mercy as well as mercilessness towards enemies as qualities required by a king. Though the evidence presented indicates that this apparent contradiction was a matter of interest, it apppears to have troubled some authors more than others. An example of an explicit solution that bridges the gap between ideals and practice comes to mind in this context: in the so-called Pseudo-historical prologue to the Senchas Már (McCONE 1986) and Comthoth Lóegairi co cretim γ a aided in Lebor na hUidre (BEST & BERGIN 1929, ll. 9732–9820), one of the Togail’s manuscripts, capital punishment and the Christian teaching of forgiveness are argued to be compatible, as the body must be punished but the soul is forgiven. O’Connor does, in fact, acknowledge that the authors of the texts he cites were able to reconcile what he identifies as tensions, and he turns to a text which is more clearly troubled by the problem of the compatibility of ideal and practice, De rectoribus Christianis,⁴ before considering Augustine and Hincmar of Rheims, all of which offer an interesting context for the Togail.

Having considered both the Togail’s structure and its main theme in detail, O’Connor’s Afterword returns, with a brief overview of the treatments of the Togail after the medieval period, to questions of meaning and perception, initially raised in the Introduction. The Afterword restates O’Connor’s approach to the saga text and stresses the importance of acknowledging that a text can have multiple meanings, while also recognising a single author’s literary achievement. Following the convincing analysis laid out in the book, it would be difficult not to agree with the arguments made here.

O’Connor’s book represents a thorough, insightful and readable examination of an important medieval Irish text. Furthermore, O’Connor is clearly con-

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² Edition and translation in TODD 1867.
³ O’DONOGRUE 1921–3.
⁴ HELLMANN 1906: 1–91.
cerned to make his book, and thus the *Togail*, accessible to those less familiar with medieval Irish literature. O’Connor achieves this by providing contextual information on medieval Irish literature and by drawing parallels to other medieval European literature, to classical works, Shakespeare and modern film, as well as by providing a glossary of terms at the end of the book. This attitude is very welcome, given the view of medieval Irish literature – and anything ‘Celtic’ – as somewhat exotic, even, sometimes, within medieval studies. O’Connor’s book shows that a medieval Irish text such as *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* can be viewed as a serious literary endeavour that engaged with the issues of its time and that is deserving of critical study in its own right and within the wider European context.


TODD, James Henthorn (ed. and trans.), 1867: *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh. The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill, or the invasions of Ireland by the Danes and other Norsemen*. London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer.

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