Who Was Mac an Cheannuidhe?
A Mystery of the Birth of the Aisling

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Aodhagán Ó Rathaille established the eighteenth-century Aisling in 'Mac an Cheannuidhe' but its doomed hero is not easily identifiable with the exiled Stuarts. A round-up of the usual suspects proving insufficient, alternative solutions are offered and discussed, while other possibilities suggest that the poem bore an urgently coded political message making sense to its audience as it explained why hopes of liberation of Irish Catholicism were now dashed by the latest developments in European politics.

When I was a schoolboy at Belvedere College, Dublin, I had the good fortune to study Irish under the late Tadhg Ó Murchadha, whose dedication and enthusiasm are still vividly with me 40 years later. In dealing with the Aisling, or patriotic dream-vision, it was his custom to prefix discussion of the individual poems with a general analysis of the form: it is clear to me now that, as with so many Irish intellectuals of his generation, Daniel Corkery's The Hidden Ireland (1925) played a great part in shaping his thought on the question. A native of Kerry, he gloried in the poetic genius of the writers, coupled with forceful regret that they were wasting their loyalties on a worthless crew like the exiled Stuarts. The Aisling admitted of general classification, to which several of those in the early eighteenth century produced important exceptions. The genre was then still in the experimental stage, whereas by the time Eoghan Ruadh Ó Súileabáin (1748-84) it had settled down into a fixed pattern, the interest of which lay in the elegance of ornament and sophistication of symbol rather than in any major variation. The cause was simple enough: with the effective disappearance of the Stuart Restoration after 1746 as a serious possibility, the urgency of the message had vanished. The most that could be said was that the later Aisling provided a form of cultural identity, the political hopelessness of which was offset by richness of the beauty it inspired.

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Aodhagán Ó Rathaille supplied a wide variety of very different treatments for his poetry, and required separate analysis, notably for the bitter conflict in 'Gile an Gile' with the personified Ireland (treated with great reverence by successors) and the strange ceremonious candle-lighting of 'Maidean suí smaoín Titan a chosa do luidhail'. But the poem 'Mac an Cheannuidhe' is much more directly in the pattern which Eoghan Ruadh would bring to so baroque a final form fifty years later:

Aisling ghéar do dhéarcas féin, im leabaidh is mé go lagbhfróghach:
Ainnir shéimh, dar bh'ainm Êire. ag teacht im ghaor ar marcaigheacht;
A súil reamhar ghlas, a cúl trom cas, a com scang geal 's a mainidhe,
Dá mhaoidheamh go raibh ag tigheacht n-a gar, le díoghrais, Mac an Cheannuidhe.

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A beol ba bhinn, a glór ba chaoín, is ró-shéarc linn an cailín;
Céile Bhriáin dá ghdéill an Fhiann, mo léir-chreach dhian a haicíd.
Fá shúiste Gall, dá brúghadh go teann, mo chúilfhíonn tscaing's mo bhean ghaoil;
Ní féidir faiseamh síle le tigheacht n-a gar go bhfillfidh Mac an Cheannuidhe.

Na céadta atá i bpéin de ghradh le gær-shéarc sámh dá cneas-chli;
Clanna ríghthe, maca Mileadh, dragain fhíochta is gaisceidigh,
Tá gnúis n-a gnó, ní mhúsclann s,' cé dubhach fá scíos an cailín,
Ní féidir faiseamh síle le tigheacht n-a gar go bhfillfidh Mac an Cheannuidhe.

A ráidhte féin, is cráidhte an sceal, mo lán-chreach gheár a haicíd!
Go bhfuil sí gan cheol ag caoi na n-dear, 's a buidhnean gan go ba mhaith gnóimh,
Gan chliar, gan órd, i bhpiant go móir, n-a haírsa fó gach maddhídhe;
'S go mbeidh sí n-a spreas gan luighe le fear go bhfillfidh Mac an Cheannuidhe.

Adubhart ar fás an bhúidh-bhean mhíona, ó túrnadh ríoghra chleacht sí—
Conn is Art, ba lonnmhara reacht, is bhfhoghlach glac ngleacuidheacht;
Crimthanna tréin, tar tuinn thug gèill, is Laoigheadh mac Chéin an fear groidhe—
Go mbeadh sí n-a spreas, gan luighe le fear, go bhfillfeadh Mac Cheannuidhe.

Do-bheir síul ó dheas, gach lá fó seach, ar thráigh na mbarc, an cailín;
Is síul deas soir, go dlúth thar mur, mo chumha anocht a haicíd;
A síle star, ag síle le Dia, tar tonnthaibh fiara gainme;
Is go mbeidh sí n-a spreas, gan luighe le fear, go bhfillfidh Mac an Cheannuidhe.

A bháithre breaca táid tar lear—na táinte shearc an cailín;
Ní féidir le fagháil, níl gean nó grádh ag neacht dá cáirdh, adhmhuighim;
A gruadhna fliuch, gan suan, gan suilt, fágh naíim, is duibh a n-aibid.
Ní féidir faiseamh síle le tigheacht n-a gar go bhfillfidh Mac an Cheannuidhe!

Dubhart-sa léi, ar chlós na sceal, a rún gur éag ar chleacht sí,
Thuas 'san Spáinn go bhfuair an bás, 's nár thraigh le cánach a haicíd;
Ar gcos mo gothta i bhfoghas di, chorrugha a cruith, 's do scread sí;
Is déanta in anam d'aon-phreib aiste; mo léán-sa an bhean go lag-bhríoghach.

[I beheld a bitter⁵ vision as I lay in my bed bereft of strength
A gentle maiden, whose name was Erin, approached me on horseback—
Full and bright were her eyes, her hair was heavy and ringleted; fair and slender her waist, and her eyebrows—
Proclaiming that the Merchant's Son was coming to her with zeal.

Her mouth was melodious, her voice was beautiful—great is my love for the maiden—
The Spouse of Brian, whom the warriors obeyed; my utter complete ruin is her affliction.
Crushed heavily beneath the flail of foreigners, this slender maiden, my kinswoman; There is no relief ever to draw near her until the Merchant's Son come back.

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Hundreds are pining in love through earnest, pleasing devotion to her complexion,
Children of kings, sons of Milesius, fierce warriors and champions;
Sorrow is in her face, she does not arouse herself; sad and weary though the maiden be,
There is no relief ever to draw near to her till the Merchant's Son come back.

Her own words, distressing is her tale,—her affliction is my complete, sharp ruin!
How that she is without melody, shedding tears, though her troops, without falsehood,
had performed great deeds,
Without clergy, without friars, deep in suffering, a remnant subject to every dog;
And that she will lie alone, nor admit a lover until the Merchant's Son come back.

The kindly, mild woman added, that since the kings she had cherished were brought low—
Conn and Art, whose reigns were warlike, and whose hands were strong to spoil in fight,
Críomhthann the strong, who brought hostages from across the sea, and Luigheach, son of Cian, the man of might—
She would lie alone, nor admit a lover until the Merchant's Son come back.

Daily the maiden looks southward, on the shore of the ships,
Eastward she looks wistfully across the main,
Hoping in God, she looks westward over wild, sand-mingled waves (mounds),
And she will lie alone, nor admit a lover until the Merchant's Son come back.

Her speckled brethren, they are over the sea, the troops whom the maiden loved;
Nor feast, nor favour, nor love is to be got by any of her friends, I avow it;
Her cheeks wet, without repose or pleasure, in sorrow, black is their covering;
There is no relief to draw near her till the Merchant's Son come back.

On hearing her story, I told her the lover she cherished was dead,
In Spain beyond he died, and her affliction was pitied of none;
As she heard my voice close to her, her frame trembled, she shrieked,
And the soul fled from her in an instant; oh woe! the woman bereft of strength.]

The poem conforms to the skeleton I learned from Tadhg, with some variant bones in the dreaming. Firstly, instead of the entertaining and encomiastic guessing competition in which the later poets play find-the-lady, there is no nonsense here. This is Éire, and nobody else. Her concern is registered at once: the return of Mac an Cheannuidhe. The later poets follow Ó Rathaille in their strong estimate of the lady's pulchritude, and also of her likeness to some rather sinister figures: here Ó Rathaille prompts thoughts of Gormlaith, Brian Boromha's much-espoused consort, and such equally dubious if forceful ladies as the stepmother of the children of Lir or the fair destroyer of Troy would be offered as subsequent alternatives by his disciples. The ambiguity is consistent with the direct charge in 'Gile na Gile' that Éire in submitting to George I has become a whore, and supports R.A. Brittain's thesis for an origin of the form in poems about a fairy queen who possesses rather too much in common with Keats's Belle Dame Sans Merci. But the distinction is that the later poets reveal the ambiguity by their questions to Éire; Ó Rathaille knows perfectly well who she is, and intends to get down to business. Their delays in establishing her identity are anticipated by
him only in simile. A nice symbolic contrast exists here. The concept of Éire grows vaguer and less certain of immediate recognition as the century advances and the old cause loses touch with reality. I doubt if the symbolism is accidental.

'Mac an Cheannuidh' agrees with the successor versions on the insolubility of Éire until the lost leader, lover or protector returns. But the end offers a violent contrast. The later poets conclude with assurances that all will be well, and the exiled deliverer is on his way with inevitable victory and restoration of the old Order, by which is clearly meant the old Gaelic Catholic Order. But Ó Rathaille, while even more explicit about what the return of Mac an Cheannuidhe will redress in Éire's view, ends with an abrupt and even harsh shattering of her dreams by the poet. Instead of winning her favour by some heart-warming prophecy, Ó Rathaille repels her and throws her into a swoon, perhaps a death-swoon, with the assertion that 'Mac an Cheannuidhe' has died 'thuas sa Spáinn' and that nobody is in the least sorry for her in the loss.

Gerard Murphy, in his "Notes on Aisling Poetry" 5 usefully offers three categories of Aisling, love, prophecy and allegory, although, like most classifications of poetry, they invite their own plethora of exceptions. Clearly, 'Mac an Cheannuidhe' derives from literary traditions of love-visions, prophecy-visions and (at least in its eponymous subject) is allegory: but equally clearly it is neither love (the poet showing very little of the amorous adulation usually evident in all three Aisling categories and used elsewhere by Ó Rathaille), nor prophecy (the poet insists he is stating existing facts: the poem in effect is anti-prophesy) and its allegory seems limited to its title-subject. But an allegory may contain all kinds of meaning we will never know. (Consider, for instance, the insoluble allegories in Shakespeare's Love's Labours Lost, turning on the minutaie of forgotten controversies.)

The poem's awareness of its place in tradition may be suggestive. Rachel Bromwich instructs us to "here notice that many strange pseudonyms are used for the Pretender such as the 'White-headed Boy', or Ó Rahilly's 'The Merchant's Son', in order to obscure the political character of the poem, and by obscurity to increase the impressiveness of the prophecy". In general Mrs. Bromwich is no doubt correct: obscurity is a long-hallowed adjunct to the enhancement of the authoritative, as the Rev. Clergy and their ungrateful heirs, the professoriate, have so often proved in their own persons. But surely in his conclusion Ó Rathaille is not trying to impress by obscurity: he wants to impress by the quality of his poetry, and by the depth of his tragedy, certainly, but he presents facts of stark despair whose obscurity may simply be our misfortune. There must be a reasonable supposition that his contemporary audience knew what he was talking about.

How familiar was that audience with the epithet "Mac an Cheannuidhe" and what interpretation was it given? Tomás de Bháilstraith6, refuting Gerard Murphy's thesis of a non-Gaelic origin for the Aisling, draws attention to the one known previous use of the term: a late sixteenth-century poem "Do Mhac Í Dhomhnuill" by Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn (1550-1591), whose editor Eleanor Knott had noted "Here we may have the origin of the epithet "Merchant's Son" applied to the Pretender by Aodhagán Ó Raithille" 7. The poem begins:

Raise the veil from Ireland; long hath she sought a spouse, finding no mate for her couch after the happiness of the men of Fál was blasted.
It is long since the Isle of Bregia could discover herself to any; a luckless widow is the wife of Flann --- land of splendid stone dwellings.
She could not but lose her beauty, it is thus with uncared for women; Ireland, land of sparkling, melodious streams, hath the complexion of loneliness. ... [verses 1-3]
Howbeit, we think the more lightly of this mournful gloom which hangs over Ireland,
since for Té’s Rampart, which was named of Art, succour hath been foretold.

It is in store for it that a man shall come to dissolve its enchantments; need must, then,
that he shall one day take possession of the Field of the Gaels.

For thee, Conn, son of the Calvach, many a prophet hath truly foretold thee — it is
fitting that you should seek one another — Ireland hath been waiting.

Alas, thou graceful of form, for him who does not give some thing of her desire to the
smooth, yew-timbered, bright rampart, first couch of Conn and Cobhthach.

Look frequently on her bright countenance, bend thine eye upon her in secret; approach
her graceful form, speak covertly with Ireland.

Embrace her, go to her couch, thou beautiful yet icy of flesh; take to thee the spouse of
Lugh, lest Ireland be left unwedded. ... [verses 8-13]

Another such kiss gave Brian of Bóróimhe, by which he gained without dispute, thou
white of hand, that stately dwelling place of the Sons of Míl.

As with other women in manifold enchantments, thou canst procure with a kiss the
release of tearful Banba, O white-footed, black-lashed youth.

As with women under enchantments, Ireland, land of rippling waterfalls, plain of great
fins, of shallow streams, will be the possession of him who rescues her.

Long ere her, time there was a women even as this country of the Sons of Míl, in
ancient Africa, sandy, bright, of fertile hills, many-rivered, salmonful.

The man of yore who loved the princess of the wondrous isles changed the white-

handed maiden of the soft, shining hair into a great, forbidding she-dragon.

The daughter of Hippocrates, son of Núl, spent a while in dragon's shape, under many
and manifold enchantments, from which it had been difficult to rescue her.

Be the reason what it may, for one day in each year in order to rekindle her sorrow, the
gift of beauty was granted to her sparkling, youthful countenance.

A merchant's son from the land of the west went to her once upon a time, and found the
bright, sweetly-speaking womanly beauty in her modest maiden's form.

He set the desire of his heart upon the woman, and prayed that the lovely, shining-
haired one might be a mate for his own bright figure, though to seek her was a cause of
remorse.

The bright-eyed queen replied, "I would be thine were it possible, thou wondrous,
comely youth, long-handed, gentle, dark-browed."

"By consent or force thou shalt be mine", said the brown-lashed youth. "I have forsaken
the glances of man, it cannot be", returned the maiden.

"At all other times I am in the shape of a fiery dragon, so that my face (although now)
smooth, modestly blushing, beloved, is horrifying to behold."

"Is help in store for thee in days to come?" said the youth "thou bright form, with clear
countenance, when dost thou expect thy deliverance?"

"It is destined for me that a knight from the warriors of Féllim's Land shall come when
I am in dragon's shape, with a kiss whereby I shall be delivered.

The compassionate warrior shall be a husband to me, it is destined for him that he shall
be made king over the islands, a thing difficult to accomplish."

"It is destined for me", said the youth, "I am from Ireland, to bestow that kiss which
shall quench thy rage, thou curly-headed maiden, so young and noble."

"How could the thing thou sayest be destined for thee, my heart's fruit?" said the stately
maiden. "since thou hast never been a knight."

On hearing that, the merchant's son took orders of chivalry; he departed from the rosy
maiden of the soft, shining hair to learn a strange calling.
At the break of day he came again to visit the maiden; astonishing was the state in which he found the gracious beauty of the fair, soft tresses. He found in the early morn the graceful figure with smooth brows, and the smooth, silky, heavy, luxuriant tresses, transformed into an awesome, fiery dragon. On beholding the terrifying monster he fled in panic; that expedition ended in his death; a case not easy to succour.

The daughter of Hippocrates then returned to her chamber, and the heart of the white-footed, sweet-voiced maiden was full of sorrow. She vowed that from that day on she would arise for no man until the coming of the prophesied one who was destined to release her from her bonds. And even yet --- long is the suffering --- her gray modest-lashed eye, her pleasing form, her rosy countenance await her deliverer.

Ireland is that woman, O silky of hair, thou art the man who shall deliver Ireland; and the hideous visage of the dragon is the tormenting host of ruthless foreigners. Draw near to her, thou curly-headed one, do not shrink from the dragonlike aspect which clothes the sweet, beguiling streams of the Boyne; deliver Ireland from her disfigurement. [Verses 16-41]

The rest of the poem requests Conn O'Donnell (d. 1583) to carry out his duty to clear Ireland from the foreigners. (This was fully in keeping with bardic preceptorial adjuration to keep promising young chieftains faithful to Gaelic tradition, rather than responding to English blandishment as in fact Conn was to do.) But a scrutiny of the two texts suggests not only that Ó Rathaille was drawing on Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn's "Do Mhac Í Dhomhnull" but that he expected his audience to know that. The almost casual invocations in "Mac an Cheanuaidhe" of Conn, Art, Laoigheadh, Brian imply audience groundwork in their implications for the sixteenth-century poem. We have to assume that in the oral culture, and in the absence of modern plethora of omnipresent cultural interference, the earlier text was as firmly in the minds of listeners as Shakespeare would be in ours, or Homer in those of the Aeschylean, Sophoclean and Euripidean audiences, or the folk-legends of the fall of Troy in those of the listeners to Homer. The very second verse includes "Céile Bhrain d'ár ghéill an Fhiann" with its self-explanatory assumptions [implying "you all know what I'm talking about, there's no need to expound in detail"] and the choice of these particular names, allowing for a few variations, again testifies to not simply an obvious, but an obligatory, use of source. The references were to be expected; naturally, in the Munster poem, Brian is given pride of place although well down the heroic litany in the Ulster ode.

The story which Ó Huiginn offers as analogy to Ireland's condition is very old. Although identified with the medical pioneer Hippocrates of Cos (presumably because of popular folklore confusions of scientific and magical expertise, witness the reputations of Michael Scott and Roger Bacon in Scottish and English folklore respectively), the basic idea relates from puberty rites of passage, as pictured in the stories of Cupid and Psyche, Beauty and the Beast, Artemis's contrasting relations with Actaeon and Endymion, Little Red Riding Hood (at least as interpreted by Angela Carter and the movie based on her work Company of Wolves and in recent times Frank R. Stockton's "The Lady or the Tiger" (1884) and in C.S. Lewis's The Silver Chair (1954). The loss of virginity (whether female or, and in this first poet's case, male) and/or marriage, obviously unite terror and wonder, joy and grief, glory and horror. Loss of male innocence to an experienced female results in enchantment or death of the man, a metaphor for the bestializing consequences of the discovery of lust: Circe in the Odyssey, Venus in Tannhäuser, Keats's "La Belle Dame Sans Merci", and --- perhaps
something its author reflected without fully realising --- Yeats's Cathleen Ní Houlihan. A Lesbian version (in my opinion symbolising a vampirical Ireland and virginical Britain, may be found in Coleridge's "Christabel". The metamorphosis is not confined to the man: the aged Cathleen Ní Houlihan is rejuvenated by getting the bridegroom out of the clutches of his bride and into those of his death, and the breaking of Prince Rilian's enchantment makes the beautiful Lady revert into her original identity as a serpentine dragon (in the Irish C.S. Lewis's The Silver Chair)!

Ó Rathaille was obviously fascinated by the basic legend, and makes very striking use of it in his "Gile na Gile" where Ireland is false to her true lord, traps and binds her poet, and is yet in misery at her own treachery: she is eternally enchanting, eternally ensnaring, eternal penitent, eternal whore. R.A. Breathnach impressively places these images in the general Gaelic context of "The Harlot Queen". On the other hand, Breathnach is surely wrong in reading the story as the "beautiful daughter of Hippocrates who had been changed into a she dragon and was fated to remain in that shape until a merchant's son from the land of the west should deliver her with a kiss": there seems no indication that the deliverer was forced to prove any such rigorously capitalist antecedent. In the Ó Huiginn poem the merchant's son has to qualify in knighthood to offset his parvenu origins ("the smell of the shop" in the English snob phrase). The merchant's son, far from being an inevitable victor, failed.

Ó Rathaille's activity in "Mac an Cheannuidhe" falls into the oral-formulaic: he tells the well-known story in his own way, with variations to suit himself. But he is definitely not telling it for its own sake. All of his poetry is urgently connected with the death of his own world, of patronage, piety and poetry. He selects the story and transforms it as he wishes to do his work: similarly, Euripides uses the Fall of Troy in The Trojan Woman, to preach moral lessons against immoral policies of Athens. If the common ground between the Ó Huiginn and Ó Rathaille poems is ostentatious, the originality of Ó Rathaille is if anything even more pointed. The Ó Huiginn version offered the equation: Conn O'Donnell is to Ireland what the Irish merchant's son, if courageous, would be to Hippocrates's daughter.

Ó Rathaille discards Hippocrates's daughter, and the merchant's son may not be Irish. In both poems the merchant's son dies, but the older version has the maiden both cause and (after his defection) probably will his death, whereas the later makes that death both unwanted and (so far as we can judge) uncaused by Íre. The implication of the term "the merchant's son" may be anything but complimentary, as a choice of identity. Its role in the poem, ending each verse, shows that it was almost certainly the driving-force in the decision to use this particular story. But in the original story, the merchant's son is initially open to question by his insufficiently exalted origin, and finally confirms the worst fears as to his essential ignobility. It is at least possible, in the light of the Ó Huiginn ode to Conn O'Donnell, that the "merchant's son" was a way of specifying a hoped-for saviour who actually is not up to the job. In this connection it may be relevant to recall Frank O'Connor's "O'Rahilly is a snob, but one of the great snobs of literature".

Who, then, was Mac an Cheannuidhe?

We may dismiss theses such as Séamus Ó hAodha's insistence that the covenant must be fulfilled and Mac an Cheannuidhe (whoever he was) will return: this is simply to impose the later convention on a poem which is clearly saying nothing of the kind. Nor is it reasonable to follow Father Patrick Dinneen in his first edition of O'Rathaille's Poems (1900) in arguing that it "must be regarded as pure fancy". His own preface, in words retained in his second edition (1911), dispose of that:
There are few pictures in poetry more pathetic than that drawn in "The Merchant's Son". The frequency with which visions of Ireland, cast into stereotyped form, were produced at a later date is calculated to create a prejudice in the mind of the reader against this poem. But the vision here described is altogether different from the common poetic reveries of the later poets. The loveliness and grace of the maiden, her misfortunes, her trust in her absent deliverer and lover, her belief in his speedy arrival, the fidelity with which she clings to his love - all these create in our minds an intense interest in the distressed queen. But our hearts melt to pity when she is described as looking, day after day, across the main, "over wild, sand-mingled waves", in the hope of catching a glimpse of the promised fleet. Then the poet has a painful surprise in store for her and for us. The hero she loved is dead. He died in Spain and there is no one to pity her. It is more than she can bear. Her soul is wrenched from her body in terror at the word. It is impossible to describe adequately the power of this poem. It is ablaze with passion, while the sudden terror of the concluding stanza belongs to the sublime.

My hearty concurrence with (and gratitude to) Dínneen dictate a firm corollary that Ó Rathaille could not possibly have abused his powers in the creation of baseless despair: he had cause enough for despair, but why add to it by an imaginary death of an imaginary saviour? Dínneen in 1900 was writing in the long shadow of "art for art's sake"?, but his abandonment of the theory by 1911 makes it clear his heart was with his own introduction, and the subsequently discarded "fancy" was a straw grasped in a transient moment of editorial desperation. The urgency of the poem implies that it was written about a person whose name its audience knew well.

The date of the poem, wholly problematic, depends on the identity of its subject in the absence of other data. All dates between 1693 and 1725 are theoretically possible, and many have their proponents. Dínneen in 1900 noted that "in some MS copies ["Gile na Gile"] is placed after ["Mac an Cheannudhe"] as a binding", and as ["Gile na Gile"] seems to have been composed before 1725, ["Mac an Cheannudhe"] may also be referred to the same date": but the logic defeats me. "Gile na Gile" is certainly about the rival claims of Stuart and Hanoverian (and not about such decrepit figures as James II and William III, dying in 1701 and 1702 respectively), as suitors of Ireland. (Although Queen Anne's Lesbianism might have made her an appropriate suitor for the fairy Ireland, the allusions are to men, so that it seems firmly after 1714.) In any case the two poems are among the most admired of their author's output and their linkage in reproduction may have nothing to do with proximity of composition. Dínneen in 1911 chose the date of 1700 as suitting "the tone and spirit" of "Mac an Cheannudhe" but this seems dictated by his new solution for the title-role, Carlos II." Seamus O'Neill in the Macmillan Dictionary of Irish Literature (1980) is all for an early date:

Only in the eighteenth century, however, did the aising become a cult, especially with the Munster poets; its theme was the promise of the return of the Stuarts, or, as it has been derisively phrased, "Charley-over-the-waterism". We even know who started this fashion. It was Aodhagán Ó Rathaille who composed the first political aising when he led off with "Mac an Cheannudhe". This poem is famous not merely because it is the first of these political visions, but because of its excellence. It is a good example of the amhrán or stress meter, although it might be argued that its rhythm is too swift for its subject, as the poem does not end on a note of promise but of despair. The language is simple and direct, not excessively ornate...

This, too, seems the reasoning behind the insistence by Séamus Ó hAodha on the youth and force of the poem, although few could equal the sublimity of his observation on our ignorance of how the aising began [My translation:] "The wind blows on the lake-water, and we do not know what troubling of the air causes it to happen." (That is what Oscar Wilde meant about the Critic as Artist.) The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing is positively ecumenical in its fidelity to the Macmillan Dictionary, "Mac an Cheannudhe" ("a title usually taken to mean the Stuart claimant to the throne") is styled "one of the earliest political
aislings and was composed by Aogán Ó Rathaille at a time when there was still the hope of a Jacobite rebellion.\(^2\) Sean Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, in An Duanaire put the poem "within a few short years" after the hopes of Spanish aid for the Jacobite cause in 1719-20.\(^2\)

If we admit that nothing obliges us to date this poem alongside "Gile na Gile" we see that any time in the reigns of Queen Anne or of George I is theoretically possible for its composition, nor does it seem impossible from the 1690s at any point after the Treaty of Limerick.

Let us examine the candidates for Mac an Cheannuidhe.

(a) James II. Few scholars really care much for this choice. After his flight from the Boyne, a return by James in person seemed neither likely nor greatly desirable, and the poem is inept that Mac an Cheannuidhe must return, not simply send troops. There is a strong implication that Mac an Cheannuidhe is virile and heroic: James turned 60 in 1693, had lost his nerve after the landing of William in England in 1688, and his heroic naval career as Duke of York would hardly have been well known in Ireland as such. Ó Rathaille might have turned with scorn from the widespread Jacobite cynicism about James II after the Boyne, but he could hardly delude himself it did not exist. (Tadhg Ó Murchadha did not tell us of the contemporary Gaelic "Séamus an chaca", but my grandmother told me)\(^2\). Eleanor Hull's attempt to straddle this ("He knew of the flight of James II, and he heard the rumours of his proposed descent upon the west coast in 1708")\(^4\) is probably far from unique in confusing James and son, James dying in 1701: but Ó Rathaille's choice of the term "Mac an Cheannuidhe" was very deliberate, and clearly in its verse-ending repetition demanded audience concentration on the hero's status as a son. Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn was stressing the class factor: Ó Rathaille was not (whoever his "merchant's son" may be, he certainly was no merchant's son). Thomas Kinsella actually translates "Mac an Cheannuidhe" as "the Redeemer's Son". Dinneen as lexicographer will not admit that translation, reserving "ceannruitheoir" for "Redeemer" and the idea has been denounced as carrying a blasphemous identification with Christ which no Irish Jacobite is known to have employed, however extravagant his other analogies. But Kinsella and Ó Tuama argue the poem's title "is possibly taken from an old Irish tale where it has the connotation of 'redeemer' or 'saviour'". If by this tale they mean the Ó Huiginn poem, then they are wrong, since the would-be saviour in that is the son, not the paternal merchant.\(^5\) James II might be seen as a "redeemer" in the strict sense that his patriot parliament had called into question land titles from the previously confiscated Irish lands (now apportioned among English settlers by the later Tudors, the early Stuarts, and Cromwell). This would mean much to Ó Rathaille, with his cult of the long dispossessed MacCarthys whom his ancestors (as he tells his audience in a late poem) served before Christ was crucified. Mrs Bromwich's emphasis on obscurity for coding political messages could be relevant here: a direct Christ-analogy might be unacceptable, but a coded allusion to land-confiscation redemption could focus an identity in the audience's mind. So James II is a decided possibility as the merchant if not as his son: there was no Irish cult of Charles I as a Redeemer, although there certainly was an English one.

Also while it is perilous to have an argument as to exact chronology, and Ó Huiginn over a century earlier had made much of the need to drive out foreigners and restore old traditions, the specific points in Mac an Cheannuidhe about the banishment of clerics and particularly of friars sound very much like allusion to the penal laws enacted after the death of James II, in the reign of Anne, specifically the law to take effect on 1 January 1704.

James II, of course, died in St. Germain, Paris, not in Spain. That in itself might not be
conclusive, but there was no war, campaign or diplomatic negotiation which could have given rise to the idea that he was in Spain at the time of his death.

So Mac an Cheannuidhe was not James II.

(b) James III. (We may as well call him that, because he would certainly have been so venerated by Ó Rathaille, as he was by many of the Irish Catholic laity, most of the Irish Catholic clergy, and all of the Irish Catholic hierarchy --- whom he personally had appointed.) He is certainly the obvious candidate. It is a simple equation to assume, as Tadhg Ó Murchadhá did, and as Corkery did, that all aislings, before the 1740s, must be about him. Macmillan and Field Day are as one in accord for him. Ó Tuama is less happy, but at least in An Duanaire comes down firmly (supported by Kinsella) to assert "The title refers to the Stuart Pretender". Dinneen in 1900 drew attention to Ó Rathaille's Tarngairreacht Dhoinn Fhhrinnigh where an allusion is made to James III as the "bricklayer", and thought (in 1900, not in 1911) that "a similiar idea appears to be suggested by the 'Merchant's Son'". But that won't work: Tarngairreacht is using the term (from the Whig invention that James II, having no Catholic heir, had a bricklayer's son smuggled into his palace and passed off as his legitimate heir) to jeer at its users whose defeat in the War of the Spanish Succession or a subsequent war it predicts, and it first establishes the realities by allusion to James II as "the son of Charles", and to James III as "his noble son". Dinneen's change of mind to favour Carlos II indicates his own mature repudiation of the argument.

But Ó Rathaille undoubtedly held to James III as his true king to the day he died. When that day was, we do not know, but he was certainly dead by 1740 when he was recorded as having been laid in a specific grave some years before: so he is not speaking in the poem of young Prince Charles Edward, born in 1720, and not a potential returning saviour until 1745.

But that word "returning" brings its own problems. Nothing indicates that James III or his son Charles ever set foot in Ireland. In poems where James III is clearly referred to, Ó Rathaille simply says he is "waiting", or he "will soon be with us". James III had departed from Britain as a babe in arms, and Ó Rathaille insisted he must regain the three kingdoms (nationalist Ó Rathaille was, separatist he was not). But in specific relationship to Ireland, the poem seems very clear that she had known Mac an Cheannuidhe, and her devotion to him stemmed from personal acquaintance with his youthful maturity.

And James III survived the poet by at least thirty years. Nor is there any false report known to have been promulgated of his death: there may, of course, have been one which has not come down to us. But that would make the poem a mistake, and one requiring urgent revision and contradiction when the truth was known. If the true King were described by the poet as having died, naturally he would do everything in his power to eradicate the false rumour when he learned of its falsehood. Other poets give the lie to false reports; these Jacobite poems were in sense news bulletins, at least up to 1746. "Mac an Cheannuidhe", uncontradicted, survives in a sufficient number of MSS. to indicate considerable popularity, being evidently recited by the poet on several occasions. And the whole tenor is one of urgency. It is true that one MS gives a variant ending in which Mac an Cheannuidhe does not die but Éire herself on receiving this news goes to Spain and is seen by the poet to die there. But this text must be corrupt: her unearthly screech proclaiming her death is the immediate reaction to the news that the rumour of his death (unmentioned hitherto) is secretly known to be false, and between news and screech she journeys to Spain. The MS in question has found no favour with scholars in the twentieth century from Dinneen at one end to Ó Tuama at the other. (Its printed text edited by John O'Daly (1800-78) and translated (1844) by Edward Walsh (1805-50) presumes James III is its subject).
In general, the case for James III is tenable only as a lowest common denominator: he is the subject of aising in general, hence for want of a better choice he is thrust upon this one. The strongest argument in his favour is that he was the son of James II.

(c) Carlos II of Spain. Dineen in 1911, now assisted by Tórra (Tadhg Ó Donnchadha), noted a theory of John O’Daly that the "Merchant’s Son’ refers to the King of Spain" (presumably indicating that O’Daly had abandoned the MS formerly published by him, in favour of those to be used by Dineen). The 1911 editors agreed:

This is highly probable, but it is difficult to understand why he was so designated. The question arises, which King of Spain is referred to in the poem? It seems probable that it was written on the news of Charles II’s death reaching Ireland. Charles died childless on November 1 1700, and this date suits the tone and spirit of the piece.

Why Carlos’s father, Felipe IV, should be called a "merchant" is inexplicable, as Dineen and Tórra admit. It could － just － be consistent with allusions to Spanish merchandise where invasion was intended. ("Spanish ale shall give thee hope, My Dark Rosaleen," &c) Felipe had intervened in Ireland via Eoghan Ruaidh Ó Neill in 1642. But even if this were not exorbitant in its genealogical and historical prerequisites for its audience, the thesis is absurd. Carlos II (‘the Bewitched’) had long been an object of pity and ridicule, yearning for death himself. His death did cause concern in its danger to European peace, but to Jacobites this was a matter of satisfaction. Having been apparently confirmed in the loss of the three kingdoms by the Peace of Ryswick (1697), the Stuarts had as their best hope a renewal of war between Britain and France whose most probable cause was the Spanish succession.

So Mac an Cheannúidhe was not Carlos II.

(d) Luis I of Spain. Dineen and "Tórra" had little liking for this candidate:

The only other King of Spain who died during the time in which our poet flourished was Don Louis, son of Philip V, who died in 1724, after a reign of eight months. It is highly improbable that an Irish poet would take a particular interest in Don Louis.

The War of the Spanish Succession had ended in defeat for France, but her opponents were unable to prevent the French candidate, Philippe, grandson of Louis XIV, from becoming King of Spain. In any event the danger of permanent alliance among the French and Spanish branches of the House of Bourbon proved quickly illusory, and Philippe, as Felipe V, found himself at war with his cousin Philippe d’Orléans the Regent of France by 1719. By 1724 Felipe had become as doubtful of his own sanity, apparently, as Carlos had been of his, and he abdicated in favour of his son. Luis I seemed a decided improvement on his father, but he died unexpectedly within the year, and Felipe V resumed the throne.

The candidature of Luis I has been recently revived, however, with an important modification. Seán Ó Tuama in his Fili Faoi Sceimhle (1978) reported on his extensive study of the MSS of the Browne family, landed Catholic patrons to Ó Rathaille (in the absence of the MacCarthys dispossesed long before the poet’s time); he noted their expectations of a Spanish invasion in 1719-20 whence their poet might allow his spirits to rise and fall with those of his patrons, first elated by the promising Luis and then depressed by his decease. The desire to make sense of the complex relations between Ó Rathaille and his patrons is eminently praiseworthy; some of the news of Europe on which the poet relied must have reached him by the great family’s Dublin-born gossip, although more would have come from the smuggling, priest-running, soldier-recruiting Jacobite rural networks.
Professor Ó Tuama attempts to cut the Gordian knot by arguing that the person whose death in Spain so shattered Éire was not Mac an Cheannuidhe. In his reading, the merchant’s son is still James III, but the person "ar chleachtaí" (Dinneen reading) or "do chleachtaí" (Ó Tuama reading) --- "the lover she cherished", in Dinneen’s translation --- is Luis I. It is a courageous interpretation, but it simply does not make sense. The poet may be cryptic, but for him to diagnose and disclose Éire’s love for Luis I, without the slightest previous intimation of anything of the kind, and no indication of previous acquaintance between Éire and poet, is akin to P.G. Wodehouse’s joke about the murderers who were so diabolically clever that they never appeared in the detective story at all, but only on its title-page being the publishers’s.

Professor Ó Tuama seems to have abandoned the thesis by his partnership with Thomas Kinsella whose translation in An Duanaire begins the last verse

I told her, when I heard her tale,
in a whisper, he was dead,

the antecedent for "he" being unquestionably Mac an Cheannuidhe as usual concluding the previous verse.

The hoped-for Spanish invasion was important in 1719-20; but all that could be said of Luis I in 1724 was that he would be more vigorous than his father and he showed no conspicuous sign of any interest in Ireland. And the urgency of the poem is also against the thesis. This is not the squalching of a vague hope that something might ultimately be expected from the newest king; it is a harsh and clear assertion of some calamity whose nature is obvious, not simply some object of speculation. Something that meant a great deal to Gaelic Ireland, and had meant it for a long time, had perished.

If we conclude that Mac an Cheannuidhe cannot be identified as anyone other than the person Éire loved, Luis’s candidacy also crumbles on the issue of former presence in Ireland. Neither Luis I nor Felipe V ever seems to have visited Ireland.

So Luis I was not Mac an Cheannuidhe, and was not the person for whom Éire died.

III

There seem no other scholarly choices. But could there be? Let us begin by going back to the poem, our one clear piece of evidence, and seeing what we learn of Mac an Cheannuidhe from it:
1. He was the son of someone whose status was noteworthy.
2. His status as his father’s son may have involved some question as to his fitness for heroic honours.
3. His father may have performed some act of "redemption" in the sense of buying back or repossessing land.
4. Apparently he had not succeeded to his father's position, whatever it was, even in a purely titular sense.
5. His father was probably Royal, because Éire spoke of Mac an Cheannuidhe as being her only acceptable substitute for the deceased kings who had been her lovers [Tadhg Dall Ó Huiginn’s mac ceannuidhe was not Ireland’s lover nor the substitute for her Royal lovers, but a protagonist in an analogous case: Conn O'Donnell is Éire's acceptable lover in that poem].
6. He had been in Ireland before; or at the very least, his father had been.
7. He was personally associated with hopes of restoring the Gaelic Order in Ireland, and removing the penal laws against the Catholic secular and regular clergy.
8. He might return from the south, from the east or from the west; that is to say he might arrive from Spain or from France.

9. "Up in Spain he obtained death", or in Dineen's translation "In Spain beyond he died".

10. Nobody had any sympathy for Éire at her affliction under item 9.

11. The news of item 9 caused Éire to lose her life, or at least appearance of life.

12. He was youthful and virile, and the evidence for his virility was positive enough to justify Éire's dismissal of all rival suitors. There may an echo of Penelope, waiting for Odysseus.

Professor Nicholas Canny offers us a useful clue in his summation of eighteenth-century Irish poets who "could not bring themselves to recommend the acceptance of the post-war settlement as either just or permanent... on the occasions when they did touch upon politics they made it clear that their only hope lay in some deus ex machina, such as the emigré Stuarts or Patrick Sarsfield and others of their exiled leaders, returning to relieve them from their plight". We seem blocked on the Stuarts: what of Sarsfield?

We know when Ó Rathaille was born no more than when he died, but authorities have suggested 1670 and 1675: hence he could have been a mature poet when Sarsfield met his doom at the Battle of Landen (19 July, dying 23 July 1693).

Macaulay, however Whig, firmly included Sarsfield among his heroes:

"Thence too Sarsfield was borne desperately wounded to a pallet from which he never rose again. The Court of St Germains had conferred on him the empty title of the Earl of Lucan; but history knows him by the name which is still dear to the most unfortunate of nations.

Landen is not in Spain, but in the Spanish Netherlands: the confusion in a young poet would be pardonable, and if "up in Spain" meant "upper Spain" it might be no confusion. He certainly was virile: he fathered a son, James Francis Sarsfield who was born two months before Landen. The despair of Éire at his death, especially in widespread poetic expression, is well-known, and if the poem was composed in 1693 or 1694 what is obscure to us would make perfectly good sense to its audience, to whom such a theme would be all too appropriate. The want of sympathy for Éire would be the war sweeping its way onward with no further attempt to reverse the Williamite conquest of Ireland finally sealed at Limerick. No "return" was more earnestly sought than that of the hero of Limerick, and that harmonises admirably with the last-line verse refrain.

So far the answer seems within our grasp, and if it does open Ó Rathaille's poetic career rather early (it is not a poem commemorating last year's news, be the subject what it might), we can hardly be surprised at the maturity of his powers. He was a great poet, and great poets often do fine work when young. Sarsfield qualifies admirably under points 6-12. Where we run into difficulties is with, points 1-5. Why call him a "merchant's son"? The original figure so described by Tadhg Ó Huiginn was wanting in the virtue every friend or foe held synonymous with Sarsfield --- physical courage. The Marshal Duke of Berwick, who would marry Sarsfield's widow, called him "a man of amazing stature, utterly void of sense, very good natured and very brave": they had served together at Limerick. Even if the original context is lost sight of, the coding seems inexplicable. No danger was run by anyone in saying Sarsfield was dead, once it was known he was dead. The only way to dispose of the inescapable "merchant's son" is if some belief existed in Kerry Jacobite circles that Sarsfield was a bastard son of Charles II or James II. The nearest we can go to factual basis for such a theory is to note that Sarsfield's brother had been married to Monmouth's sister, Monmouth being the acknowledged bastard son of Charles II who rebelled against James II and was executed after his defeat at Sedgemoor. Sarsfield had served against his brother's brother-in-law at Sedgemoor.
If Sarsfield really was taken to be a King's son in the minds of Ó Rathaille and his listeners, then "Mac an Cheannuidhe" would seem to be another lament for Patrick Sarsfield. Nobody else qualifies so directly under the twelve points.

But if he was not so regarded, it is another matter. Granted that Sarsfield was a name for poets to conjure with, our field is not limited to Patrick Sarsfield. James Francis Sarsfield is also quite promising. The boy inherited his father's "empty title of the Earl of Lucan", was brought up by Berwick, and secretly visited Ireland in 1717. Two years later he returned and by April 1719 the Irish government had issued a proclamation for his arrest with a reward of £1000⁶:

That the government having certain intelligence that Sarsfield, otherwise called Earl of Lucan, and several officers who had lately landed and dispersed themselves in several parts of the Kingdom, had held conferences with divers Papists of distinction, with design to ferment a rebellion in favour of the Pretender, and that they had actually concerted a general insurrection, which was to be in all parts of the Kingdom the same night and hour, having to this end their emissaries in each province, therefore it was thought fit to give notice thereof to all the inhabitants, that they might take the necessary measures to apprehend the said Sarsfield...

Whatever young Sarsfield had intended, he took ship from Kilcolgan, Co. Galway, and very shortly thereafter died at St. Omer. Clearly his return was eagerly awaited, whether he intended one or not; clearly the news of his death hit Irish Jacobites hard. If his Irish intentions had been read correctly, he was to co-ordinate efforts with a Spanish-cum-Jacobite attempt on England. His efforts had ugly consequences: "an insurrection is certainly designed in all parts of the Kingdom in one night", declared the Post Man for 13 April 1719, and a savage crackdown in coercive legislation and its enforcement followed.

As to James Francis Sarsfield's qualification under our 12 points, he was youthful and virile (and open-handed, hospitable and agreeably roistering); his death induced Irish despair, leaving the Irish Catholic cause apparently friendless once more, whereas it had had hope that Sarsfield's return might end its ostracism and persecution; had he returned, it would have been from south, east or west, and it was a return since if he is "Mac an Cheannuidhe" the date is mid-1719 or slightly later; his father was not a merchant but he was non-Royal (we eliminate the Royal bastardy story here since it was hardly likely to persist so vividly to 1719 even if it had existed); his father had tried to restore the Catholic Order and in that sense had been a "redeemer" (if that word-play is involved) and Patrick Sarsfield at Limerick had redeemed Ireland's name in combat after the disasters of Newtownbutler, Derry, the Boyne and Aughrim; he had formally succeeded to his father's position as titular Earl of Lucan, but not as Jacobite general in action, nor as paramount Irish hero --- yet; his father had not been Royal, but his status in Irish eyes had if anything been higher than that of any Stuart. The drawback to his credentials is that he did not die in Spain. But he had been taken to have supported Spain, and might not unreasonably have been presumed to have made for Spain. In any case St. Omer was in French Flanders, and had been in Spanish Flanders until 1677; the French only narrowly held off a reconquest in 1711.⁴ "Up in Spain" could mean "upper Spain" for the younger as well as for the elder Sarsfield, even if it no longer included the exact place of death. All in all, James Francis Sarsfield is a strong candidate. Admittedly, his removal still left Jacobite Ireland with one potential saviour --- James III, whose own descent was still rumoured among Ó Rathaille's Brown patrons at the very time of young Sarsfield's death.⁵ (James II, a burnt-out case since the Boyne, and the future James III at the age of five, are no such offsets to the elder Sarsfield's death in 1693.)

There remains one further possibility. The vague notion of so many hearers and readers that Mac an Cheannuidhe has to be the son of James II is important and may even stem from an oral tradition, but it involves a misunderstanding. James III, despite the wicked Williamite
slanders about the bricklayer, was the true son of James II; but he was not his eldest son.
James Fitzjames, afterward the Marshal Duke of Berwick, was born in 1670 to Arabella
Churchill, as her bastard son by James Duke of York, later James II. Although scarcely more
than a boy, he was formally the commander at Limerick for a time in 1690, and he went on to
prove himself in military, though not in political or moral, terms the true nephew of his uncle
John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough. Among his famed exploits were his defeat of William
III's Huguenot general, Ruvigny, Earl of Galway, at Almanza in 1707, during the War of the
Spanish Succession: Ruvigny had played a major part in defeating the Irish at Aughrim, and
had opened the negotiations with Patrick Sarsfield which eventuated in the capitulation at
Limerick. And Berwick was no upstart making a cheap reputation at Irish expense; he was
famous for his love of the Irish, and his encouragement of the fortunes of individual
Irishmen, his succession to Sarsfield as husband and head of family being symbolically
absolutely accurate. Irish Jacobite poets exulted in his victories: Seán Ó Neachtáin, famed for
the love-poem "Rachainn fó'n gcóill leat, a mhaighdean na n-ór-fholt", wrote a poem of 40
verses in Berwick's honour saluting him as "victorious hand of the battles".
It seems possible that Ó Rathaille's "Aisling meabhuil" alludes not to James III but to
Berwick:

An illusive vision troubled my soul for a time, leaving me without vigour, lean, spiritless, and prostrate:
Shoers of ships crossing the sea from the south, mightily and in due order,
Nimble soldiers in the battle-front, in splendid arms --- the graceful race of Cian ---
Up setting and wounding the foreigners, and wide their plains at the extremity of the regions of Niall,
I beheld a Mars without censure, a warrior of the sword, of noble deeds, mighty.
A marching banner, a battle cock, of the race of Raithlean, old Gaelic warriors;
The heavens tremble, towns, strongholds, oceans, and distant peoples,
At the feats of martial valour of the Achilles who undertook to fight for the rights of the old king.

James III was no Mars or Achilles, save in the wildest and most inflated of panegyrics, but
neither title was inappropriate for Berwick, greatest of Jacobite generals. And one would
have thought James III had no choice but to vindicate his father's claims, whereas Berwick ---
indeed history was to prove --- had other options. Mars comes naturally to tongue as
soubright for a Maréchal. Achilles was famous for refusing to fight for the king, at least in the
bulk of the Iliad. The poem is not saying this Achilles does fight for him, simply that Ó
Rathaille's vision (whose being only a vision presumably accounts for his enervation)
imagines his doing so.

How does Berwick score on the 12-point scale for "Mac an Cheannuidhe"? His father's
status was indeed noteworthy; he was not legitimate, which raised a mild question as to his
fitness for heroic honours (it was a sacerdotal invalidation); his father had opened the
possibility of confiscated Gaelic lands being redeemed; he had not succeeded to his father's
position even in a titular sense as that went to his younger but legitimate half-brother James
III and could never have gone to him; his father was Royal, making him an appropriate
contender for the lover of Eire hitherto only accorded to kings of chieftains; he had been in
Ireland before --- specifically, at Limerick, the last epiphany of the true cause in arms; he was
identified with the restoration of the Gaelic Order and the destruction of the penal laws, since
those events required Jacobite victory and Berwick was the best hope of bringing one; he
might return from France or Spain, as he was in the service of France and served in Spain.
And he was virile: after his marriage to Honora, widow of Patrick Sarsfield in 1695, she bore
him a son in 1696, the future Duke of Liria (and subsequently second Duke of Berwick).

But he did not die in Spain; he died in 1734 (probably after Ó Rathaille) serving France at
Philippsburg, in Baden, on the Rhine. Nor is there any sign of a false report of his death,
Illus. 1. James Fitzjames, Duke of Berwick (1670-1734)
(Portrait by Sir Godfrey Kneller)
although he certainly fought in Spain. The report of his campaign there, in 1719, would have elicited comment in Ireland considering for whom he fought, and against whom. Berwick was a soldier in the service of France, now the ally of the Hanoverians; his son Liria, his stepson James Francis Sarsfield, and his half brother James III were all enlisted in the cause of Spain.

The myth of the Wild Geese was undoubtedly a reinforcement of the morale of Irish Catholics in the utmost condition of political and social degradation, encounters with hard-fisted slave-dealers or disillusioning acquaintance with drunken smugglers. Macaulay supplies the most exotic reality sustaining the myth:

There were indeed Irish Roman Catholics of great ability, energy, and ambition; but they were to be found everywhere except in Ireland, at Versailles and Saint Ildefonso, in the armies of Frederic and in the armies of Maria Theresia. One exile became a Marshal of France. Another became Prime Minister of Spain. If he had staid in his native land, he would have been regarded as an inferior by all the ignorant and worthless squires who had signed the declaration against Transubstantiation.

But the myth does not invite its votaries to dwell over-much on its enlistment of Irishmen against Irishmen, Jacobites against Jacobites. Berwick's father, James, lost his kingdoms because of his convictions, Berwick's uncle Marlborough pledged support simultaneously to James and William because of his: Berwick's own convictions were more conventional, simply that a soldier should remain faithful to the service in which he enlists. He became a French subject in 1703, and was made a Marshal of France in 1706, when Louis XIV maintained the Court of James III at St. Germain. The Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 dissolved formal links between France and James III but the Marshal stayed where he was. That both his son and step-son should have supported Spain, and that Spain in 1719 should be at war with France, Berwick seems to have accepted with the philosophy of Dumas's musketeers finding themselves on opposite sides of a conflict --- concern for one another's lives above all else, but otherwise fealty to the individual causes they were serving. In the case of his half-brother it was less easy. James III wanted Berwick's moral and physical support in his attempt on Scotland in 1715, but Berwick opposed the action. This makes much more sense of the Ó Rathaille Aisling Meabhuil with its talk of Mars and Achilles than the prevailing notion that it simply made vain prophesies of success for the militarily inexperienced James III. If only Achilles would leave his tent and serve the cause of the old king --- i.e. restore the Stuarts --- all would be well, but since the dream of his doing so is only an illusion, the poet is left almost lifeless without hope. It could also suggest that in 1715 Ó Rathaille assumes some unknown personal quarrel has divided the half-brothers, since the elder brother might reasonably be expected to resent his exclusion from the younger's inheritance. The original Achilles had far less excuse for sitting out the Greek-Trojan conflict in the Iliad, but, then, he was not in any sense a brother of Agamemnon. What the Aisling Meabhuil does not suggest --- and the poet, if he realised it, might not want to suggest --- is that a Jacobite leader might have been forced by career interests, and resultant obligations of hour, to admit loyalties more pressing than those of the Jacobite cause. As for Berwick's opinion that the attempt of 1715 would be futile, given France's peace with Britain, Ó Rathaille's poem supplies the direct retort that if he took part in it, by all means drawing France into it, it would not be futile. But France, having been mauled so savagely for so little gain in the War of the Spanish Succession, had no desire for further self-sacrifice in another War of the British and Irish Succession. Louis XIV and his grandiose ambitions lay in the one grave. James III, while more conscious of Berwick's code of honour than Ó Rathaille, did not take kindly to their divergence of opinion on the '15, and the half-brothers were on cold terms until Liria, as son and nephew, reconciled them in 1727. Indeed James III had summoned his brother to his service in the '15, and Berwick had stated (presumably with the contrary conduct of his uncle
Marlborough in mind) that as a Marshal of France he could not "desert like a trooper".

But if Berwick's possibly decisive absence from the '15 depressed O Rathaille, it would have been far more serious a matter in 1719. France was now not merely neutral: it was in alliance with George I. On 31 March 1719 a Proclamation from the Council in Dublin announced the imminence of Spanish invasion on the strength of frequent advices to George "from his good brother and ally the most Christian King" Louis XV, or more specifically from Orleans, Regent of the infant Louis. Withing a few days came the Government demand for the arrest of young Sarsfield, his departure and death. Meanwhile anti-Catholic penal laws were being much more drastically enforced, and the Catholic Brownes would have been all too conscious of the the potential dangers of this. Meetings at holy wells, pilgrimages, all bishops, friars, Jesuits, unlicensed clergy, and even Gaelic hurling and football, were once again proscribed. Arms were called up, horses called in if over the £5 value to which Catholics were limited. The Brownes' anger and fear would have quickly percolated down to O Rathaille. By 10 August the Irish House of Commons had proposed that every unregistered priest or friar found in Ireland after 1 May 1720 should be branded on the cheek. By October a Bill was being considered which included castration for illegal male clergy and whipping for nuns. These proposals were dropped (although worse ones passed in 1722 to be vetoed by London) but it was no time for making allowances for the former Jacobite hero still in the service of the Royal informer and felon-setter. In October 1718 Berwick had been appointed commander of the French army to invade Spain against Felipe V, whose war aims would include the restoration of James III. France declared war on Spain on 10 January 1719, Berwick took Fuenterrabia in mid-July and San Sebastian in mid-August. Meanwhile the Spanish invasion of Britain was dispersed by a storm, frustrating the intent of James III to capture London, whither Liria had determined to accompany him. But it was Berwick's campaign which put paid to the schemes of Cardinal Alberoni for Spanish overthrow of the French Regency and the House of Hanover. A few Spanish soldiers straggled into Scotland, as a miserable mirage of what might have been. Naturally Ireland would have been buzzing with Protestant exaltation as to Hanoverian preservation, and the supreme irony that George I and his heir owed their continued security to the military prowess of the son of James II. All of this would have been reported from Dublin to the Brownes, and from the Brownes to O Rathaille.

And O Rathaille would have urgently needed to convey to his Gaelic-speaking audience that their hopes had been dashed by their former idol, the son of their hoped-for restorer of the Gaelic lordships. This would explain the reason for coding the title: mac an cheannuidhe suggests a son who did not succeed his father, whose birth had Royal and parvenu features; but also someone who had promised deliverance and defected (in Tadhg Dall O Huiginn's poem). There was actual danger for the poet in the reading of his message by Government representatives, since a denunciation of Berwick for his part in preventing Stuart restoration meant open regret that God, so to speak, had saved George I: hence the poem would not have been mere Catholic complaint but open support of clear and present danger to the state. The poem was written in the middle of a witch-hunt, and, as the legislation of the next few years would show, it was in full cry well beyond the war. But O Rathaille would have felt the vital necessity to warn his hearers as widely as possible against any further faith in Berwick. There was a danger of the old veneration bursting into flame again, especially when Berwick's son Liria --- still a supporter of James III --- visited Kilcash, Co. Tipperary, in October-November 1720. Well might O Rathaille feel the need for a poem covertly to tell Jacobite Ireland that as far as its hopes were concerned, Berwick died in Spain and that shame alone surrounded the memory of the glories of the fallen idol.
"Mac an Cheannuidhe" is not, after all, a simple elegy in its tone. Its mood of profound sorrow turns at the end into shame, horror, and stark tragedy. It begins "Aisling gair do dhearcas féin": I saw a bitter vision. The ominous opening, inaugurates a tone whose structure of despair, alleviated only by the thought of the saviours return, acquires the bitterness of death when the poet declares that that saviour is dead to Éire. Éire's cult of Mac an Cheannuidhe is now the cause of her own universal repudiation. The poet might, after all, be expected to be gentle in telling of the death of Patrick Sarsfield or his son: but his whole manner in breaking the news is one of abruptness almost to an inhuman level. It is the poet who produces the bitterness of the vision he himself contemplates. There is all the brief serve-you-right savagery of a short story by Maupassant.

But the beginning is also an ominous indication that the poet himself is in a sour and sick mood from the outset: the poem is crafted well, from a detective-story standpoint, because we are firmly told that life was but weak within him, that he was bereft of strength, and then we forget his condition in the contemplation of the sorrows of Éire. In Aisling Meabhail, it was the vision, the Aisling itself, which reduced him to that state, but here he is in that state already before the aisling takes shape. And it makes the poem the vehicle of its own work: Ó Rathaille is directly telling his Gaelic Ireland of his tragic and shameful news. He cannot be more explicit because the time is too dangerous to give the authorities ammunition against the poet, and perhaps against Nicholas or Valentine Browne, his patrons, the Viscounts Kenmare, surviving Catholic magnates for an ambitious informer to pluck. But the warning must be given: Berwick had so many Irish admirers, and had done so much for so many of their friends and relatives in France, and all such respect must now end. The poem must be repeated time after time, which may help explain the number of MSS: listeners must be told to steer clear of Berwick, and hence probably of Liria. Berwick is now the true King's enemy, and the false king's friend. This type of warning must have other counterparts in Scottish and Irish Jacobitism where some very eminent figures have proved hidden Whig agents, although none quite of Berwick's genealogical and military eminence. Yet as the Brownes might have remarked, Berwick would not have been the only member of his family to rat: his uncle Marlborough's defection from James II the maker of his career, had proved the turning point in winning success for the Williamite invasion of England. And finally, Ó Rathaille's poem would have been necessary to advise hearers that any hope of Stuart invasion was over.

The spirit of Gaelic Ireland, to protect itself, must appear bereft of life, and any political resistance on its part is dead as of now. Any action at all is dangerous. This appearance of death on Éire's part, obviously metaphorical, suggests that the "death" of Mac an Cheannuidhe in Spain may, likewise, be metaphorical and the transparently allegorical status is one case is a clue to its existence in the other.

In their commentaries on the poem, some recent writers have seemed to devalue its worth. John Jordan, often a brilliant critic, finds it "slighter" than its poet's best work while noting that among his aislingi it is the "one major exception... (if in fact it be one)" to their being "geared to the Stuart cult". (More sweepingly, he adds that "there is no evidence that any Stuart is in question" with a certain innocence as to what constitutes a Stuart). Similarly Frank O'Connor, in an ungrateful, posthumous discussion of the eighteenth-century Irish poets who had served him so well and to whom his translations had responded lyrically if not accurately speaks of Ó Rathaille's "heavy-handed verse". In fact the reaction, however involuntarily has a sour-grapes touch, born of confusion and uncertainty as to the poem's meaning. If the Berwick thesis be correct, it becomes a different poem. Joseph Theodoor Leerssen's finding ("One poet straddles the divide between the earlier, aristocratic tradition, and the later, more democratic or populist one: Aogán Ó Rathaille") gives us the context
admirably. That Ó Rathaille composed for his patron, Valentine Browne himself could all too ruefully bear witness. But he also addressed a much more wide-spread, Gaelic speaking audience, whose response to "Mac an Cheannuidhe" may be judged by the extent and duration of its imitations. It became the formula, although Ó Rathaille showed himself as unwilling to repeat a formula among his aisingli as Eoghan Ruadh Ó Súilleabháin is to vary it among his (for all of his originality and ingenuity in other modes). So the poem went far and wide and spawned its children, but its occasion was forgotten. It reflected old bardic pedagogic motivation, in its readiness to reproach great ones for backsliding, even if it had to conceal the circumstances. It also differed from its imitations in the extent of its emotional range: if it relates to Berwick, it invades the spirit of aer and adds to its other work both satire and curse. Its fame among poets is of more historical significance than its doom among critics: its maker's fellow-craftsmen knew he had written a great poem even if they ceased to remember why. For on this showing it makes masterful use of varying moods, beginning in bitterness with its hint of ominous revelations to come, continuing in grief and desolation richly realising the dimensions of the loss of the Gaelic and Catholic Order made palatable alone by the desperate hope of the hero's return, and then hope is shattered and retrospectively poisoned by the brutality of the final revelation and its message of utter disaster and shame. The hero's moral death becomes more heartbreaking than could be his real death. So however flattering the aising school arising in its wake is to "Mac an Cheannuidhe", the parent poem must be rescued from its simpler-minded children.

To this we must add a warning against the undue Anglocentricity of Irish historians. To write the history of early eighteenth-century Ireland from the standpoint of London and Dublin, from the sources limited to purely Anglophone scholarship, is to exclude from our investigations the greater mass of the Irish population. Ireland's European sense was a different matter to England's, and changed in quality the farther west, the more Gaelic, and the stronger Catholic one got. If its poetry seems a profounder means of self education on international complexities than we in our twentieth-century sophistication have been ready to concede, let us reflect also that our opulence ill-attunes us to estimate the subtlety of the contrivances of austerity. Aodhagán Ó Rathaille and his associates sacrificed material gains for their beliefs, and our materialistic age has its problems in coming to terms with that form of integrity also. In the meantime we can be grateful to him for so much beauty, born of so much sorrow.

Appendix

MAC AN CHEANAIGHE
BY EGAN O'RAHILLY
(Translated by Edward Walsh)

A vision bless'd my eyes erewhile,
Revealing scenes sublime and airy!
The genius of green Erin's isle,
Stood by my couch, a gorgeous fairy:
Her blue eyes' glow, her ringlets flow,
And pure, pale brow exceeding any,
Proclaimed, with pride, that at her side
Would sit, her true-love, Mac an Cheanaighe!
Her voice is sweetest music's sound
To us who for her love are dying:
Proud spouse of Brian, conquest-crown'd,
I mourn the doom that leaves thee sighing!
When Saxon might assails thy right,
I dread, fair queen, belov'd of many,
That o'er thy brow dark sorrow's plough
Shall come, ere cometh Mac an Cheanaigh!

Myriads languish for her love,
And burn to clasp her form of beauty;
For her have kings and heroes strove,
Rivals high is love and duty:
But joy's bright trace ne'er lights her face,
She fears her foeman fierce and many;
No hope-fraught ray to cheer her way,
Will come, till cometh Mac an Cheanaigh!

"My brethren," said the beauteous maid,
"Were kings supreme and chiefs of glory,
Conn of the blood-red battle blade,
And Art, the theme of ancient story.
And o'er the deep, where tall barks leap,
Shall heroes come renown'd and many."
Alas the day! - thy charms' decay
Shall come, ere cometh Mac an Cheanaigh!

"There's glory for thy future day,
The banner green yet be flying,"
I cried-- but 'neath the vision's sway,
In distant Spain I saw her dying!
As burst my cry, she gave reply,
One shrick the wildest far of any -
My bitter grief found no relief,
Till fled thy keener, Mac an Cheanaigh!

NOTES

1 My gratitude for assistance in the making of this essay is also due to my late mother, Síle Ní Shuíleabháin, my late father, R. Dudley Edwards, my aunt, Elizabeth Wall, as well as to Tom Dunne, Máire Cruise O'Brien, Roibeard Ó Maoláirí and Etienne Rynne for invaluable advice, and to the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University whose Seminar constructively criticised an earlier draft, particularly John MacInnes.

2 Patrick S. Dinneen and Tadhg O'Donoghue, eds., Dánta Aodhagáin Úi Rithéile: The poems of Egan O'Rahilly, with introduction, translation, notes and indexes together with original illustrative documents. (Irish Texts Society vol III) 2nd edition revised and enlarged (1911), pp. 12-17. An alternative version, in modern spelling, is available in Seán Ó Tuama ed., An Dúanaire 1600-1900 Poems of the Dispossessed with translations into English verse by Thomas Kinsella (1981), pp. 154-61, but see the entire section on the poet, pp. 138-67. As this excellent work is readily available I have not included its text or translation here, but for amusement I have included as Appendix the translation by the Young Irelander Edward Walsh (1805-50) published in John O'Daly, Reliques of Irish Jacobite
Poetry (1844, 1866) pp. 24-27 based on a corrupt text. I have accordingly retained Dinneen's spelling and usages, but am not competent to pronounce on the merits of his text as against Ó Tuama's - both are clearly preferable to O'Daly's. Naturally my first acquaintance with the poem was in the Dinneen text as reproduced in the admirable if unchronological school anthology *Filiúthacht na nGaedheal* (1940), ed. Pádraig Ó Canainn.

Dinneen's word in this translation is "clear". But his own *Focloir Gaedhilge agus Béarla* (1927), pp. 526-27 does not include that as translation of *gear* limiting himself to "sharp, sharp-pointed, acute, edgy, keen, observant, intense, "cutting", forward, sour, bitter, acid, strong".


While the line naturally recalls Gormlaith, there may also be allusion to Aoibhilt, the fairy spokesperson in "Maidean sul smaoin Titan" and, vulgarly, the O'Brien banshee. (There is a spéir-bhean/ Banshee link that requires investigation, especially given the lachrymose propensities of both entities.)

This is developed in the chapter on Coleridge commencing my forthcoming *Ireland in the British Imagination*.

Lewis both responded to and reacted against Yeats, the former, I think, in his *Prince Caspian*, the latter perhaps here. I glanced at the connection in the *Chesterston Review* (August - November 1991) but it requires detailed study.

*Breathnach, "The Lady and the King"*, pp. 322-23.

*Frank O'Connor [i.e. Michael O'Donovan], *Kings, Lords and Commons* (1961) p. 102.

Ó hAodha, ed., *An Dara Óir-Chiste* (1931), pp. 50-53. As the author of the only book-length study of the poet, _Aodhadún Ó Rathaille_ (1925), Ó hAodha merits some notice.


*Breathnach, "The Lady and the King"*, pp. 322-23.

David Nutt was the London publisher of the 1900 and 1911 editions. Nutt himself had died in 1863 but the firm was now run by Alfred Trübner Nutt (1856 - 1910) whose other publications had included Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888). The Gaelic revival was inextricably interlinked with the aesthetic movement.

*Breathnach, "The Lady and the King"*, pp. 322-23.

See note 15.

*Breathnach, "The Lady and the King"*, pp. 322-23.


*Breathnach, "The Lady and the King"*, pp. 322-23.


*An Duaire*, pp. 254-55.

My father's mother, Brigid. Dinneen (*Focloir*, p. 145) translates the expression as "James the Coward, a name given to King James II of England" but translates the epithet itself as "excrement, filth, ordure". My grandmother as a former nurse was less squeamish.


*Brendán Ó Buachalla, "An Mheisiasacht agus an Aisling", in Pádraig de Brún, Seán Ó Coileáin, and Pádraig Ó Rialain eds., *Fólia Gadaléac: Essays presented by former students to R.A. Breathnach* (1983), pp. 80-81, drawing on the findings of Cathaldus Giblin whose significance Ó Buachalla observes with a clarity historians should note.

Kinsella is not always the most faithful of translators (to put it mildly), and while he may at least claim his poetic licence has been applied for, it is in danger of being endorsed in his version of some prose passages. The editorial note actually reads "Ní fholáir nó is é an Stioibhartach 'Mac an Chennait' ("Mac an Chennait must be the Stuart), which sounds like understandable desperation on Ó Tuama's part. It is a pleasing thought that "the Stuart Pretender" in English is "the Stuart" in Irish.

*Breathnach, "The Lady and the King"*, pp. 322-23.

Reliques of Irish Jacobite Poetry (1866 [1844]), pp. 24-27. See my appendix for Walsh's translation, whose freedom eclipses Kinsella's, and in fact offers the nonsensical in place of the impossible. I find myself wondering if this version had any influence on Gilbert & Sullivan, *Iolanthe*. Sullivan may have known the *Reliques*.

*Dánta Ó Rathaille* (1900), pp. 12, 158-61.

*Breathnach, "The Lady and the King"*, pp. 322-23.

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*Breathnach, "The Lady and the King"*, pp. 322-23.
still from the same translation stable as Walsh). Kinsella is peculiarly felicitous as well as faithful with and "we won't spare the Spanish wine for my Róisín [Dubh]." (An Duanaire, pp. 308-11)

3See note 31.
4Ó Tuama, Fíil Faoi Scéimhle — Séan Ó Riordáin agus Aogáin Ó Rathaille (1978), p. 202, also pp. 163-64, 169, 201. I have kept the Brownes as Brownes, which their poet did: Sir Valentine, the first Viscount Kenmare, died in 1690, Sir Nicholas, the second Viscount, in 1720, Sir Valentine, the third Viscount in 1736. The first Viscount's mother was a MacCarthy, his father's mother was a FitzGerald and his paternal grandfather's mother was an O'Sullivan Beare, so that the Brownes had much Gaelic as well as Catholic affinity. See Edward MacLysaght, The Kenmare MSS (1942).

5Wodehouse, Louder and Funnier (1932): "Thrillers" pp. 51-76.


7Thomas Babington Macaulay, History of England (1855), chapter 20: "Battle of Lendan."

8The classic poetic/expressive is the anonymous "Sílín chum Pádraig Sáirséil" accessible to every schoolchild of my time in Ó Canainn, Fíilidheacht, pp. 114-15. Its date of composition is definitely between Limerick and Lendan.

9Sir Charles Petrie, The Marshal Duke of Berwick — The Picture of an Age (1953), p. 75, quoting from Berwick's Memoirs. Berwick and Sarsfield were conspicuous for severely insisting the Jacobites make a stand at Limerick where their seniors had lost heart. Berwick was recalled to France in January 1691 while the Jacobites still held Athlone.


11On the longstanding Irish Catholic involvement in the area see Rev. Brendan Jennings, OFM, ed., Wild Geese in Spanish Flanders, which duly produced unexpected ornithological correspondence for its publishers, the Irish MSS Commission.

12Maria Catherine da Cunha to Valentine Brown, 12 May 1719, 10 January 1720 (MacLysaght ed., Kenmare MSS, 109, 112.)

"The brave Frenchman, who was an exile on account of his attachment to one religion, and the brave Irishman who was about to become an exile on account of his attachment to another, met and conferred, doubtless with mutual sympathy and respect." (Macaulay, History of England, chapter 17: "Negotiation between the Irish Chiefs and the besiegers").

Edward O'Reilly, Transactions of the Iberno-Celtic Society for 1820, vol I --- part 1, containing a Chronological Account of Nearly Four Hundred Irish Writers, commencing with the Earliest Account of Irish History, and carried down to the Year of Our Lord 1750; with a Descriptive Catalogue of such of their Works as are still extant in Verse or Prose, consisting of upwards of One Thousand Separate Tracts (1820), p. ccxvi. O'Reilly p. ccxix also notices a poem by Cathal O'Hesliosnan [sic] consisting of 44 verses on Berwick's recovery "from a fit of sickness, beginning 'Adhfar gaire d'Inis Fáil'. Cause of joy to Inis-fail (Ireland) '. The last verse of "Sílín chum Pádraig Sáirséil" speaks of the leading nobles of Ireland now in exile including "Mac Riogh Shéamus": this is obviously an allusion to Berwick since the poem is 1691-93 when the future James III was 3-5 and if his parents' exile is unmentioned in the verse why should his be? Berwick appears alongside Dukes, Burkes, Captain Talbot and Patrick Sarsfield. To avoid confusion between him and his eponymous father and brother I have kept him "Berwick" here but "Mac Riogh Shéamus" means his surname "Fitzjames."

Dánta Ó Rathaille (1911), pp. 24-25. (Translates "Acil as" as "hero", but it means "Achilles".


Macaulay, History of England, chapter 17: "State of Ireland after the War."

Petrie, Marshal Duke of Berwick, p. 306.

Petrie, Berwick and his Son, 98-100. Honora Butler, Viscountess Kenmare, wife of Sir Valentine Browne third Viscount (recipient of the eponymous satire from his poet) was a Butler of Kilcash (the Cill Chais of the anonymous poem "Cad a dhéanaimid feasta gan adhradh?" (An Duanaire, pp. 328-31).


Frank O'Connor [i.e. Michael O'Donovan], The Backward Look --- a Survey of Irish Literature (1967), pp. 113-14. These pages conflict so sharply with the affectionate tone of the earlier O'Connor translations and commentaries that it is tempting to doubt if O'Connor would have passed them for the press had he survived to supervise the book's publication.

Lecson, Mere Irish and Fiar-Ghaeil --- Studies in the idea of Irish nationality, its development and literary expression prior to the nineteenth century (1986), p. 229; see also pp. 260-75.