Two Poets and the Legend of Brian Bóraimhe

LENORE FISCHER

A provisional list of the combined works of the supposed tenth-century poets Mac Liag and Mac Coisse, organized strictly by first attestation, contains three works pre-dating the Anglo-Norman invasion, nineteen between then and the Cromwellian wars, and seven post-Restoration works. Changes in style and theme suggest that contrary to previous analyses the two poets might genuinely have existed, that the works attributed to them during the Gaelic Resurgence reflect a flourishing Connacht-centred society and that poems recorded in the post-Cromwellian period betray a sense of alienation from the past.

Introduction
The story of Brian Boru and of his rival Mael Sechnaill who ceded the kingship of Ireland to him was laid down in the early twelfth-century *Cogadh Gael re Gaillaibh*: while often retold, its main outlines have remained fairly fixed. Outside of the *Cogadh*, however, other traditions about Brian have taken on the life of their own. The story of the two poets, for instance, seems only to have become developed in post-Norman times. Mac Liag, later famed as Brian’s poet, is mentioned in the *Cogadh* only once; Mac Coisse,1 reputed to be Mael Sechnaill’s poet, comes into that work not at all. The annals give obits for both poets. The Annals of Tigernach (ATig), for instance record for 989 ‘Uarad mac Coisse, priméces Goidhel, in penitentia mortua est a Cluain maic Noise;’ and the Chronicon Scottorum (CS) says essentially the same; the Annals of Ulster (AU) obits call Airard m. Coissi chief poet (*primeces*) of Ireland (990.2) and Mac Liag *ardollamh Ereann* (1016.3); the CS record of Mac Liag’s death in 1016 will be discussed below. None of these entries assign a patron to either man.

Historiographic background
O’Reilly and O’Curry in 1820 and 1873 respectively essayed to collect the evidence for Irish poets and writers: theirs are the first descriptions to compile a list of works attributed to this pair.2 Mac Liag was held in high regard at the time: Mac Curtin cited him as a prime authority3 and Hardiman describes him as:

... doctor, or professor, of Ireland, in Brian’s time. He also became secretary, or private scribe to that prince). ... He was author of many valuable works. ... The principal of these are, his life of Brian; an historical treatise, intituled *Leabhar Oiris agus Annala*.4

---

1 Given the variety of spellings in the primary sources, I have chosen to follow the AU spellings of ‘Liag’ and ‘Coisse’, but I have rendered ‘mac’ with a capital ‘M’ in harmony with each other and with general modern practice.
After quoting an extended passage from the *Leabhar Géire* (LO), Hardiman concludes:

Such is the interesting narrative, by which our neglected native historian has perpetuated the particulars of that momentous engagement. I hesitate not to say, and the proof is before the reader, that no nation in Europe can produce so old, and at the same time, so pure and perfect a specimen of its vernacular dialect, as that now submitted to his perusal from a moulder ing Irish manuscript.  

O’Curry may have doubted the value of some of the poetry he was quoting as Mac Liag’s, but its genuineness he never questioned. Standard works on Irish literature such as Hull and de Blacam listed both figures. Hull’s *Textbook* credits Mac Liag with four poetry and prose works; de Blacam is more circumspect:

Erard Mac Coisse: Chief chronicler of the Gael (?†1023) appears in several compositions as one of Brian’s circle of literary protégées. It is thought, however, that this historian, famous in his time, was dead before the height of Brian’s career, and that his tributes to the High King from the south are literary fictions. Possibly MacLiag (1015), who may be described as Brian’s propagandist, took liberties with Mac Coisse’s name. To MacLiag is ascribed a long and intimate narrative of Brian’s career, called “the War of the Gael with the Gall”... This work really was composed at a later date, but may be based on records left by MacLiag.

In 1942 O Lochlainn published some twelve works credited to Erard Mac Coisse and to a certain Aribertach Mac Coisi-dobráin of Ross Ailithir, concluding that two genuine figures had been conflated and that ‘spurious poetry [had] begotten spurious history.’ A more detailed review of this work in 1999 by Aideen O’Leary goes even further, maintaining that ‘primarily on the basis of the textual evidence which I have presented, I should think it likely ... that lorard had no historical existence.’ Mac Liag was served similarly in a follow-up article by O Lochlainn in 1944 in which he suggested (somewhat at odds with his previous conclusion) that ‘I have given grounds for believing that the poets Mac Coisi, Mac Liag, Flann Mac Lonáin and his mother Laitheóg are all literary figments.’ Opposing these views there have been various studies of individual poems which will be cited as appropriate below.

Aims and methods

The present article is not in the first instance concerned with whether or not the two poets actually existed, but seeks to look at the development of their legend. The approach used here will be rather different than that of the foregoing scholars: O’Leary organized her argument stylistically; the others seem to have cited poems at random. Here we shall consider the individual poems strictly on the basis of their first attestation. While granted that an early poem might only survive from a late copy, still, a careful chronological survey reveals significant trends. The following is therefore a provisional

---

5 Ibid., p. 365.
list of these works, some of which are prose accounts. Since purported poetic dialogues exist between the two figures, the whole corpus will be numbered as a single body. Looked at in this manner, it will be found that the works fall into three main periods: Group I consists of poetry set down before the Anglo-Norman invasion; Group II terminates with the Cromwellian campaigns; Group III is everything after that.

**Group I: Pre-1169**

(1) ‘ Muirchertach Becc, mac Maelcertaigh’ (Mac Liag, 1 q, CS, 1016.5). CS’ obit for Mac Liag 1016.5 gives this single quatrain, with the entry “Mac Liac i.e. Muirchertach, chief ollamh of Ireland, an excellent man, dies in Inis Gaill Duibh on the Sinna.” O’Donovan’s suggestion that Inis Gaill Duibh refers to the Viking settlement on King’s Island, Limerick has not to date been bettered. This would corroborate not only Mac Liag’s association with the Dál Cais court, but also an early removal of that court from Kincora to Limerick.

(2) ‘ Ocus na cethri catha’ (Mac Liag, 1 q, Cogadh LXI, 1140s). Version D of the Cogadh, probably written out in the late 1140s, credits Mac Liag with one verse celebrating four victories of Brian’s brother over the Vikings. Ó Cléirigh’s transcription of 1635 (Cogadh versus B) gives only two of the four lines.

(3) ‘Éinnaid in senchas diatá’ (Mac Liag, 26 qQ, LL f. 152a, 1151X1201). Dimnishenches lore of Carn Conaill attributed to Mac Liag in the Book of Leinster (LL), relating to S Co. Galway near Gort.

**GROUP II: From the Anglo-Norman Invasion to the Cromwellian Wars**

(4) Slieve Aughty place-lore (Mac Liag, prose, YBL col. 916, 1391). The portion of The Yellow Book of Lecan (YBL) written by Gillía Isosa MacFirbhisigh contains a tale describing how a poet is brought back from the dead to explain to Mac Liag and his companions the place name lore of the Slieve Aughty Mountains, an area lying significantly at the border of Thomond and South Connacht. Mac Liag and Mac Coisne are both touted for their greatness: Mac Liag for good cheer and hospitality, Mac Coisne for his charity and for dying on pilgrimage. Flann Mac Lonain’s concluding poem, ‘Aibind aibind Echighe Ard’ is contained in the twelfth century Book of Leinster, but extra verses in YBL praise Dál Cais as just and generous and proclaim that ‘Brian shall not fall until his worldly prosperity be accomplished.’

---

11. The surviving MS of CS from the 1640s is generally considered a faithful copy of an original which preserved contemporary chronicles being kept at Clonnaconnoise certainly for at least 979-1133, see David Dunville, “Where did the Clonnaconnoise Chronicle” Originate? The evidence of the Annals of Tigernach and Chronicum Scotorum, A.D. 974-1150” in Katheryn Grabowski and David Dunville (eds), Chronicles and Annals of Medieval Ireland and Wales: the Clonnaconnoise-Group Texts (Suffolk 1984) p. 155; also Niall Ó Muraile, The Celebrated Antiquary Dubhaltach Mac Firbisigh (c. 1600-1671): His Lineage, Life and Learning (Maynooth, 1996), p. 102. This view is on the whole corroborated by P. McCarthy in The Irish Annals: Their genesis, evolution and history (Dublin, 2008), p. 314.


16. Edmund Hogan, Onomasticon Gaedelcum, locorum et tribuum hiberniae et scotorum (Dublin, 1910), pp 159-60.


The largest single body of Mac Liag/Mac Coisse verse appears in the fourteenth-century Book of Uí Maine (UM), compiled 1394 for Muircheartach Ó Ceallaigh, Archbishop of Tuam (d. 1438), by Adam Cusin and Faelan Mac a’ Gabann na Scol.19 Around 1859 Hardiman sold several leaves of the MS to the British Museum: these are now bound in Egerton 90.20 The rest of UM is lodged in the Royal Irish Academy (RIA). Uí Maine had supported Brian Bóraímaine at the battle of Clontarf21 and their pride in this is clearly reflected in the poetry attributed here to Mac Liag.

(5) ‘Scíth rígh Gáela, glantair hil!’ (Mac Liag, 34 qq, Egerton 90 f. 19, 1394)22 uses the device of enumerating the shields of various potentates to tell us of their involvement with Tadhg Ua Cellaigh, naming among others the kings of Aidne, Ely, Delbn, and Tethba, all located around the perimeters of Uí Maine. Brian and his son Murchad are eulogised in the last two verses.

(6) ‘Beannacht, a Bruin, ar Brigit’ (Mac Liag, 23 qq? Egerton 90 f. 19, 1394)23 is a panegyric on cara dam-sa Tadhg tairtheach ‘my prosperous friend Tadhg,’ describing his raids, the lands over which he held sway, the horse-racing and feats of valour offered as entertainment at his house, and the various lords of his rank and generation. The second to last verse is either missing or mislabelled in Meyer’s edition, as he jumps from verse 21 to 23. Brian and his blessings appear in each of Meyer’s last two verses.

(7) ‘Leasg amleasg sin gu Atha Clíth’ (Mac Liag, 28 surviving qq, Egerton 90 f. 19, c.1394)24 is an incomplete lament upon death of Tadhg Ua Cellaigh at the Battle of Clontarf, reviling the Vikings who killed him. Maol Seachlainn’s supposed attempts to persuade Tadhg to abandon Brian’s side prior to the battle are vigorously rejected by Tadhg, and Tadhg affirms his loyalty to Brian Bóraímaine. Tadhg’s generosity is then praised, and the poem breaks off as Tadhg’s and Brian’s pages start arguing over the comparative generosity of their lords.

Though the UM attributes these poems to Mac Liag, O Lochlainn disagrees:

the plain truth is that at least 80 per cent of the poetry said to belong to the pre-Norman period really dates from the time of the great Irish rally in the mid-fourteenth century, when the pride of the victorious local chiefs was being puffed up by a host of poets who, being also chroniclers, strove to substantiate extravagant claims by invoking the names of bygone scholars and sages, and by stuffing the books of history, genealogy, and even topography with poems ascribed to phantom poets of the past.25

The MacLiag poems, he suggests, are ‘part of the poetical content of a Saga, we may call it “Eachtra Brian” which was in process of manufacture during medieval times.’26 R.A. Breathnach in writing on UM seems to assume that such a saga actually existed but became lost.27

---

19 See Kathleen Mulchrone (ed.), Catalogue of Manuscripts in the Royal Irish Academy, xxvi (1942), pp 3315-6.
20 O’Curry, Manners and Customs, p. 125.
21 AI 1014.2, AU 1014.2, CS 1014.
23 O’Grady, Catalogue, 84; Irish text in Meyer, Mitteilungen aus irischen Handschriften.’ pp 225-7.
24 O’Grady, Catalogue, 84; Irish text in Meyer, pp 229-31.
(8) ‘A uad Fiachrach dar dhiall goil’ (Mac Coisise, 34 surviving qq, RIA D.ii.1, f. 118, ca. 1394). An acephalous poem with inbuilt attribution, described by O’Leary as “principally a eulogy of Dathí, legendary king of Ireland, whose military campaigns stretched as far as the Alps, where he was killed by a bolt of lightening.” The beginning of the poem presumably supported the Uí Néill right to the sovereignty of Ireland.

(9) ‘Maol Sechlinn sinnsar Gaoithdhel’ (Mac Coisise, 27 qq, RIA D.ii.1, f. 5, c. 1394) appears early on in UM, shortly after Uí Néill genealogies and accounts of Fir Bolg, Tuatha Dé Danaan and Milesian Kings of Éire, and is thus embedded in the foundation lore on the kingship of Ireland.

The UM poems show us a clear growth in the kinds of poetry being attributed to Mac Liag and Mac Coisise. Mac Liag’s topographical work from Group I is still present and we have Uí Néill regnal lore as well. Over and above this Brian and his poet are used as a star from which to hang Uí Maine family lore: Tadg their ancestor, who died supporting Brian at Clontarf, shed glory thereby over the entire family.

The Book of Ballymote (BB) was written at the close of the fourteenth century further north in what is now Co. Sligo. It signally lacks the panegyrics on Tadg Ua Ceallaigh, but “Finnaid” (3) appears in the dinnshenchas and its genealogies include three pieces attributed to Mac Liag:

(10) ‘Da mac dég Ceindéidig caií’ (Mac Liag, though not attributed here, 8 qq, RIA 23.P.12, f. 189, ca. 1400). ‘In trá is Foich nó is Beach’ (Mac Liag, 1 q RIA 23.P.12, f. 89) and ‘Lorcá lasadh isan áth’ (Mac Liag, 1 q RIA 23.P.12, f. 89). Only the first of these reappears in later MSS, moving from text to text as an integral part of the Leabhar Muinhneach (LM) material.

(11) ‘Abair dam-sa re Derbáil’ (Mac Coisise, 14 qq, “LRM 14c”) survives only in the seventeenth century MS Brussels 5100 written ca. 1630, but the scribe ended the poem by noting sliacht an Luibhfeir Ruaidh inmsin (‘that is the recension of the Red Book’), the Leabhar Ruaidh Muinhneach (LRM) being a volume he had frequent reference to elsewhere in the Brussels text as well. The LRM itself has unfortunately been lost, but we know it was compiled near the end of the 14c by Murchad Ó Cuinidh.

The poem consoles a noblewoman, Der Bál, daughter of Tadg, on the death of her son Æed. O Lochlainn believed that “in the absence of supporting evidence the language of this poem will hardly allow us to date it before the year 1200,” but Carney has made a good case for its antiquity, linking it to the death of Æed, son of Der Bál, who was the daughter of Tadg, son of Cathal, king of Conacht, and was married to Domnall, king of

---

28 See Malehrone, Catalogue, p. 3352.
29 O’Leary, Identities of Mac Coisi, p. 59.
30 See Malehrone, Catalogue, p. 3325.
31 Ibid., p. 3348.
32 Malehrone RIA Cat xiii (1924), p. 1611.
33 See Elizabeth FitzPatrick, RIA Cat xv, (1935), p. 1640.
34 Ibid., p. 1629.
Áed’s death however, as he admits, occurred in 1004, which rules Mac Coisse out as the poet if we are to believe the contemporary annal obits.

A later attested poem, ‘A Mór Maigne Moige Shuill’ has no traditional associations with Mac Coisse but was attributed to him by Kuno Meyer on the basis that it resembled ‘Abair dam-sa re Derbál.’ This has been hotly debated since with Ó Lochlainn and Carney on opposing sides. 

(12) ‘Chnoc in scail a ainm ar tús’ (Mac Coisse, l q, Annals of Connacht 1405.15). Mac Coisse’s name is being misused here, according to O’Leary:

the quatrain ... states that from now on this hill will be called Tulchán Mael Ruanaigh ... Given the date of this battle, it must be concluded that this was a re-use of an older quatrain, or that the poet could not have lived in the tenth or eleventh century, or indeed that the ascription is frivolous.

The quatrain however is not referring to a battle in 1405. The sentence preceding describes the woes of the curaid Cmic in Scail 7 Tulchain Maelruanaid Moir ‘the warriors of Scal Mountain and of the Hilllock of Maelruanaid Mor’ and an ancient poem about a past episode of naming is produced to justify using these terms. The battle in 1405 involves primarily the MacDiarmata and no fresh renaming is involved.

(13) ‘Mac Coisse and the Giant’s widow’ (Mac Coisse, prose, Liber Flavus Fergusiorum f. 37, 1437, probably from Roscommon). This is a folklore tale involving Mac Coisse and the discovery of a 25-foot giant buried at Clonmacnoise. While it transmits nothing from Mac Coisse’s own time, it does tell us of the folklore that grew up around him in the later Middle Ages, and connects him with Clonmacnoise and with Loch Lene near Fore in Co. Westmeath.

(14) ‘Airec menman Uraid maic Coise’ (Mac Coisse; prose story with verse in Rawlinson B. 512 f. 109, fifteenth century, provenance unknown). Set in the court of Domhnall Uí Néill, King of Ireland, to whom Mac Coisse has come for compensation for the damages done to his property in Westmeath, this long tale supposedly told by Mac Coisse himself has also provoked debate. While Ó Lochlainn was content to accept a date of 1000-1200 for it, its ascription to Mac Coise seems just ... to give learned authority to what is really a standard list of hero-tales.” Aideen O’Leary’s study of Mac Coisse in 1999 abided by and large with Ó Lochlainn’s summing-up, even though in footnotes she acknowledged other studies that had meantime been proposing a more significant role for this piece. McCana suggests that the tale laid down canons for the
poets' profession, an argument further developed in Carey.\textsuperscript{48} It must have been highly regarded by the scribe of that part of Rawlinson B.512, for he decorated it with a large highly-ornamented $I$ (6.5 X 4 cm), featuring interlacing with an animal head ... coloured with pink, yellow, and blue, but ... now very faded.\textsuperscript{49}

(15) 'Maccaen opas orm anitii' (Mac Coisse, 3 qq, marginalia of TCD H.1.8 MS of AU 980.2),\textsuperscript{50} a poem in honour of the death in 980 of Domnall Úa Néill, king of Ireland with 'M. Coissi cecedit' at the end. This copy of AU was largely compiled by Ó Luinín prior to 1498 with annotations by Ó Caiside. Presumably he added this shortly after the original penning, since the two men seem to have worked closely together; it had certainly been added before Ó Luinín's death in 1528, as he had by then completed Rawlinson B.489 which incorporate the marginalia in the main text.\textsuperscript{51} While the main text of AU is considered to derive from contemporary chronicling, this has not been shown to be true of the marginalia; this piece is therefore conservatively included in Group II, rather than in Group I where it might be thought to belong.

(16) Mac Coisse's and Mac Liag's obits in AClon (Mac Coisse and Mac Liag, prose, AClon 983 & 1009, 1627).\textsuperscript{52} Connell Magheogan's 1627 translation of the so-called Annals of Clonmacnoishe (AClon) recites a long tale in Mac Coisse's obit at 983 about how Mac Coisse, while living at Clonmacnoishe, received Ireland's revenues for a year from Mael Sechnail and josted with him to keep them after. Mac Liag's obit at 1009 reads: 'McLiag archpoet of Ireland and one that was in wonderfull favour with king Bryan died; he was named Mortaugh, a very good man.' The poets are by now firmly attached to the patrons assigned them in post-Norman tradition.

A number of Mac Liag/Mac Coisse poems appear in Stowe B.iv.2 (RIA cat. no. 1080), a compilation made by Ó Cléirigh in 1627-8 as he travelled Ireland collecting material for the Annals of the Four Masters.\textsuperscript{53}

(17) 'Marthain duit, a loraide fhéil' (Mac Liag/Mac Coisse, 52 qq, B.iv.2 f. 89 1627)\textsuperscript{54} is conceived as a dialogue between the two, starting off with Mac Liag hailing Mac Coisse and wishing him a long life. It is a great pity that we do not know Ó Cléirigh's sources, for it is clear that this poem was from a radically different background than some subsequent ones. Mac Liag barely gets to rumble that he gets first crack at the bath before a feast and a first sup from the drinking-horn before Mac Coisse overrides him with effusions about the horses, shirts, rings and swords showered upon him. Mac Coisse had already gained a reputation in Airee Menman for setting a high standard in the matter of rewards: the composer here may be angling to enlarge his own remuneration while playing on the north/south theme. Indeed, it behoved him to be circumspect in soliciting rewards, as there could be heavy penalties for being too overtly greedy.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{48} MacCana, Tales of Medieval Ireland, pp 36-8; J. Carey 'The three things required of a poet' Ériu xlviii. (1997), pp 50-2.
\textsuperscript{49} Ó Cuív, Catalogue, p. 38.
\textsuperscript{51} See Ó Cuív, Catalogue, p. 161 on the date of Ó Luinín's death, and McCarthy, Irish Annals, pp 35-6 on the serial details.
\textsuperscript{55} Penalties for demanding too much reward outright are cited in Rosin Mc Laughlin, Early Irish Satire (Dublin, 2008) p.6.
(18) ‘Freiccari meisi, a Meic Coisi’ (Mac Coisse/Donnchadh mac Briain, 36 sqq, B.iv.2 folio 30, 1627)\(^{56}\) takes the same theme to yet further lengths: while Donnchadh makes no attempt to defend the fame of his father’s house, Mac Coisse’s retort is devastating: Mael Schnaill treasured him so much that he gave him the entire revenues of Ireland for a year, a story we have already seen in AClon (16).

(19) ‘Dursan mar tai, a Dhún na sciaith’ (Mac Coisse, 8qq, B.iv.2 f. 31 1627).\(^{57}\) Only 8quatrains long in Ó Cléirigh’s transcript, this poem brings into the arena a theme which was to become increasingly in evidence: that of a nostalgic yearning for past glories. Gone are the proud rantings of Tadg of the shields, here we weep ‘Alas for thy state, O Dún na Sciaith ... Thou without games, without drinking of ale. ... Ochone! I am the wretched phantom, small are my wages.’ The theme had been used by Geoffrey Ó Dálaigh in the fourteenth century, but it acquires a new urgency that was eventually to culminate in Aodhghán Ó Rathaille’s bitter lament (fl. 1675-1729): ‘The drenching night drags on: no sleep or snore/no stock, no wealth of sheep, no horned cows./ This storm on the waves nearby has harrowed my head/ – I who ate no winkles or dogfish in my youth!’\(^{58}\)

(20) ‘Samhoin so, sodham go Tadg’ (Mac Liag, 47qq, B.iv.2 f. 151 1628).\(^{59}\) O Lochlainn alone has discussed this poem so far, and his comments are amazingly misleading, for he saw nothing in it but ‘a wearisome list of place and personal names,’ and claims that it consists of Mac Liag ‘apparently inviting his comrade to come visiting various kings and potentates’.\(^{60}\) It is in fact nothing of the sort: Mac Liag starts off by describing his own journey from Kincora where he spends half the year to Tadg Ua Céallaigh’s court where he spends the winter. A large part of the poem is taken up with material found nowhere else, according to which it was Tadg Ua Céallaigh who defeated Brian’s bitter foe, Mael Ruanaidh, king of Cenél Conaill, and brought him in chains to Kincora, a story which alone would make the poem worthy of more extensive discussion. The last seven verses all end in the word ‘samh,’ suggesting that anything up to six of them could be additions to the original poem. This is particularly of interest since in the second to the last we find our first mention of Conaing and Cian, two Munster heroes who were soon to eclipse Tadg.

Ó Cléirigh thus preserved a very significant collection of poetry. He omitted the topographical and genealogic material, but included ‘Sciaith’ (5) (f. 153), a rattling example of the Ul Maine style, and ‘Samhoin so’ (17) with its unique lore concerning Brian Bóhairmhe’s northern campaigns and its penultimate verse foreshadowing the rising Desmond element. These poems are on adjacent folios near the very end of the MS, probably copied from sources in a single or in neighbouring collections.

Ó Cléirigh repeats the Ul Néill regnal poem ‘Maoil Sechloinn’ (9) (f. 89). In ‘Marthain dati’ (18) and ‘Freiccari meissi’ (19) Mac Coisse further upholds the noble character of the Ul Néill. The next entry, ‘Dursan mar tai’ (20), is an early example of what was to become a haunting theme: the lament for a devastated past. The proximity

---


\(^{60}\) O Lochlainn ‘Poets – II’ p. 39.
of these two suggests that they came from the same source, while ‘Maoil Sechloinn’ and ‘Marthaín duí’ at intervals further on were possibly copied from a library not far away.

(21) ‘Bóraidhe baile na ríogh’ (Mac Liag, extract in Keating’s FFÉ Book II Sec. XXV, 1634; 33 qq, RIA 23.G.8, 1711) is a recitation by Mac Liag of the massive tributes from Ireland that poured into Beal Beru near Kincora in Brian’s day. O’Curry describes it as follows:

the poet ... happened to have been at Ceann Coradh, on one occasion when Brian’s tribute of cows from Leinster and Ulster was being driven home; [and he] said to Brian: “Here comes Erinn’s tribute of cows to thee: many a fat cow and fat hog on the plain before thee.” “Be they ever so many,” said Brian, “they shall all be thine, O noble poet!” whereupon it was that Mac Liag gave the name of Boromha to the town and plain ... It is probable that it was upon this occasion also that Brian himself received the addition to his name of Boromha. ... The poet proceeds to give an account of the amount and kind of tribute sent to Brian ... among which we find an item of one hundred and fifty butts of wine from the Danes of Dublin, and one of a tun of wine per day from the Danes of Limerick. He then describes the order in which the royal and noble guests of Brian sat around him in the great hall.

The actual text of the poem is not preserved from any manuscript earlier than 1711, but Keating cites it by name and gives a fair extract of part of its contents in Foras Feasa ar Éirinn (FFÉ).

Ag so sios an chioscháin is an eart do bhiodh ag Brian Bhóraidhe ar chúigeadháibh Éireann leath amuigh don Mumhain ré cothughadh thighe Chinn Choradh, anmhail chuirthear sios lé Mac Liag ardollamh Éireann san duain darab tosaich: Bóraidhe baile na ríogh.

‘Here follow the tribute and dues that Brian Boraimhe claimed from the provincial kings of Ireland outside of Munster, for the upkeep of the house of Ceann Choradh as stated by Mac Liag, chief ollamh of Ireland, in the poem which begins: Boraimhe town of the kings’.

(22) ‘A chluicce aí i cind m’adhairt’ (Mac Liag, 1 q, AFM 1015.7, 1636). Cited by the Four Masters as Mac Liag’s last verse, the text makes no obvious sense. Either it has suffered gross distortion or else it masks some riddle. The Four Masters transfer Mac Coissc’s obit to 1023, presumably to accommodate his supposed authorship of ‘Dursan mar tái’ (19).

Keating’s FFÉ seems to have been the inspiration for the Leabhar Ghearr na Pailise (*LGP), written in Munster, which linked a series of Munster battles by annalistic

---


62 O’Curry, Manners and Customs, pp 120-1.

63 FFÉ ii, sec. XXV, see Dineen, G. Keating, pp 265.

64 See O’Donovan, AFM, annual entry 1015.7.
recitative ‘so as to form a kind of romantic history of Munster, A.D. 174-1138.’ The original text does not survive but a copy made circa 1715 (Egerton 106) by Mac Solly faithfully transcribes the colophon of the original: ‘Scriptum per mé Eugenium Carti ... anno domini 1648.’ One of the battles in this cycle is the Cath Chluana Tairbh (CCT): the first attempt outside of the annals, the Cogadh and the FFÉ to describe Brian’s debacle at Clontarf. The CCT contains no poetry: it is the first in a predominantly prose tradition which Ni Urdail calls an ‘O’Brien Saga’. We shall see below the effects that this text was to have on the poetic tradition.

**Group III: Post Keating/AFM**

(23) ‘An oir tainic tuitim Bhriain’ (Mac Liag/ Mac Coisse, 26 qq, RIA 23.F.16 “The O’Gara Collection” f. 79, 1655). It is unfortunate that this text has never been published, for it proved to be extremely popular in the manuscript tradition. It has generated a certain amount of modern discussion, beginning with O’Reilly who mistranslated the title as ‘Westward came the fall of Brian.’ O’Curry gives the first stanza:

An oir tainic tuitim Bhriain, maireg atá ar dorhan na dhaígh a techtaire tig anois. Iníl duinn marbhadh Murchadh.

‘From the east has come the news of Brian’s fall! Alas! That I am in this world after him; Thou messenger, who comest from the east/ Tell me, has Murchadh been slain too?’

Mac Coisé in the fourth and fifth stanzas of this poem, bears testimony to the bravery and nobleness of Brian; and in the exaggeration of his feelings, goes so far as to assert that so great a sacrifice as his had not been offered on the altar of Justice, Truth, and Religion, since the Great Sacrifice on Calvary itself. Mac Liag, then, in the sixth, seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth stanzas, continues his inquiries as to whether Murchadh and many other leaders whom he names, had really fallen. And in answer to these questions, Mac Coisé, at the eleventh stanza, gives the names of several of the chiefs who fell, and describes the position in which they lay dead on the battle field. At the eighteenth stanza he launches out into exclamations of despairing grief; and he then continues to the end to review the most important incidents in Brian’s life and reign.

O’Grady gives more examples of the poem’s content:

Here is a roll of the dead ... elicited by a series of questions put as it were to the poet Erard, Izard, or Urard Mac Coisi (with an apostrophe to S. Kieran of Clonmacnoise) who describes how and where the dead are stretched upon the field:

---


68 See Thomas P. O’Rahilly RIA Cat, i. (1926), p. 11.


70 O’Curry, *Manners and Customs*, pp 118-9.
Innis a Mic Choisí ó chluain ó theasda Brian barr in tsluaig
An bhfaca tu thiar nó thair a chommaith d'fine Adaim
Beir do bennacht anoisí a Urard mhóir Mic Choisí.
Cáit mar marbach Brian san mag nó an derna math gá marbach

Tell us O Mac Coisi from Clonmacnoise./ now that Brian (the army's head) is not:/ east or west hast thou of Adam's tribe/ ever seen one so good as he?
Now then accept a benison [and tell]./ O great Urard Mac Coisi:/ where on the field was Brian slain,/ and showed he prowess at his killing? (quatt. 3,6).

The answers are of this kind:

Ai dá laim déis budéin Domhall móir mac Eimhin fhéil
atá im ghluin in ghillí ghlain cian mac Maolmuaidh cen marthain
i.e. 'At his [Conaing's] very right hand is Eimín's generous son Donald More;
and at that noble young man's knee Maolmuaidh's son Cian lies lifeless' (quatt. 15). 71

Flower, O Lochlainn and O'Leary all give the poem short shrift. 72 Yet this poem must have an important bearing on development of the legend of Brian Boru. It has every appearance of having been influenced by Eugene Mac Carthy's CCT, both in the choosing of the field of Clontarf as the setting and in the inclusion of the Munster heroes Conaing and Cian son of Maolmuaidh among the dead worthy of mention.

(24) 'A Chinn-chorráidh! Cáidhi Brian?' (Mac Liag, 11 qq, RIA 23.F.16 'The O'Gara Collection' f. 79, 1655) 73 accompanied 'An oir' on the same page in O'Gara’s MS. O'Reilly called it a 'beautiful and pathetic poem,' 74 and Mangan's translation of 1841 ('Kincora') has earned this poem a place in modern anthologies of Irish verse. 75 'A Chinn-chorráidh!' can be said to follow the lead set by 'Dursan mar tait' (19), though it is not Maelsceáin's deserted fortress that is bewailed here, but that of Brian Bóramhe, haunted by the ghosts of Conaing and Cian. It is as though popular opinion, having deserted the fields of the living (exemplified in the vigorous Uí Maine poetry) for the corpse-strewn battlefield of ‘An oir,’ had moved on to keep over the abandoned homesteads, the ghost towns of the past.

(25) 'Brónach ollamh déis a righ' (Mac Coisse, 11 qq, RIA C iv.1, f. 208, ca. 1664). 76 This poem occurs in part d) of this manuscript, a section described by Mulcrone as an O Ruairc compilation. 77

71 O'Grady, Catalogue, p. 350.
72 Flower, Catalogue, p. 337; O Lochlainn 'Poets – II', p. 38; O'Leary, p. 64.
73 O'Rahilly, Catalogue, p. 11. Irish text published by Hardiman, Irish Miscroly, pp 196-201), accompanied by facing translation by John D'O'Fionn.
74 O'Reilly, Irish Writers, p. lxxi.
75 O'Curry, Manners and Customs, p. 118, describes its publication in the Irish Penny Journal, no. 28 (9 January 1841).
77 Muilcrone 'RIA Cat' xiii, p. 1672.
O'Donovan, although stating that 'the Elegy ... would appear to give a satisfactory internal evidence of the time at which it was composed' nevertheless has difficulties reconciling an elegy written for Fergal O'Rourke (d. 965) by Mac Coisse (d. 990 or 1023) on the occasion of Fergal's supposed death at the Battle of Clontarf (1014). He credits the AFM obit of 1023 for Mac Coisse as more accurate than Atig's of 990, and then suggests that either there were two Fergal O'Rourke's, of which the younger died at Clontarf, or that the poem was originally written by Mac Coisse to lament the death of Mal Sechlainn, (d. 1022), for whom Fergal O'Rourke's name was later substituted. Of the poem's merit, O'Donovan remarks 'the pathetic force with which the bard, prostrate on the tomb of his chieftain and patron, pours forth his griefs for the loss he and his country had sustained, is remarkably original and striking'.

O'Curry and O'Leary, too, are bothered by the incompatible annal dates for Mac Coisse and Fergal O Rourke. The firebrand Fergal, however, had long been substituted for his less well-known great-grandson Niall Ua Ruairc at the Battle of Clontarf in certain versions of the Cogadh, giving Mac Coisse and Fergal an unimpeachable link in popular tradition. O'Leary calls the poem:

a dramatic and highly elaborate eulogy, but it is also stylized in the fashion of (I should say) the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Colm O Lochlainn's dismissal of it as 'the most transparent forgery of all' gives an indication of his justifiably sceptical approach to this corpus as a whole.

(26) 'A Chearmaid Mhuiige Meadhbha' (Mac Coisse, 26 qq, RIA MS 23.L.34 p. 165, written by Maurice Newby in Dublin in 1711 and 1714-5). Only the first quatrains have ever been published. O'Curry describes it as:

in praise of Maerluanaidh, the second son of Tadhg of the tower, King of Connacht, and ancestor of the O'Conor family, who died in the year 954, and was succeeded by his eldest son Conor. Maerluanaidh, the second son, became lord of the territory of Magh Luirg in East Connacht, and was the ancestor of the families of Mac Dermot and Mac Donagh, of that country. The poet describes a visit which he paid to this chief at his princely residence, and the entertainment and gifts which he received on the occasion.

Among these presents were, a chessboard; a valuable sword; fifty milch cows; and thirty steeds, 'fit to appear at fairs and assemblies'. This curious poem begins:

thou warrior of Queen Meadhbh's plain, —
thou king of popular Cruachan,—
thou valiant guardian of thy people,—
thou brave protector of Milesian Erin!

Seemingly Mac Coisse was being employed here to shed glory on the O'Connors of Roscommon in very much the same style in which Mac Liag was used by the Ui Maine several centuries before.

---

78 O'Donovan, 'Elegy' p. 341.
79 O'Curry, Manners and Customs, pp 129-30; O'Leary, Identities of Mac Coisi, p. 57-8.
80 Ni Mhaoaigh, 'Breathnach Bias in Cogadh Gáedel re Gallab', p. 143.
81 O'Leary, Identities of Mac Coisi, p. 58.
82 Mulchrone & FitzPatrick, RIA Cat xxiii (1938), p. 2869.
83 O'Curry, Manners and Customs, pp 128-9.
(27) ‘Fada beith gan aoibhnes’ (Mac Liag, 5 qq., LO, RIA 23.E.26 p. 204, 1711).\(^{84}\)

This part of 23.E.26 was put together by Mac Solly in 1711 and served as the basis for Best’s published version of the Leabhar Oiris (I.O.).\(^{85}\) A translation by Drummond published by Hardiman in 1831 is unnecessarily vapid.\(^{86}\) The text describes the poet sitting in Inis Gaill Duibh (Limerick), attacked by wave and tide, a prey to raids, wishing he had a strong lord again such as ‘Brian of the satin cloak,’ ‘Cian of the Cairn’ or ‘Conaing of the harbours, a man like Hector’ (the Munster heroes play a prominent role in much of the LO). O’Reilly and Hardiman mis-identify Inis Gaill Duibh as the Hebrides\(^{87}\) (but see page 5 above); O’Curry relocates it to the Upper Shannon, but foreshadows O Lochlainn’s doubts: “if Mac Liag was the author of this poem at all” he states “it is the most corrupt and insipid, of all his poems with which I happen to be acquainted.”\(^{88}\)

(28) ‘Inneásad mo theist ar Chian’ (Mac Coisise, 1 q LO, RIA 23.E.26, p. 204, 1711).\(^{89}\) Mac Coisise in his retreat at Clonmacnoise praises Cian mac Maelmhuaidh upon hearing of the death of that hero. The LO, like CCT, is very much a Munster production, and the northern poet Mac Coisise is being requisioned, if only in one quatrain, to give praise to a hero of the south. The LO may be said to represent the swan song of the Mac Liag/MacCoisise poems in the manuscript tradition: only one more new poem appears in this tradition.

(29) ‘Dhia bhír mbeatha a bhos ar Cian’ (Mac Liag; TCD H.1.13 p. 78, 1746).\(^{90}\) H.1.13 is a collection of ‘Historical and Romantic Tales and Poems, transcribed by Hugh O’Daly’. ‘Dhia bhír’ does not seem ever to have been transcribed again, and has never to my knowledge been published or discussed.

The nineteenth century unearthed no new poems to attribute to Mac Liag. Micheál Óg Ó Longáin, however, a member of a family of scribes active in Co. Cork, seems to have been particularly zealous in attributing other people’s poems to Mac Liag: ‘A Chaisil, is dímbri gnoin,’ ‘Céathrar do bhí ar uaigh an fhír,’ ‘Éol adhna seisearn cloinne Caín’ and ‘Fuares a Salair Chaisil’ are all credited to Mac Liag in one or another of his manuscripts, while ‘Cert gach ri go reil’ he assigns to Mac Coisise.\(^{91}\)

**Analysis**

**Group I:** There seems no prima facie reason to doubt that “Finnaid” (3) and ‘Muireachtaich Becc’ (1) might be the works of a Mac Liag described in the contemporary annals as ardollamh or chief poet. The location of ‘Finnaid’s’ Carn

---

88 O’Curry, *Manners and Customs*, p. 120.
89 Mulchrone RIA Cat xxvi, p. 2331. Irish original and translation in O’Leary, *Identities of Mac Coisi*, p. 64.
90 See Abbett, *Catalogue*, p. 299.
91 ‘A Chaisil’ in RIA 24.A.28, in Fitzpatrick, RIA Catalogue, xxiv (1938). This poem is cited in five other MSS, but without attribution; ‘Céathrar’ in RIA 3.B.9, see Mulchrone *Catalogue*, ii (1928), p. 270 (credited to Donnchadh Mór Ó Dálaill in an earlier MS, see James Delargy & Kathleen Mulchrone, *RIA Cat*, vi, 1930 p. 538); “Éol” in RIA 24.A.17, see Mulchrone, *Catalogue*, ii, p. 2318; this was otherwise attributed to O Dálaigh Finian or to Maol Domnaigh Ó Muirghesáin (RIA Index vol 1 p. 265); “Fuares” and “Cert” in RIA F.vi.2, see Mulchrone, *Catalogue*, vi (1931), pp 658 & 660. “Fuares” has no less than 40 other entries in the RIA index, and was much quoted by Keating. “Cert” had even more distinguished ancestry, being credited to Fothad na Canone in the LL.
Conall in the homeland of Brian’s close allies, the Úi Fhíachraic Aídhne, affirms the later association of Mac Liag with south Connacht, while the association with Limerick in the obit accompanying ‘Muircheartach Becc’ provides Mac Liag with an early link to the Thomond dynasty. ‘Ocús na cethri caith’ (2) seems the merest nod by the Cogadh’s author in Mac Liag’s direction: was he deliberately avoiding using the two main poets of Brian’s time? ‘Ocús’ never appears in the literature again.

‘Muircheartach Becc’ reappears only in Mac Liag’s obit in the AFM, but ‘Finnait’ becomes an embedded constituent of diurnachas lore in the Leabhar Ghabhala section of six RIA MSS and at least six MSS elsewhere, with copies into the eighteenth century. Mac Liag is thus firmly represented in the pre-Norman literature with an emphatic association with south Connacht and Thomond. Mac Coisíse, on the other hand, is represented in no manuscripts of this period at all.

Group II: The majority of the poetry from this period was recorded during the period of the Gaelic Resurgence of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when the Irish princes were re-establishing themselves prior to the Tudor Re-conquest. ‘Airec Mennman’ (14), ‘Cnoc’ (12) and ‘Maccan’ (15) could very well be the compositions of an Urard Mac Coisíse who died chief-poet (primeces) of Ireland in 990 as AU reports. Their themes are ones which a chief poet might well be expected to employ: a story establishing or affirming a code of poetic practice, a piece of place-name lore and an elegy on the death of the King of Tara. The writing of an elegy (‘Maccan’) for Domnall, King of Ireland, suggests that Mac Coisíse had already attained his rank of primeces by that time, a conjecture further supported by the setting of ‘Airec Mennman’ in Domnall’s court. Mac Coisíse is explicitly identified in the latter work as a property-holder in Westmeath, the area with which he is linked in later tradition. The locality addressed in ‘Cnoc’ on the other hand is in Airteach, in Roscommon south of Lough Key. This lies outside the area with which Mac Coisíse is usually associated, but might be connected with Mael Sechnaill’s Connacht campaigns. Mael Sechnaill on succeeding to the kingship at Domnall’s death promptly won a resounding victory over a Dublin/Leinster/Hebridean alliance at the Battle of Tara (AU 980.1). His subsequent campaigns during Mac Coisíse’s presumed lifetime seem mainly to have been directed against Connacht (AU 985.2) and Thomond (AI 982.4, AU 990.3) where Brian Bórainnhe was beginning his opening skirmishes for the kingship of Ireland.

‘Cnoc’ and ‘Maccan’ are both attested onlyonce, but ‘Airec Mennman’ reoccurs in the early sixteenth-century Harleian MS 5280, in a 19e MS replicating this and in RIA 23 N.10. The latter is an MS of 1575 considered to be ‘a fine for line replica of an older vellum.’ The latter-attested companion ‘A Mór Maigne’ may be fine poems, but internal dating makes it seem unlikely that the Mac Coisíse envisaged here could have produced them.
The Mac Liag genealogical lore, like the dinnsenchas, moves in a current of its own, in this case joining the material that coalesced into the LM. The two lesser poems associated with 'Da mae déic' (10) do not reappear, but 'Da mae déic' itself reappears in five other RIA MSS in LM contexts into the eighteenth century.

The remaining poetry surviving from this period shows a clear separation between the strands of tradition represented by the two poets. Mac Coisse's name is associated with the rights of the Uí Néill to the sovereignty of Ireland, notably in 'Maoil Sechloinm' (9) and 'A naid Fiachrach' (8). The latter does not appear again, while 'Maoil Sechloinm' reappears only in Ó Cléirigh's B.i.v.2. 'Marthain' (17) and 'Freiccar' (18) effectively treat the Dál Cais as boors. 'Dursan' (19), too, represents the Uí Néill perspective in an example of the ubi sunt? theme that became so beloved later on. 'Freiccar' recurs once, while 'Marthain' and 'Dursan' each reoccur twice (signally, both are included in Tadhg Ó Neachtain's pseudo-'Psalter of Tara').

The supposed Mac Liag poems of 'Sciath' (5), 'Beannacht' (6), 'Leasg am leasg' (7) and 'Samhoin' (20) convey to us the aspirations and connections of the Uí Maine court: Brian's name is used as the knock-out punch in 'Beannacht' and 'Leasg am leasg' while 'Sciath' accuses Mael Sechnaill of trying to subvert Tadg Ua Ceallaigh at the Battle of Clontarf and 'Samhoin' even arrogates to Tadg the capture of Brian's most implacable foe.

This group of poems attributed to Mac Liag may provide an insight into one possible reason why a poet might compose verse in the name of an older authority. During the Bruce Wars (1315-19) the reigning O Cellaig king of Uí Maine bore his ancestor's name of Tadg (following here the spelling of his day, as used in the AConn). He had been head of Uí Maine for at most eight years (his predecessor died widely mourned as 'a common housekeeper for all Ireland in general, a very bountiful man'), when Edward Bruce invaded from Scotland. Bruce tried to win the support of the two most powerful Connacht overlords, but they fell to wrangling with each other over control of Connacht. O Cellaig in support of one faction was involved in an action at Glenn Fathraim, where 'they stripped women and ruined children and lowly folk, and never within the memory of man were so many cattle fruitlessly destroyed in one place'.

The opposing faction succeeded in 1316 in gaining the kingship of Connacht, and O Cellaig's hostages were taken. Connacht, Thomond and Meath then united against the English in support of Edward Bruce, but at a major engagement at Athenry they were defeated and Tadg and many others killed. Given the complexities of the Tadg's situation, a court poet may have preferred not to give him direct advice, but to seek to guide events more subtly by harping on the bravery and glory of his namesake. Since a poet could only expect payment for pieces invoking named contemporaries he may have preferred not to be seen writing unremunerated work and have chosen to exercise

98 See Mulchrone RIA Cat Index i (1948) and e.g., MS 23.E.26 of 1711, see Gerard Murphy & Winifred Wulff, RIA Cat xvii (1936), p. 2332.
100 I am greatly indebted to Katherine Simms for drawing my attention to the possible connection between this Tadg and the poetry celebrating his ancestor.
101 A Clon 1307. AConn is even more effusive, describing him as 'renowned throughout Ireland for bestowing food, clothing, gold and cattle' 1307.2.
102 AConn 1315.12, Freeman, An tArdla Connacht, p. 239.
103 AConn 1316.5.
power anonymously. These poems enjoyed only a moderate success with later audiences: ‘Samhoin’ does not reappear, but ‘Scith’ is in three MSS of the RIA collection while the other two recur twice each.  

It would seem likely that ‘Boraimhe’ (21) on the tributes paid to Brian must be lore from Dál Cais itself: it is set squarely in Kincora as the Uí Maine poetry is not. It is older than O Lochlainn was willing to concede, he having ignored its shadowy presence in Keating’s pages. It may even have been modelled on ‘Freiccari’ wherein Mael Sechnaill gives a year’s revenues of Ireland to Mac Coisse and ‘Marthain’, which makes the Dál Cais out to be better than bumpkins. If so, it is a reply framed with consummate skill, for it gracefully avoids mentioning the rival Mac Coisse altogether; Brian’s bestowal of the massive tributes whose arrival the poet has just described takes us by surprise, and the description of the splendour of Brian’s court rings more coherently than Mac Coisse’s rambling recital in ‘Marthain’. As a Dál Cais production it is particularly valuable to modern scholarship for the light it sheds on the place name ‘Boraime’, for the wealth that Brian was perceived to have generated, and most of all for the fact that, other than the Cogadh itself, signal little else in the way of contributions to Brian’s legend actually came from Brian’s own territory or people. ‘Boraimhe’ recurs as a poem in MSS by Tadhg Ó Neachtain and by Edward O’Reilly, but its contents, acknowledged or not, recur in full or in part in many printed histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Slieve Aughtry place-lore story (4), ‘MacCoissi and the Giant’s widow’ (13) and the tale told in the AClon obit (16) show us what was happening in the genre of folklore, which seems to have been developing with equal vigour for both figures. The politics of north/south play no role at all in the first two of these pieces: they show far more connection with topographic lore. Mac Coisse is firmly associated with Clonmacnoise and Westmeath, Mac Liag with the border country between the Uí Fhíachrach heartland and Brian Bóraimhe’s stronghold at Thomond’s northern boundary. Both records are essentially unique, though Mac Coisse’s story reappears in RIA 23.B.37, a replica of its source MS. The AClon story is more political than the others, as perhaps befits its appearance in an annal. Its material forms the germ of ‘Freiccari’. ‘A chluice’ (22), dredged up by the Four Masters for Mac Liag’s obit, if not intentionally gnomic, richly merits O Lochlainn’s tag of ‘doggerel’: it was never taken up by any other manuscript compilers.

Nearly all this material seems to come from MSS with a Connacht or Munster origin. UM, BB, ALC, Liber Flavus and MacFlarbhisigh’s portion of the YBL are all Connacht productions. Munster’s contribution is limited to ‘Abair damh-sa’ (11), presumably attributed to Mac Coisse in the lost Red Book of Munster, and the extract of ‘Boraimhe baile na riogh’ (21) in Keating’s FFÉ. One of the ‘Airec Menman’ MSS (Harley 5280) and the AU alone have Ulster provenances, and where the AU marginalia came from is not known. Ó Cléirigh’s collection is unprovenanced, as is the earliest MS of ‘Airec menman.’ The origins of AClon, too, are unclear. Though some

105 See Mulchrone RIA Cat Index i (1948).
107 See Mulchrone RIA Cat Index i (1948).
109 See Flower, Catalogue, p. 298.
110 See, for instance, theories in MacCarthy, Identities of Mac Coisi, p. 326-8
tacked-on verses praising Munster princes in ‘Sanhoin so’ (20) show that the south did have its own lore (lore that was later to take shape in Leabhar Gearr na Pailise), Munster’s total contribution in this period seems startlingly small.

It seems fitting, if entirely coincidental, that the list of Mac Liag poetry begins with his supposed first childhood verse, and that it is his supposed last piece which concludes the most vigorous period of poetry produced in his name. Notable for this period altogether is the astonishing richness of material produced, covering the fields of dinnechinn, genealogy, professional doctrine or law, court poetry and even folklore: evidence of the vibrancy of these figures in the popular imagination.

**Group III:** The poetry attributed to our two poets in the post-Cromwellian period no longer narrates current dialogues and events, but stands remote, looking back to an unrecoverable past. Scribes and patrons of the post-Cromwellian era seem to have fancied the corpse-strewn battlefield of ‘An a’ir’ (23) for the poem is recorded in at least five other MSS. This pales, however, beside the success of ‘A Chinn-chorráidh!’ (24) addressing the wraiths in the empty household of the Munster king, which recurs in fifteen other MSS of the RIA collection.

With the rise of the CCT following on the FFÉ, the cast of characters changes. The Eoghanacht hero Cian son of Maelmuad comes to the fore, celebrated in five out of the seven poems of this group (in the absence of any published text little can be said about the last one, ‘Dhia bhr mbeatha a bhos or Cian’, but its title indicates a Desmond orientation). The prose narratives of CCT and LO celebrating Brian’s deeds seem gradually to have eclipsed our poets however: CCT in its earliest form has no poetry at all, and in LO Mac Liag and Mac Coisce have only one chance each to speak. Mac Liag in ‘Foda bheith’ (27) gets in five quatrains along the lines of ‘A Chinn-chorráidh!’; but ‘Inneosad’ (28) makes Mac Coisce mouth a single stanza of praise for Desmond. His quatrains are rarely documented in catalogue descriptions of LO, but Mac Liag’s ‘Foda bheith’ is listed in nine LO recensions.

‘Brónach’ (25) and ‘A chearamaid’ (26) are both found only once. While Group II MSS from Connacht outwith Uí Maine yielded a number of Mac Liag/Mac Coisce poems, these are the first instances where we see Mac Coisce eulogizing non-Uí Maine chieftains of Connacht directly.

**Discussion**

It seems unnecessarily iconoclastic to deny existence to two poets whose obits are recorded in the contemporary annals simply because, whirled up in the growth of Brian Bóraimhe’s legend, a great deal of later poetry became wished upon them. We have isolated three poems which might reasonably be assigned to Mac Coisce, given an obit of 990. Two poems similarly might have come from the hand of Mac Liag, whose obit 16 years after Mac Coisce’s suggests that he may have been Mac Coisce’s successor in the post of ‘chief poet of Ireland’. Comparing these possibly original works with those which we have every reason to believe were not genuine, it is striking that while it is a retrospective assessment of the figures and policies of the patron kings that dominates the attributed poetry, Mael Sechnaill, Brian Bóraimhe and their respective policies play no part whatever in the poems we are positing as genuine.

The fact that the Munster-born Brian Bóraimhe succeeded in outmanoeuvring Mael Sechnaill and becoming King of all Ireland, and that his repeated Circuits of Ireland gave this title a reality it had not previous enjoyed, triggered a wave of antagonistic
response after Brian’s death.111 The Cogadh itself is undoubtedly to be viewed as the Dál Cais rejoinder to this antagonism. The controversy thus initiated continued bubbling gently in the symbolic persons of our two poets and their patrons through the poems and compilations of the succeeding centuries until it erupted acrimoniously in Iomarbháigh na bhFileadh, the ‘Contention of the Bards’ sometime around 1616.112 Brian Bóramhíe is used as ammunition there, but the two poets get no mention in the furious accusations and retorts of the Iomarbháigh. The north/south controversy as embodied by our pair was entirely gentlemanly, imbued with a chivalry that perhaps reflects the strategic manner in which Brian Bóramhíe replaced both Máel Sechnaill and treated him as a valued ally thereafter.

Though O Lochlainn’s proposed Eachtra Bhriain’ hardly seems to have taken any real shape, the legend of the two poets enjoyed its greatest vigour during the Gaelic Resurgence of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: far beyond the political use to which they were evidently put within the Uí Maine court, they figure in nearly every major field of Irish learning of that time.

Úi Maine was only the first family outside of Dál Cais to hook their star to Brian’s: others have described how this fashion spread. In Ó Corráin’s words ‘in subsequent tradition, both Irish and Norse, Clontarf became a heroic battle of saga and story-telling … Everyone wished his ancestors to have participated in the great battle,’113 while Ryan dryly remarks that ‘in the later accounts of the Cath Cluana Tarb’ Brian’s army receives additions from the most unexpected quarters.’114 We have traced above how Munster heroes replaced Uí Maine in the seventeenth century, and how even north and east Connacht tried to scramble aboard in a way closely paralleling the changing composition of Brian’s army detailed in successive recensions of LO.

Post-Cromwellian poetry is notably different than that of the Gaelic Resurgence. The Ua Ceallaigh poems are almost wholly concerned with the living: even ‘Leasg amleasg’ (7), styled as a lament over Tadhg’s death, is more concerned with Tadhg’s heroic rejection of Máel Sechnaill’s blandishments than with keeping over his corpse. ‘An oir taimine tuitim Bhriain’ (24) by contrast seems little more than a distribution map of dead bodies on the battlefield. Laments for the past become predominant and the most successful of the entire corpus from start to finish is ‘A Chrim-chorrraidh! Cáidhi Brián?’ (25).

By the close of the eighteenth century the cycle was nearly played out: prose replaced poetry, printing was replacing the manuscript tradition. Mac Liag remained venerated, as Micheál Óg O Longáin’s frantic attempts to add to his repertoire show. Printed works often cited Mac Liag as an authority, especially of ‘Boraimhe’ (21). O’Curry called it an ‘undeniably genuine piece,’115 Hyde said that:

---

111 See e.g. F. J. Byrne, ‘Ireland and her neighbours, c. 1014-1072’ in Dáithí Ó Corráin (ed.), A New History of Ireland, i (Oxford, 2005), p. 866 on how poetry produced by Flann Mainistrech within the decade of Brian’s death laid down the official doctrine of the monopoly of the high-kingship by the Uí Neill from the time of St. Patrick to the usurpation of Brian; also Edel Bhreathnach, ‘Cultural Identity and Tain from Lebor Gabála Érenn to George Petrie’ Discovery Programme Reports iv, (Dublin, 1996), p. 85 on the Dindsenchas being compiled primarily with the aim of enhancing the claims of an alien dynasty, the southern Uí Neill, and most particularly those of Máelsechlainn II. Lower on the same page she notes that in the ‘Lebor Gabála Érenn. The Book of the Taking of Ireland, a text which in its most complete form dates to the late eleventh or early twelfth century, … the concept of the high-kingship of Ireland, fáthas Érenn, is essential to the chronology of the text – an ancient kingship, associated primarily with the Uí Neill and located at Tara.’


113 Donnechadh O Corráin, Ireland before the Normans, (Dublin, 1972), pp 120-1.

114 Ryan, ‘Battle of Clontarf’, p. 18; see also his subsequent analysis pp 18-9.

115 O’Curry, Manners and Customs, p. 120.
one of [Mac Liag’s] poems gives a graphic description of the tribute of Ireland being driven to Brian at his palace in Kincora ... Mac Liag] describes Brian sitting at the head of the great hall of Kincora, the King of Connaught sat on his right hand and the King of Ulster on his left.116

Bugge cites the wine tributes mentioned in the poem as evidence for a trade with France.117 Westropp more cautiously speaks of ‘an ancient poem attributed to his [Brian’s] bard Mac Liag. If this is genuine, we can even form a clear picture of the arrangements of the hall,’ whose seating arrangements, furnishings and etiquette Westropp then details.118 Even as late as 1979 we find the legendary version of Mac Liag alive and well:

Towards the end of the tenth century flourished Mac Liag. He was a native of south Connacht, and was at first poet to Tadhg O’Kelly, Prince of Uí Maine. Later he was chosen by Brian Bóramahe as his Ard-Ollamh (chief poet) and took up residence at the palace of Kincora. Some 1,200 lines of his poetry have survived, giving a vivid picture of life in Ireland under Brian’s rule. One of the most beautiful of these is his lament for Kincora bereft of Brian and the other chiefs who fell at Clontarf.119

Conclusions
Byrne, referring to another contemporary of Brian’s, has remarked that he ‘suffered the fate of many famous poets, in that the verses of inferior men were foisted upon him by later scribes.’120 Mac Liag and Mac Coisse would seem to have suffered a similar fate. But whether or not the original poets really existed, still, in ‘the verses of inferior men’ we may trace the growth of a legend about north versus south, about an established king versus a new upstart, and about the deeds of their followers from the Dal Cais propaganda of the Cogadh across a virtual abyss in the prose record to Keating and the Desmond sagas of the seventeenth century and further into post-Cromwellian Ireland and its diaspora. This brings us from the world of vigorous Gaelic life and arms, replete with folklore, poetic disputation and lore of place and kin to a world whose poetry grasps at ghosts of the past, and beyond that again into the realm of eighteenth and nineteenth century scholarship, where the flotsam of bygone times was indiscriminately reassembled in a titanic effort to re-create the imagined glories of the past.121

117 Alexander Bugge, Contributions to the History of the Norsemen in Ireland, (Christiana, 1900), p.4.
118 Thomas Johnson Westropp, ‘Types of the Ringforts remaining in Eastern Clare, (Killaloe, its royal forts and their history), PRIA, xxix (1911, pp 207-8.
119 Fergal McGrath, Education in Ancient and Medieval Ireland, (Dublin, 1979), pp 132-3.
120 Byrne, ‘Ireland and her Neighbours’ p.865.
121 My sincere thanks to Katherine Simms, Peter Smith and Cathy Swift for their support and sage counsel in the early stages of this study.