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## THE FAIR OF TAILTIU AND THE FEAST OF TARA

FOR several years I have been engaged in a study of the so-called 'high-kingship' with the aim of separating fact from fiction in the conventional accounts of it which are now common form in all modern textbooks of Irish history. In the present article I propose only to examine the evidence relating to two alleged 'institutions' which most historians since Keating have associated with the 'central monarchy'. The results of this examination serve, I think, to reinforce the general conclusion I have reached on other evidence: that, while the king of Tara as head of the far-flung confederation of Uí Néill dynasties was normally the most powerful monarch in Ireland, his 'sovereignty' over the other provincial kings is a fiction invented by the 'synthetic' historians. As I hope to show in future numbers of *ÉRIU*, this 'sovereignty' had neither a legal nor an historical basis.

I have mentioned two 'institutions', but in a few very late sources a third has been added in order to eke out the inevitable triad. Thus in *IT* iii. 198, § 55, *SG* i. 73, *ZCP* xx. 168, etc., the three 'noble meetings' held annually by 'the men of Ireland' are given as the Assembly (*mórdáil*) of Uisnech at Beltaine, the Fair (*óenach*, Lat. *agon*) of Tailtiu at Lugnasad, and the Feast (*feis*, Lat. *cena*) of Tara at Samain. In this way each of the three main festivals of the pagan year is provided with its own ceremonial gathering.

The 'Assembly of Uisnech' can be quickly disposed of. There is not a shred of reliable evidence that any such assembly was ever held throughout the entire historical period. And even among the legendary sources we find only two attempts to describe it, both of them very late. In a passage interpolated in the old list of royal auspices (*ada*) and tabus (*geasa*)<sup>1</sup> we are told that it was customary to hold a meeting of the provincial kings under the presidency of the king of Tara in Uisnech every seven years; each king paid 'rent' for his seat at this meeting by handing over to the 'king of Meath' a gold armlet. Here the interpolator is hopelessly confused between the 'Assembly of Uisnech' and the Feast of Tara, which he envisages as taking place immediately afterwards. On the other hand, Keating's much more circumstantial description (ii. 246),<sup>2</sup> based on some unknown source, contradicts the foregoing in almost every particular. A 'general concourse of the men of Ireland' (*comhdháil choitchenn fear nÉireann*) used to be held annually on the

<sup>1</sup> Ed. Dillon, *PRIA* liv. C. 28 f.

<sup>2</sup> References are to the four-volume edition of his *Forus Feasa* in *ITS* (iv, viii, ix, xv).

feast of Beltaine, but its purpose was commercial rather than political: it was a vast emporium where goods of all kinds were bartered. This is hardly the type of gathering that one would expect to receive the title of *mórdáil Uisnig*;<sup>1</sup> and almost in the same breath Keating informs us that every chief (*flaith*) who attended the 'assembly' had to hand over his horse and accoutrement as 'rent', but to the king of Connacht (from whose territory Uisnech had been sliced off by Tuathal Techtmar) rather than to the king of Meath.

Needless to say, there is not a single reference in the Annals to this alleged septennial (or annual) assembly (or emporium), though such an important and numerous gathering would surely, like the Fair of Tailtiu, have from time to time provoked incidents which the chroniclers would have deemed worthy of recording. Among modern historians Mac Neill, who obviously recognized its fictitious character, does not mention it at all. Dr. Ryan<sup>2</sup> contents himself with paraphrasing Keating's version: 'In Beltene, or May, the great fair of Uisnech was held, "where the men of Ireland were wont to exchange their wares and other jewels".' And Mrs. Stopford Green<sup>3</sup> says substantially the same thing at greater length.

But Keating, who is our sole authority for the commercial nature of this gathering, is also at pains to give it a less mundane significance. He tells us that in addition to the barter of merchandise the assembly had another purpose: to offer sacrifice to Bel, the 'principal deity' of the pagan Irish, who used to celebrate the rites prescribed for the festival of Beltaine on the hill of Uisnech. Later I shall have occasion to examine his account more closely in connexion with the alleged visit of Patrick to Tara (pp. 129 f. *infra*). For the moment I will only point out that here we may have a clue to the origin of the fable about the 'assembly'. In pre-Christian, perhaps in pre-Goidelic, days Uisnech, the 'centre' of Ireland, seem to have been a place of religious significance,<sup>4</sup> particularly associated with a fire-cult. The legend of the sacred fire which blazed for seven years after it had been kindled by Mide son of Bráth and of the assembled druids whose tongues were cut out and buried on the hill of Uisnech is preserved in the *Dindsenchas* (RC xv. 297, Met. D. ii. 42 f.), so that an aura of ancient sanctity must have clung to the district even in the days of the latest pseudo-historians. These, in quest of a third item to set beside the Fair of Tailtiu and the Feast of Tara, invented the

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Ryan's translation of this as 'the great fair of Uisnech' (see next par.) is conditioned by Keating's account. In *Aided Diarmada* (SG i. 74) it is called *comdail fer nÉrenn* and is said to have lasted a fortnight.

<sup>2</sup> *Ireland from the Earliest Times to A.D. 800*, pp. 169 f.

<sup>3</sup> *History of the Irish State to 1014* (London, 1925), p. 277. The author acknowledges constant aid and advice from Mac Neill; yet it would probably be unfair to saddle him with any responsibility for this remarkable blend of 'Dichtung und Wahrheit'.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. O'Rahilly, *EIHM* 168.

*mórdáil* of Uisnech, which was first envisaged as a religious gathering, and was later expanded into a commercial mart, possibly by Keating himself, though this is by no means certain.

In the Fair of Tailtiu (*Óenach Tailten*), on the other hand, we have a genuine historical institution, whose existence is attested in the annals from the eighth century onward and in other historical documents from the sixth. It was convened by the king of Tara and was held annually on or about the festival of Lughnasad, possibly opening on the first Monday of August;<sup>1</sup> it seems to have lasted a full week, cf. *a llá ndédenach di sechtmain Óenaich Tailten* in one recension of Baile in Scáil (ZCP xiii. 372, § 4, but contrast *ibid.* iii. 459, § 4). In 873 the Annals of Ulster note with intense disapproval the failure to hold it: 'Óenach Tailten was not celebrated<sup>2</sup> sine causa iusta et digna, quod non audiimus ab antiquis temporibus cecidisse.' From this time on the Fair seems to have been held more irregularly; thus there was none in 876, 878, 888, and 889 (AU). In 916, we are told, Niall Glúndub, having become king of Tara, celebrated Óenach Tailten 'quod multis temporibus praetermissum est' (AU; cf. also A. Clon, p. 146, ITS xlv. 398). Mac Neill regards this restoration as marking the end of a time of troubles due to Norse activity over the previous half-century, 'during which the disturbance of normal conditions in Ireland reached its maximum' (Phases, p. 258). But his implied conclusion that henceforward the Fair was held 'normally' is altogether wide of the mark. Throughout most of the following century, from the 'black Fair' of 926 (cf. p. 120 *infra*) to 1006, it was in complete abeyance.<sup>3</sup> Yet so far as the earlier historical period is concerned, other references in the annals to be discussed presently make it quite clear that the Fair of Tailtiu, far from being an invention of the pseudo-historians, was an ancient institution intimately connected with the Tara monarchy. The only question at issue is whether it had at any time the 'nation-wide' constitutional functions with which Mac Neill has seen fit to invest it.

'Associated with it (the high-kingship)', he writes, 'was the national assembly held annually at Tailte in the valley of the Boyne.'<sup>4</sup> Mrs. Green's 'national assembly of Tailtiu' (p. 336, etc.) is just an echo of this view. Dr. Ryan, however, is much more circumspect: 'In August games were celebrated at Tailtiu in Meath under the presidency of the High-King' (p. 170); but we shall see later that this scholar follows Keating in assigning the role of 'national assembly' to the Feast of Tara.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *dia luain Loga Lughnasad*, Met. D. iv. 150, l. 46, and see p. 118 *infra*.

<sup>2</sup> *cen aigi*. This byform of the v.n. of *agid* (beside *án*) is always used in the sense of holding or celebrating festivities, games, fairs, etc.

<sup>3</sup> See Met. D. iv. 160 and Gwynn's note *ibid.* 413.

<sup>4</sup> Early Ir. Laws and Institutions, p. 109; cf. also Phases, p. 256.

Since Mac Neill here (as only too often elsewhere in his works) cites no authority, we are left to speculate about the sources on which he based this far-reaching conclusion. From Keating he would have received little or no encouragement. That writer, it is true, regarded Óenach Tailten as one of the great gatherings of the men of Ireland, but its primary function was to serve as a kind of national marriage market where 'matches' and 'alliances' were negotiated between the parents while the young people remained in strict and praiseworthy seclusion (ii. 248). Unless I am mistaken, Mac Neill has relied mainly on the long poem composed by Cúán Ó Lothcháin in 1006<sup>1</sup> when the Fair was renewed by Mael Sechnaill II after the break of seventy-nine years to which I have already alluded. Here, indeed, we have abundant evidence of the antiquity and universality of Óenach Tailten—provided, of course, we are prepared to accept the poet as a trustworthy historian. He unfolds the record of its annual celebration by the Fir Bolg, the Tuatha Dé Danann, and the descendants of Mil in succession from the death of Queen Táiltiu in 303 B.C. to the days of Patrick, who visited the Fair and approved of its continuance, even laying down rules for the behaviour of those who attended. Further, the 'nation-wide' character of the Fair is confirmed by his description of the 'twenty seats' reserved for the king of Tara and his suite, with similar accommodation for the kings of the Laigen and the Ulaid on his right and for those of Munster and Connacht on his left. Indeed its empire is not even bounded by the sea, for in Scotland as well as throughout Ireland everyone is entitled to claim immunity from feud and legal process while travelling to and from Tailtiu. It is true that Cúán has not a word to say about law-making or other functions appropriate to a 'national assembly'; but this defect is amply supplied by the redactor of the fantastic legend about the birth of Aed Sláne, whom we may accordingly add to Mac Neill's uncited authorities. In Genemain Aeda Sláne (LU 4210 f.) the Fair of Tailtiu is put on a par with the Feast of Tara as one of 'the two exalted assemblies (*dá comthinól airegda*)' where the men of Ireland used to make laws and ordinances which were binding on the whole people. Mac Neill's 'national assembly' would thus seem to have been constructed on a synthesis of the poem and the legend.

Strangely enough, he does not discuss a grave objection to his view which is implicit in the very poem he has laid under contribution. Mael Sechnaill II, when he 'renewed' the Fair in 1006, was still king of Tara (and Meath), but he could no longer in any sense be deemed 'king of Ireland', for six years previously he had acknowledged the overlordship of Brian Bóruma. But if Tailtiu was really the 'national assembly' of the whole country, and if 'to preside over it was a function of the king

<sup>1</sup> Ed. Gwynn, *Met. D. iv.* 146–62. Mac Neill refers to this poem in his *St. Patrick*, p. 65.

of Ireland' (Phases, p. 256), surely it should have been convened on this occasion by Brian, who in contemporary annalistic entries is styled king of Ireland. Instead, it was summoned by the head of the Southern Uí Néill, and this alone would seem to prove that Óenach Tailten, while undoubtedly the most important gathering of its kind in Ireland, had never been more than the principal fair of the Uí Néill confederation of dynasties and their vassal tribes. The presence of the other provincial kings is altogether imaginary; it is not attested in a single one of the numerous contemporary references to 'disturbance' of the Fair. A study of the relevant entries shows that in every case where the actors are named the trouble arose from internal disputes between the Uí Néill group, and no external tribe or province is ever mentioned as taking part in it.

A 'disturbance' of the Fair was no rare event, but it may be well to deal first with the only occasion on which an attempt to hold it was completely frustrated. This was in 811, when not a single horse or chariot went to Tailtiu for the opening of the Fair by Aed Oirdnide of the Northern Uí Néill, who was then king of Tara. According to AU 'it was the community of Tallaght who prevented it',<sup>1</sup> because their sanctuary had recently been violated by some member of the Uí Néill dynasties, possibly by Aed himself.<sup>2</sup> Presumably they 'fasted' against the king and threatened with supernatural penalties all who would attend the Fair. At all events their opposition was powerful enough to secure its abandonment, and shortly afterwards they received handsome compensation from Aed.

Now it is true that Tallaght lay just outside the confines of the Uí Néill dominions; one remembers that its founder Mael Ruain is apostrophized by Oengus as 'mighty luminary to the south of Mag Midi' (*grian mór des maig Midi*).<sup>3</sup> Accordingly this intervention by the monks might seem to show that the Laigin at least were represented at the Fair. But I do not think this inference is justified. First, Tallaght, though situated on Lagenian soil, was very close to the frontier of Brega, in a region where border clashes constantly occurred. Again, the new foundation, from which the reform movement associated with the Culdees spread far and wide,<sup>4</sup> was then at the very zenith of its influence. Mael Ruain was not yet twenty years dead, and the zeal of his first disciples was unabated. Hence in the neighbouring Uí Néill territories

<sup>1</sup> *do-d-rorbai*. The v.n. of this verb *derbaid* is a common word in the Laws for 'estoppal, barrier'.

<sup>2</sup> No invasion of Lagenian territory by him is chronicled during the previous twelve months. But throughout his reign there was constant warfare between the two kingdoms.

<sup>3</sup> Fel. prol. 226, misunderstood by Stokes; for the correct translation and meaning see O'Rahilly, pp. 488 f.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kenney, Sources, pp. 469 f.

the prestige of the Culdees must have been as great as among the Laigin themselves. In this connexion it is perhaps significant that Oengus, when contrasting the honours paid to the shrine of Mael Ruain with the transient glory of his secular contemporaries, should have chosen as examples the two monarchs with which Tallaght had the closest relations: Aed Oirdnide's predecessor in the kingship of Tara, Donnchad mac Domnaill (†797), and the late king of Leinster, Bran mac Muredaig (†795).<sup>1</sup> In the present case, therefore, the ban on attending the Fair was doubtless addressed to the subjects of the Southern Uí Néill dynasties. Had it been aimed at a wider audience, for example at the provincial kings and their numerous escorts, an effective embargo would have surely been impossible at two days' notice; for we are told that the 'hindering' (*derbaid*) took place on the Saturday before the opening day, which, as I have already suggested (p. 115 *supra*), was probably the first Monday of August.

But the most definite proof of the regional character of Óenach Tailten consists in the record of the 'disturbances' which occasionally marred its celebration. Between 717 and 927 eight such incidents are chronicled; in three cases the names of the trouble-makers are not given, but the remaining five are more than sufficient for our purpose.

1. In 717 the Fair was successfully 'disturbed' by Fógartach king of Brega who, after a chequered career, had returned from banishment in Britain and was now challenging his old enemy the reigning king of Tara, Fergal mac Maíle Dúin of the Northern Uí Néill (†722), whom he eventually succeeded.

2. Just sixty years later, in 777, a disturbance by the Ciannacht, a vassal tribe of Brega,<sup>2</sup> was quelled by Donnchad mac Domnaill (770–97), the second of the Mide branch of the Southern Uí Néill to ascend the throne of Tara. Throughout his reign he waged constant war against the rival Brega dynasty (cf. AU 776, 777, 785; O'Rahilly, p. 488). Indeed the 'prophecy' concerning him in Baile in Scáil § 46 (ZCP xii. 233) stresses the havoc inflicted by him on his neighbours: *Troethbaid Brega borrcathaib* 'he shall crush B. with fierce battalions'. Obviously, then, we have here an abortive revolt against Donnchad, perhaps an attempt on his life, organized by the king of the Ciannacht at the instigation of his overlord the king of Brega.

3. In 791 the same Donnchad crushed a much more serious disturbance by Aed Ingor. The latter receives a separate entry (as Aed Ningor!) in the index to AU, but he is identical with the Northern prince who in 797 succeeded Donnchad in the kingship of Tara and was afterwards known as Aed Oirdnide. In Baile in Scáil § 47 he figures under his

<sup>1</sup> Fel. prol. 217 ff.; see Thurneysen, ZCP vi. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. O'Rahilly, pp. 95, 393; Walsh in Mac Neill Essays, p. 517.

earlier sobriquet, though why he was called Aed the Undutiful we are nowhere told. It is just possible that he received the epithet as a result of this revolt against the titular head of the dynastic kindred. Or had he previously rebelled against his own father Niall Frassach? The source of the name by which he is usually known is easier to trace.<sup>1</sup> *Oirdnide* is the participle of *oirdnid* (or *oirdnithir*), a loanword from Lat. *ordinare*. In AU the epithet is first used of this king in 804; hitherto he is called simply Aed mac Néill. But in that year there took place in Dún Cuair (Rathcore, Co. Meath?) what AU calls ‘congressio senatorum (= synodorum?) nepotum Neill, cui dux erat Condmac abbas Aird Macha’—obviously a peace conference between the chief dynasts of the Northern and Southern Uí Néill. I suggest that in the course of this gathering Aed was solemnly ‘hallowed’ by the successor of Patrick, the first king of Tara to be inaugurated with religious rites; the statement immediately following, that he freed all clerics from the duty of taking part in royal hostings, lends further support to this conjecture. His attempted revolt against Donnchad in 791 developed into a running fight which ranged from the fair ground to Carn mac Cairthin in the north and resulted in the deaths of several prominent persons listed in AU. This collision at Tailtiu was reckoned among the more important events of Donnchad’s reign, for the ‘prophecy’ in Baile in Scáil, § 46 (ZCP xii. 233) refers to it specifically:

*Di lár Tailten, ruanaid glē, ruínfid riam hi fochlae*

‘He shall gain a victory, the champion of battle (?),<sup>2</sup> from the middle of Tailtiu to the north.’ And a later scholiast has appended the glosses .i. *cath Cairnd maicc Cairthind* and .i. *for Aed n-Ingor*.<sup>3</sup>

4. In 827 the disturbers were the Gailenga, another vassal tribe of Brega from whom the modern barony of Morgallion in Co. Meath takes its name.<sup>4</sup> For reasons which will appear presently a brief sketch of the background to this trouble is desirable. The king of Tara at the time was Conchobar, son of the Donnchad who figures in (2) and (3), and thus a member of the Mide line (Clann Cholmáin). The tribes of the sister over-kingdom of Brega, whose ruling house had been extruded from the succession to the Tara monarchy by Conchobar’s grandfather Domnall Mide (743–63), remained permanently disaffected towards the neighbouring dynasty. Accordingly, when in 822 the king of the Northern Uí Néill, Murchad mac Máile Dúin of Ailech, invaded the Midlands, he was joined by most of the Bregian tribes under their over-king Diarmait mac Néill who hastened to acknowledge his suzerainty.

<sup>1</sup> The ‘explanation’ given in Coir Anmann 123 (IT iii. 340) is too ludicrous to merit discussion.

<sup>2</sup> Taking *glē* as = older *glee*, gen. of *gléo*. But it may be the adj. *glē* ‘clear, luminous.’

<sup>3</sup> This gloss obviously belongs here, though Thurneysen has attached it to the text on the preceding line.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Walsh in Mac Neill Essays, pp. 519 f.

Thereupon Conchobar marched into Brega and compelled the tribes to submit at the point of the sword. It was, I believe, this forced peace that was now broken by the 'disturbance' of the Fair. Mac Neill, however, gives a totally different interpretation of the incident.<sup>1</sup> Conchobar, he suggests, was too preoccupied with attacks by the Norsemen and by Feidlimid king of Munster to convene Óenach Tailten; 'the Gailings, whose territory lay close by, were loth to be deprived of the customary celebration, and attempted to hold the Assembly on their own account, but were forcibly prevented by the high-king'. The text of the entry does not contain a single word which could be used in favour of this curious construction; on the contrary, it has the stereotyped formula found in all the other cases: *Coscraadh oinaig Tailten for Gailengaib la Conchobar mac nDonnchada*, and there is no reason to think it means anything more than that Conchobar crushed a riot started by the Gailenga, just as in (2) his father had crushed a similar riot by another Bregian tribe. Twenty years later (cf. AU 847) the Gailenga were to make further trouble for his much more famous son Mael Sechnaill I (846–62), the first king of Tara who ever received hostages from Munster.

5. Finally we come to what Cúán Ó Lothcháin calls 'the black Fair of Donnchad' (*duboenach nDonnchada*, Met. D. iv. 158, l. 176) in 927, which marks for all practical purposes the end of this ancient institution, for the few spasmodic attempts to revive it in the eleventh and twelfth centuries lacked any real continuity. Donnchad, who was king of Tara from 919 to 944, belonged to the Southern Uí Néill, and at this Fair he was confronted by his far more celebrated Northern rival, Muircertach king of Ailech, well known to popular history as Muircertach of the Leathern Cloaks. In a future article I propose to demonstrate that the romantic fable of this prince's 'Circuit of Ireland', now a prominent 'fact' in all our textbooks, has no historical basis and arises from a forged poem which has been fathered on a man who was dead at least a century before its composition. But at the moment we are concerned only with his demonstration against the king of Tara at Óenach Tailten: this did not lead to bloodshed, for according to AU 'Dominus separavit eos sine ulla occisione'. On the other hand, the chronicler whose work provides the basic material for the Clonmacnoise group of annals dismisses the affair tartly as 'membrum iniquum inobediens capiti iniquo',<sup>2</sup> from which we may infer that neither of the parties to the quarrel was in the good graces of the monastery.

Of the five cases of 'disturbance' we have examined, three arose from dynastic rivalries between the Northern and Southern Uí Néill and two

<sup>1</sup> Phases, p. 257, followed by Green, p. 337.

<sup>2</sup> CS, p. 196, which reads *captiuo t captiui*, but cf. A. Clon., p. 148 which has *capiti*.

from the revolt of disaffected Bregian tribes against the Mide dynasty. All may therefore be attributed to internal strife within the Uí Néill dominions. Now if the Fair was really a 'national assembly' attended by all the provincial kings, how explain the exclusively regional character of the recorded disturbances? Can it be seriously maintained that if the kings of Munster or Leinster or Connacht, many of them bitter enemies of the Uí Néill, took part in the 'assembly' every year, they would always have been content, not merely to refrain from making a disturbance themselves, but to remain passive spectators of the turmoil created by a rival kinsman or a rebellious vassal of the presiding king? Yet no person or tribe outside the Uí Néill dominions is ever mentioned in connexion with the riots. The reason, I suggest, is that such 'outsiders' never attended the Fair.

There is, however, one incident in which modern historians have seen an attempt by a provincial king, not so much to 'disturb' the Fair as to hold it himself. Under 733 the following entry appears in AU: *Coscraith Cathail do Domnall a Tailtae 7 coscraid Follomuin do Chatal a Tlachtgu*. According to Mac Neill and others,<sup>1</sup> the first item means that Cathal mac Finguine (721–42), the famous king of Munster (whose relations with the Uí Néill I hope to consider at length in a future article), sought to preside at Óenach Tailten, but was prevented from doing so by the king of Meath. It should be noted first of all that even if this interpretation were correct, it would not imply that the Fair was normally attended by the provincial kings, for Cathal—in Dr. Ryan's words—'led an army to Tailtiu' and thus came as a rival potentate, not as a subordinate. And even if it could be proved that he actually tried to hold Óenach Tailten, I would regard this, not as a bid for a non-existent 'high-kingship', but simply as an attempt by one who during his reign was the most powerful king *in* Ireland (a very different thing from being 'king of Ireland') to assert his supremacy over the king of Tara by presiding at the principal Fair of the Uí Néill. But the assumption that Cathal attempted anything of the kind is contradicted by both the evidence and the context. His successful opponent Domnall Mide did not become king of Tara until ten years later, and hence was himself unqualified to hold the Fair at the time. Again, we have seen (under (3) above) that the annalists have a regular formula for conflicts at the Fair, and had there been such a conflict on the present occasion we might have expected the annal to read *Coscraid Óenaig Tailten la Domnall for Cathal*. The natural translation of the actual entry is surely 'Cathal was routed by Domnall in [an engagement at] Tailtiu'. Lastly and most important, what of the second item of the annal, which all three scholars pass over in silence? Does it not show that Cathal, after his defeat at

<sup>1</sup> Phases, p. 237; followed by Ryan, p. 84, Green, p. 337 (where 833 is a misprint for 733).

Tailtiu, was victorious over Folloman (†766), a junior member of the Mide dynasty, in an encounter at the neighbouring Tlachtga? To me it seems quite obvious that the two incidents, which the chronicler has bracketed together, represent simply the veering fortunes of battle during one of Cathal's campaigns in the Midlands. To argue that the first had a far-reaching political significance which is denied to the second is to distort the evidence.

Besides the annals, certain other more or less contemporary sources confirm the existence of Óenach Tailten from the sixth century onwards. It is true that the legend of Patrick's visit to the Fair must be dismissed, for it has arisen through the misinterpretation of a passage in Tírechán's Memoir. Here is a translation of the relevant sentence: 'On Monday he came to Tailtiu, where the royal fair is [now] held, to Coirpre mac Néill, who sought to slay him.'<sup>1</sup> Thus whether the story of Patrick's visit to Tailtiu be fact or fiction, he certainly did not attend the Fair, and the only evidence afforded by this passage is that Óenach Tailten was regularly held in Tírechán's day towards the close of the seventh century.

That it was in existence at least a century earlier is suggested by an incident reported in Adamnán's *Vita Columbae* (iii. 3). The saint was excommunicated 'by a certain synod (*a quodam synodo*)' for certain pardonable and even justifiable actions' (*pro quibusdam venialibus et tam excusabilibus causis*); immediately afterwards, when he entered the synod to confront his accusers, only Brendan of Birr 'rose up' to salute him and eventually induced his reluctant colleagues to rescind the ban. Adamnán concludes his account of the affair: 'Hoc famen factum est *hi Teilte*' (where the preposition is also Irish). By this time, though the Tara monarchy was not yet fully christianized (cf. p. 136 *infra*), it is quite possible that the Fair of Tailtiu was already attended by churchmen from the surrounding Uí Néill territories. If so, the presence of Brendan would be in order, for his monastery was one of the last outposts of Leth Cuinn.<sup>2</sup> Hence the 'synod'—which, needless to say, has grown in later legend into a vast gathering of the saints of Ireland—may well have been a meeting of ecclesiastical and secular dignitaries from the kingdoms of the Southern Uí Néill held during the Fair. This may afford a clue to the nature of those 'pardonable and even justifiable actions' to which Adamnán refers with studied vagueness. At the battle of Cúl Dremne in 561 the king of Tara—Diarmait mac Cerbaill—had been defeated by a coalition of all the kings of the Northern Uí Néill, including Ainmire mac Sétnai and Ninnid mac Duach of the Cenél Conaill.

<sup>1</sup> 'Prima feria uenit ad Taltenam, ubi fit agon regale, ad coirpriticum filium neill qui uoluit eum occidere.' L. Ardm. f. 10<sup>r</sup>2. In this and the following sentence all the verbs except *fit* are perfect. Dr. Knott refers me to the use of *fit* as the equivalent of Ir. *biid* 'there exists, is wont to be' in Cormac's glossary (e.g. 474, etc.).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Birra ar bruach Muman*, quoted Walsh, *Place names of Westmeath*, p. 345.

Of these Ainmire (afterwards king of Tara 566–9) was Colum Cille's first cousin and Ninnid was his uncle. While the accounts of his various grievances against Diarmait can be dismissed as later fables, we have no reason to doubt that the saint had been an active partisan of his near kinsmen and their cause and that the king of Tara took his revenge by inducing some of the churchmen within the Southern Uí Néill dominions to excommunicate (or censure) the Northern cleric. What influence, if any, the affair at Tailtiu had upon Colum Cille's decision to leave Ireland it is difficult to say; though we are quite safe in discounting the legend that his exile was imposed as a penance for the bloodshed he had caused, it may well be that he had become too controversial a figure to continue his ministry within the Uí Néill dominions.

Colum Cille's contemporary, Ciarán of Clonmacnoise, is also linked with the Fair by the fantastic legend of Ambacuc,<sup>1</sup> who, having sworn a false oath 'under the hand' of the saint, was forthwith miraculously decapitated, yet survived for several years and even begot offspring. This fable, which is not found in any of the extant lives of Ciarán, has made its way into the Clonmacnoise group of annals ('Tig.', RC xvii. 138, CS 148) and was copied from them by the Four Masters, *s.a.* 538. It can hardly be earlier than the end of the ninth century, by which time Clonmacnoise had transferred its allegiance from the kings of Connacht, its old patrons, to the rising star of the Tara dynasty under Mael Sechnaill I and his successors.<sup>2</sup> It was doubtless in order to provide a pseudo-historical basis for the new relationship that this and other legends associating Ciarán with the Uí Néill and their principal Fair were invented. Similarly the late story<sup>3</sup> of Guaire Aidnech's visit to the Fair after the battle of Carn Conaill (649) on the invitation of his conqueror Diarmait, son of Aed Sláne, was invented when the fiction of the 'high-kingship' had been firmly established in the schools.

With these facts to guide us, we can, I suggest, separate the historical from the legendary Óenach Tailten. Mac Neill's 'national assembly' we are surely entitled to dismiss as a twentieth-century gloss on an eleventh-century fairy-tale. Tailtiu was an old burial place and the site of an old *óenach*. How far this tradition goes back is not easy to determine. It probably dates from pre-Goidelic times, almost certainly so if Thurneysen's analysis of the place-name is correct. 'Queen' Tailtiu, the fostermother of Lug, he regards (doubtless rightly) as a figment of poetic imagination; the word itself (older *Teiltiu*) he would explain as a Goidelic

<sup>1</sup> Cf. ÉRIU vi. 159 f., Met. D. iv. 156, l. 130, SG i. 416, etc.

<sup>2</sup> See Kathleen M. Hughes in *Studies in the Early British Church* (ed. Chadwick, Cambridge, 1958) pp. 253 ff. The monastery was separated from the territory of the Southern Uí Néill only by the width of the river Shannon.

<sup>3</sup> ZCP iii. 216 f.

borrowing of the Brythonic adjective represented by *W. telediw* 'well-formed, beautiful',<sup>1</sup> from which he infers, somewhat tentatively, the presence of a colony from Britain or at least of British immigrants. In the interval O'Rahilly has made us quite familiar with the idea of P-Celtic dialects in Ireland before the Goidelic invasion, and for all we know Taitiu may have figured among the 'Ivernic loanwords in Irish' which he proposed to study 'in a series of articles intended for publication elsewhere' (*op. cit.* p. 496).

From several statements in the Laws (e.g. Críth Gablach 500 f., etc.) it is clear that the king of every tribe was bound to convene an *óenach* at regular intervals. The site of the fair was normally an ancient burial ground; indeed the tradition reflected in many poems and sagas that the *óenach* originated in the funeral games held for kings and heroes may have a kernel of truth. Doubtless many of the modern 'fairs' throughout Ireland are, or were formerly, held on the site of an old tribal *óenach*. At such gatherings, besides the exchange of goods and the holding of games, horse-racing, and various athletic competitions, the 'public business' of the *túath*, including important lawsuits between different kindreds and the issue of special ordinances, was transacted.<sup>2</sup> It is uncertain whether the arrangement of 'matches' and 'alliances', which Keating describes as the salient feature of Óenach Tailten (p. 116 *supra*), formed part of the official programme; but at least it may be said that there were few more favourable occasions for transactions of this kind than a tribal, still more a provincial, fair. Indeed we are told in Cormac's Glossary (385) that one hillock at Óenach Tailten was called *tulach na coibche*. Now in the legal language *coibche* is most commonly used in the special sense of 'bride-price'; but its primary meaning is 'bargain, covenant',<sup>3</sup> and Cormac here glosses it by *cendach*, which suggests that he took it to include much more than marriage contracts. On the other hand the mass of popular traditions about 'Teltown marriages' collected by O'Donovan, Wilde, and Westropp<sup>4</sup> may reflect ancient practice at Óenach Tailten, though some features of these 'hand-fasting' unions suggest a different background. Thus the date on which they were contracted was Beltaine (1 May), not Lughnasad (1 August), and this is also the day from which yearly marriages are reckoned in the Laws.<sup>5</sup> On the whole it would seem that, while every *óenach* afforded obvious

<sup>1</sup> ZCP xx. 369. But I am not sure whether this equation can be reconciled with Sir Ifor Williams's explanation of *telediw* as < *taladwy* v. nec. of *talu* 'pay' (Pedair Keinc y Mabinogi, p. 148).

<sup>2</sup> Hence the translation of *óenach* by 'fair', its meaning in modern Irish, is inadequate and misleading, but to seek to change it now would probably deepen confusion.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Studies in E. Ir. Law, p. 114, Ériu xvii. 66, § 5, and note p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> Summarized by Westropp in Folklore xxxi (1920), 123 ff.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Studies in E. Ir. Law, p. 56, ZCP xv. 358 f. According to Westropp a fair was held at Iristown, the townland adjoining Taitiu (Teltown), on 1 May as late as 1678.

opportunities for arranging marriages, Keating's picture of Óenach Tailten as primarily serving this purpose is no more accurate than his statement that it was an 'all-Ireland' gathering.

The importance of a fair was proportionate to that of the king who presided over it. Hence a fair convened by an over-king, to whom the rulers of several *tuatha* owed allegiance, might be attended by tribesmen from these petty kingdoms also. Such, for example, was Óenach Raigne for the tribes of Ossory (cf. FM 859). Most important of all was the provincial fair, held in the neighbourhood of the chief stronghold and attended by all the tribes of the province; it lasted for several days, and there was an elaborate programme of public business and entertainments. At one time the Laigin held their fair at Carman, the precise location of which has been a matter of dispute among scholars; to me Orpen seems to be right in suggesting (JRSAI 1906, 11 ff.) that it was in Co. Kildare, probably on the Curragh within striking distance of the old 'capital' Ailenn. An eleventh-century poem (Met. D. iii. 2-24) gives a dramatic and highly coloured description of the pomp and circumstance attending its celebration, all of which has been taken as sober historical fact by Mac Neill and his followers; indeed in their works<sup>1</sup> it is prominently featured as a first-hand account of the typical *óenach*, though the older prose Dindsenchas of Carman (RC xv. 311 ff.) has nothing whatever to say about this elaborate programme. This is rather as if one were to cite the romantic description of life in the castle of Enniskillen by Tadhg Dall Ó hUiginn (ITS xxii. 73 f.)—with its vivid picture of warrior-bands sallying forth at dawn and returning at dusk laden with booty—as reliable evidence about the habits of the singularly unwarlike Maguires of Fermanagh during the sixteenth century (cf. *ibid.* xxiii. 242).

Strangely enough, Mac Neill makes no comment on the awkward coincidence of dates between Tailtiu and Carman. If the poet is to be believed, the fair of the Laigin was celebrated every three years on the festival of Lugnasad and lasted a week; in other words it had the same date and duration as the Fair of Tailtiu except that this was held annually. It follows that the king of the Laigin and his sub-kings would have been absent every third year from the 'national assembly' and their places on the right hand of the 'high-king' would have remained vacant. Such discrepancies cannot, of course, be expected to curb the imagination of poets like Cúán Ó Lothcháin, but they surely call for some notice by serious historians, even by those who are apparently content to allow the poets to compose history as well as verses.

According to one of the ninth-century Triads (35) the three principal fairs of Ireland were *áenach Tailten*, *áenach Cruachan*, *áenach Colmáin*

<sup>1</sup> Mac Neill, *Early Ir. Laws*, pp. 102-9; Green, pp. 279 f.; Ryan, pp. 170 f.

*Ela*.<sup>1</sup> But just before the opening of the historical period Óenach n-Emna (or O. Macha), the great fair of the Ulaid, may well have been the most important assembly of its kind.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the fifth century, however, the ancient province had been dismembered, and most of it was now ruled directly or indirectly by kings of the House of Níall. The expansion of the Midland Goidels over so much Northern territory not merely upset the traditional balance of power; it also meant that one dynastic kindred held sway over virtually two provinces. The rulers of the Northern Uí Néill continued to regard Taitiu, in the heart of their ancestral homeland, as the site of their principal fair. For this reason alone Óenach Tailten was more than the ordinary provincial fair, transcending in extent and importance Óenach Cruachan for Connacht, Óenach Carmain (and later Óenach Colmáin) for the Laigin, and Óenach Téite (Nenagh) for Munster. It was in fact the most important fair *in* Ireland because it was held under the aegis of the king of Tara who, as titular head of all the Uí Néill kingdoms and their dependent tribes, was normally the most powerful monarch in Ireland. But at no time during the centuries of its regular celebration was it ever an assembly of the whole country any more than the king of Tara was 'sovereign' of the whole country. Even in the triad cited above it appears simply as *primus inter pares*.

It is, I think, highly significant that the eclipse of Óenach Tailten should have coincided with the period during which the pseudo-historians were busily engaged in creating the myth of the 'high-kingship'. Unhampered by contemporary realities, poets and storytellers might safely 'remould it nearer to the heart's desire'. The failure to hold the Fair during most of the tenth and almost the whole of the eleventh century thus helped to clear the way for the legendary Óenach Tailten which now emerges as one of the constitutional organs of the 'high-kingship', a nation-wide gathering of the 'men of Ireland'. And it was doubtless the influence of the legend that led to an artificial revival of the Fair on two occasions during the twelfth century. Turloch O'Connor, in his bid to establish a real central monarchy, convened Óenach Tailten in 1120 ('Tig.' RC xviii. 41, CS 322), and there can be little doubt that in so doing he believed himself to be acting like the 'high-king' of legend. His son Rury also held it on a grand scale in 1168 ('Tig.' RC xviii. 275) shortly after the first Norman adventurers had landed with Dermot McMurrough. By a strange irony this last Fair of Taitiu, presided over by a prince who had no ancestral right to hold it, came nearer to Mac Neill's idea of a 'national assembly' (though the Four Masters

<sup>1</sup> Hogan (Onomast., p. 558) thinks this is the same as Ó. Carmain. But it was presumably held near Lynally, south-west of Tullamore, and may originally have been confined to the Laigin des Gabair. Cf. BNnÉ i. 178.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *óenaige im óenach Emma* Met. D. iii. 20, l. 246. For reff. in the Ulidian sagas see IT i. 81, 255; SC<sup>2</sup> 456, etc.

expressly limit it to Leth Cuinn) than any of the Fairs summoned by the Uí Néill throughout their long history.

In Óenach Tailten we have been dealing with a genuine historical institution whose extent and significance were grossly exaggerated in later legend. In the Feast of Tara, on the other hand, we are confronted with a primitive ritual which, some centuries after its disappearance, was resurrected by the pseudo-historians in a totally different guise. Indeed, the transformation of this archaic ceremony into a respectable institution of the 'central monarchy' is perhaps the most striking metamorphosis effected by the professional myth-makers.

Let us begin with the accounts of the Feast found in later sources, since these are today in unchallenged control of our textbooks. In Keating's eyes it was clearly much more important than the Fair of Tailtiu. He describes it as 'a general meeting of kings like a Parliament' (*rioghdháil choitcheann amhail pharlaimint* ii. 132)—words which would seem to have set the tone for certain modern Irish historians. It was held every three years at Samain and lasted a week. All the provincial kings attended, and each of them was lodged in separate quarters which Keating is able to name and locate in considerable detail (iii. 36 f., cf. also ii. 250 f.). The functions of this 'Parliament' were numerous and varied: *inter alia* they included the revision of the *Senchas Már* (iii. 32) and the assessment of taxation. The 'debates' on such matters were held in the *Tech Midchuarta*, where a rigid order of precedence obtained, the 'king of Ireland' sitting on his throne in the centre of the hall, with the king of Munster on his right, the king of Connacht in front of him, and so on.

So far as I can judge, Keating's account is not drawn from a single (and now vanished) source: it is rather an eclectic arrangement of the conflicting versions he found in various 'authorities'. Thus he could have taken the details concerning the lodgement of the provincial kings and the order of precedence in the *Tech Midchuarta* from the *Battle of Moira* (*ÉRIU* v. 233), and the law-making functions of the *Feis* from *Genemain Aeda Sláne* (*LU* 4209) and other late legends. But where did he get the three-year period? All his 'authorities' agree that the Feast was held at Samain, though they differ among themselves about its duration, one (*SG* i. 319) giving it as four weeks, another (*A. Sen.* in *IT* iv. 5367) as six. But none of them describes it as a triennial institution. The great majority of the later sagas and legends—*Genemain Aeda Sláne*, *Aided Diarmata*, *Cath Crinna*, the *Agallamh*, etc.—state that the Feast was celebrated every year. On the other hand, in *Tochmarc Étaíne II* (*ÉRIU* xii. 162) the period is five years.<sup>1</sup> And in *IT* iii.

<sup>1</sup> *sic* *LU* and *YBL* col. 876. But in *YBL* col. 990 .u. has been 'corrected' to .iii. This is hardly the source of Keating's figure, but it may indicate that the latest generation of myth-makers had settled on a three-year period.

198, § 55, as well as in the late addendum to the *Tabus* (p. 29, § 6, cf. p. 113 *supra*), it is seven years. Ironically enough, nearly all of these variations can be found in legends about one famous holder of the Feast, Cormac ua Cuinn, an apparently mythological figure<sup>1</sup> who has been skilfully transformed by the myth-makers into the 'Great King' *par excellence* of Irish pseudo-history. The one certain fact that emerges from this welter of confusion is that at the time such stories were invented the Feast of Tara had been so long obsolete that nothing except its name survived. Hence these sources must all be very late, for we shall see presently that certain other sagas preserve a less inaccurate memory of the genuine Feast.

Beyond all doubt one of the most powerful factors in the evolution of the legendary Feast of Tara was supplied by certain passages in the Patrician documents. It is unnecessary for our purpose to decide whether Patrick's visit to Tara really took place or whether the whole story was invented at a later period when the power of Emain and its rulers had long been but a memory and the king of Tara was the most powerful of contemporary Irish monarchs. According to Muirchú's account the kindling of the Paschal fire on the hill of Slane by Patrick and his followers on the eve of Easter coincided with an important pagan solemnity:

Contigit uero in illo anno [ut aliam]<sup>2</sup> idolatriae solempnitatem quam gentiles incantationibus multis et magicis inuentionibus nonnullis aliis idolatriae superstitionibus, congregatis etiam regibus satrapis ducibus principibus et optimatibus populi, insuper et magis incantatoribus auruspibus et omnis artis omnisque doni<sup>3</sup> inuentoribus doctoribusue uocatis ad Loigaireum uelut quondam ad Nabcodonosor regem, hi Temoria, istorum Babylone, exercere consuerant, eadem nocte qua sanctus Patricius pasca illi illam<sup>4</sup> adorarent exercerentque festiuitatem gentilem (L. Ardm. f. 3<sup>vi</sup> f.).

It is to be noted that Muirchú nowhere identifies this celebration with the Feast of Tara, though later he describes the king and his company seated at a banquet *on the following day*, i.e. Easter Sunday. But two centuries later the compiler of the *Vita Tripartita* had no doubts on the matter:

Now as it happened, this was the time at which the principal solemnity of the pagans, viz. the Feast of Tara, used to be celebrated. The kings and princes and nobles were wont to come to Tara to Loegaire mac Néill at Tara to keep this holy day (VT<sup>2</sup> 435 f.).

<sup>1</sup> See O'Rahilly, pp. 283 f.

<sup>2</sup> Supplied from MS. B (Brussels Bibl. roy. 64; see Hogan, *Documenta de S. Patricio* i. 33). The omission of these words in L. Ardm. makes the sentence impossible to construe, though neither Todd nor Stokes seems to have been troubled by this. I owe the emendation to the kindness of Dr. Bieler.

<sup>3</sup> Obviously influenced by Ir. *fer (des) dána*; not, as Hogan suggests, an error for *doli*.

<sup>4</sup> *aliam B.*

On one important point the above account differs from all the legendary sources hitherto cited. These are unanimous in putting the date of the Feast at or about Samain, whereas here it is held at Easter-tide. How explain this discrepancy? The solution, I think, turns on the nature of one ceremony which is described in detail by Muirchú:

Erat quoque mos apud illos, per edictum omnibus intimatus, ut quicumque in cunctis regionibus, siue procul siue iuxta, in illa nocte incendisset ignem antequam in domu regia, id est in palatio Temoriae, succenderetur, periret anima eius de populo suo (L. Ardm. f. 3<sup>v</sup>2).

This must surely be an echo of the fire ritual associated with the festival of Beltaine (Mayday). From Cormac (122) and O'Mulconry (149) we learn that on that day the druids were accustomed to light two fires in honour of Bel and to chant 'numerous spells' over them; cattle were then driven between the two fires as a protection against plagues during the following year. Keating, it will be remembered, connects these ceremonies with the 'assembly' of Uisnech (ii. 146, cf. p. 114 *supra*), at which the 'men of Ireland' gathered in order to worship their chief god. Almost in the same breath, however, he tells us that the two druidic fires were lit in every tribe (*tuath*) throughout the country, and neither Cormac nor O'Mulconry mentions Uisnech in connexion with this ritual, as we might expect them to do had it been a single celebration for the whole of Ireland. One could, if necessary, reconcile these contradictions by assuming that the king of Tara held the local Mayday ceremonies of his kingdom at Uisnech, and that Muirchú mistakenly or deliberately transferred them to Tara, but we shall see presently that any such attempt to save the story would be wasted labour. Still less are we entitled to assume that the ancient ritual had lapsed with the abandonment of paganism, leaving Muirchú and his contemporaries uncertain about the precise locality, for echoes of it linger even today in the well-known metaphor still used by native speakers: *idir dhá theine lá Bealtaine*.

Further confusion is created by the account of the general prohibition on the kindling of fire until the sacred flame was alight. Here the context implies that all fires had to be extinguished beforehand, as indeed the compiler of the *Vita Tripartita* expressly states: 'Now the fire on every hearth in Ireland had been quenched on that night' (VT<sup>2</sup> 440 f.). But this introduces a fresh site in competition with Tara and Uisnech. According to Keating (ii. 246), the druids of Ireland used to assemble on the hill of Tlachtga on the night of Samain, when the fire of Tlachtga was solemnly kindled; meanwhile every householder in the country was bound to extinguish his own domestic fire, which was later relit from the sacred flame; for this he paid a fee of one *screpal* to the king of Munster in accordance with the ludicrous fable that Tlachtga had originally belonged to that province. Here, too, the time of the year will

not suit Muirchú's story. Nor can I find any tradition of fire-worship associated with Tlachtga outside the pages of Keating. On the other hand, I have already pointed out that such a tradition seems to be attached to Uisnech (p. 114 *supra*). In the Dindsenchas poem (ii. 42) the fire lit by Mide spreads 'over the four quarters of Ireland'; hence every 'principal hearth' (independent household) owes a fixed rent to the kings of Mide. The details are doubtless as fantastic in one case as in the other, but of the two places Uisnech seems the more likely to have been the centre of an ancient fire-cult.

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the whole story has been built round the victory of the paschal fire over its pagan congener.<sup>1</sup> To provide the necessary framework for this, Patrick's visit had to take place at Eastertide and had to coincide with some druidic fire ritual. Hence the calendar had to be distorted, for the nearest date on which the druids celebrated such a ritual was Beltaine, and though in certain years the Christian and the pagan festivals might come fairly close together, they could never fall on the same day. Nor is there the slightest evidence that any fire cult was ever practised in Tara itself, for there is no echo of a cult of this kind in the copious legendary material about the ancient capital of the Uí Néill. On the other hand, later sources associate the practice of a fire ritual with two places in the vicinity, Uisnech and Tlachtga, though the latter is supposed to have held its celebrations on the festival of Samain. It would seem, then, that the framer of the legend has amalgamated two or more separate manifestations of fire worship and arbitrarily transferred them to Tara for the greater glory of the saint. Even if Patrick's visit to Loegaire is historical (which I am inclined to doubt), the setting provided by Muirchú is certainly false.

Discarding the fire story as a later invention, may we nevertheless accept the statement in VT that the 'pagan solemnity' which had assembled so many notables in the royal palace was in fact the Feast of Tara? If so, we could fix the precise date of Patrick's visit at 454, the year in which Loegaire held the Feast (p. 132 *infra*). This cannot be ruled out as absolutely impossible, though it would involve a drastic reconstruction of Patrician chronology on lines which no scholar, so far as I am aware, has hitherto suggested. But it seems to me to be extremely improbable for several reasons. First, the language used by Muirchú (and still more by the compiler of VT) appears to imply a regularly recurring, perhaps an annual, celebration, whereas we shall see presently that the Feast was held only once in each reign. Again, in view of the importance of this event, which marked the apogee of Loegaire's career, one would expect Muirchú to mention it by name

<sup>1</sup> Zimmer's view (Celt. Church, p. 81) that the legend originated in the Easter controversy which was raging in Muirchú's day is quite possible. See Bury, *Life of S. Patrick*, p. 262; Kenney, p. 333, n. 137.

instead of leaving it to be supplied two centuries later by the compiler of VT. Finally, the account of Patrick's visit to Tara which has been incorporated in a law-tract of the eighth (?) century, and which may represent an independent tradition,<sup>1</sup> has not a word to say about the Paschal fire or the Feast of Tara. We are therefore entitled to ask: is Muirchú's description of the 'pagan solemnity' based rather upon a Biblical parallel, just as the subsequent contest between Patrick and the druids is an echo of the story of Moses?<sup>2</sup> The reference to Nebuchadnezzar does not take us very far,<sup>3</sup> though the meeting convoked by him of *harioli et magi et malefici et Chaldei* (Dan. ii. 2) in the royal palace might have provided the basis of the incident; on the other hand, if we could assume that Muirchú confused him with his son Belshazzar, then the prototype of the Tara gathering would be quite obvious. As for the identification of the ceremony with the Feast of Tara in VT, this merely shows that the legendary Feast had already taken its place in pseudo-history by the end of the ninth century.

Bury, who throughout his *Life of St. Patrick* treats the legendary material with a tenderness which contrasts strangely with his uncompromisingly secular approach, gives far too much credence to the Tara episode. True, he points out the more obvious discrepancies in the legend, but he accepts the main story of Patrick's dealings with Loegaire as authentic and actually suggests that he might have been invited to the Feast of Tara where 'the common affairs of the realm were being discussed' (p. 113). On the other hand Mac Neill contents himself with expressing the opinion that 'the tradition of a special visit to the High-King is likely to be authentic' (St. Patrick, p. 100) and makes no reference to the Feast of Tara.

Indeed Mac Neill has remarkably little to say about this institution. In the whole of his published works I have discovered only one guarded reference to the Feast of Tara. In the book from which I have just quoted, having written (less confidently than usual) of the 'supremacy' of the 'high-king' in the fifth century, he continues: 'Formal recognition was accorded to him by the presence of the other kings and magnates and their following at a great social function called the Feis of Tara' (p. 57). A 'social function' then, not a 'national assembly' like Óenach Tailten. The distinction is interesting, since it marks the only significant difference of opinion on these matters between Mac Neill and his

<sup>1</sup> AL iii. 26 ff. Cf. Green, *op. cit.* pp. 107 f. (note contributed by Mac Neill); Mac Neill, St. Patrick, pp. 101 f. In a future article on the kingship of Tara I hope to examine this account and to show that it contains a number of interpolations which can be detected by the absence of glossing.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Todd, St. Patrick, p. 419; Bury, p. 303. But Bieler (*Life and Legend of St. Patrick*, p. 115) thinks it is based rather on the apocryphal 'Actus Petri cum Simone'.

<sup>3</sup> But see Todd, p. 421, who points out that the druids' warning about the Paschal fire is 'a manifest imitation of Daniel's explanation of Nebuchadnezzar's image'.

pupil and successor Dr. Ryan. To this scholar the Feast of Tara is far more important: indeed, it takes over the functions assigned by Mac Neill to the Fair of Tailtiu (cf. p. 115 *supra*). 'It was also a privilege, jealously guarded, of the supreme monarch to convene and preside over the Feis of Tara, held in Samain (November), normally at intervals of a few years' (*op. cit.* p. 170). And elsewhere (p. 130) Dr. Ryan writes of 'the great national assembly known as the Feis of Tara', attended by the provincial kings and other dignitaries, at which 'law and polity were discussed'. Apart from the 'intervals of a few years'—doubtless an attempt to remain neutral between the partisans of an annual, triennial, quinquennial, and septennial Feast—this account is based on Keating. But would it not be well first to examine the few contemporary records of the Feast in genuine historical documents and see how far (if at all) these can be reconciled with the later romantic tales in which Keating placed such childlike trust?

The 'Ulster Chronicle', which forms the basis of all our early annals,<sup>1</sup> mentions the celebration of the Feast of Tara by three kings only: Loegaire, his successor Ailill Molt, and Diarmait mac Cerbaill (544–65). For Loegaire the date given in AU is 454, in AI 456. The former, recording the king's death in 461, states that he reigned seven years, seven months, and seven days after the Feast, which incidentally disposes of all the conflicting 'periods' found in later legend.<sup>2</sup> In AI, on the other hand, his obit appears under 463, which gives the same interval between the two events.<sup>3</sup> Hence, despite the discrepancy in dating (which is nothing unusual in the early annals), both entries obviously refer to a single celebration, and of the two the date given in AU is more likely to be correct. For Ailill Molt's Feast there are three alternative dates in AU: 467 'in libro Cuanach', 469 'secundum alios', and 470 'ut alii dicunt'. Here the compiler is clearly unable to decide between conflicting records of a single event, and in fact we find but one entry in AI under 469—which is probably the correct date—and also in CS (p. 26).<sup>4</sup> Finally the celebration of the Feast by Diarmait mac Cerbaill is chronicled under 558 and 560 in AU, but this again is a duplicate entry, for all the other annals—AI (560), 'Tig.' (RC xvii. 142), and CS (p. 52)—have only one record, and we may take the second date as certain. Accordingly the evidence of the annals shows that the historical Feast of Tara was held, not 'at intervals of a few years', but only once in each reign.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. O'Rahilly, pp. 237, 253.

<sup>2</sup> Already noted by Bury, p. 304.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Carney, *Studies in Ir. Literature and History*, p. 337.

<sup>4</sup> No reliance whatever can be placed on the dates given in the margin of CS; see Walsh in *Ir. Hist. Studies* ii. 369. Hence I always cite this work by the page. I also cite the so-called Third Fragment of 'Tigernach' by the page of Stokes's edition in RC xvii.

It seems to have escaped attention that in a few of the sagas themselves the tradition of a single celebration by the king of Tara survives. Thus in what is obviously the older recension of the Battle of Moira (ÉRIU v. 232) Domnall mac Aedo (628–42) summons the men of Ireland to the Feast of Tara at the beginning of his reign. By contrast, in *Fled Dúin na nGéd*,<sup>1</sup> which has substantially the same theme, Domnall holds his inaugural ‘wedding-feast’ (*fled baindsi*, cf. p. 134 *infra*), not in Tara, but in his new capital Dún na nGéd on the Boyne. The redactor of this story is aware, therefore, that no Feast of Tara had been held since the reign of Diarmait mac Cerbaill almost seventy years previously—indeed he repeats the legend of the cursing of Tara by Ruadán and its subsequent abandonment (p. 137 *infra*); consequently he has been forced to invent a new and entirely imaginary ‘capital’ in which the royal feast is held. Again, in the legend of the Bórama (RC xiii. 36, § 2) Tuathal Techtmar, on completing the conquest of Ireland, celebrates the Feast of Tara for the provincial kings, who give pledges for their allegiance to him and his descendants. So too in the Destruction of Dinn Ríg (ZCP iii. 4, § 7) there seems to be only one celebration of the Feast by Cobthach Cael after he had secured the kingship of Tara by slaying his predecessor. These examples make it necessary for us to distinguish two stages in the evolution of the legendary Feast: an earlier stage in which it is still celebrated once in each reign, and a later one in which it has lost all contact with history and has been converted into a regularly recurring function, doubtless on the model of the Fair of Tailtiu with which it is so often bracketed together.

Among modern historians Joyce alone would seem to have been embarrassed by this conflict of evidence, and his account of the Feast affords an amusing example of his constant efforts to reconcile *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit*: it was ‘originally held, or intended to be held, every third year, but within the period covered by our authentic records it was convened only once by each king, namely at the beginning of his reign, or if at any other time it was on some special emergency’.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Mrs. Stopford Green, doubtless prompted by Mac Neill, completely discards the periodical Feast and places it at the beginning of every new reign (*op. cit.* p. 67). But she is unwilling to jettison its ‘constitutional’ features, describing it as an occasion on which ‘the chiefs and kings of Ireland were called to the high-king’s court’. And in a later chapter (p. 285) she calls it ‘the most important *airecht* . . . summoned by each high-king at the beginning of his reign’, where ‘the chief sub-kings were entertained in houses set apart and kept for them’ and where ‘courts of justice were held and new laws made and proclaimed’. It would require a separate article to trace the remarkable fortunes of

<sup>1</sup> Ed. Marstrander (Christiania, 1909); cf. also Dillon, *Cycles of the Kings*, pp. 59 f.

<sup>2</sup> *Social History* ii. 436.

the *airecht* in the works of modern Irish historians, all of whom accept unquestioningly Mac Neill's false interpretation of this word in his 'Law of Status' (PRIA xxxvi. C. pp. 272, 306) and ignore Thurneysen's convincing refutation (ZCP xvi. 199 f.). By a curious coincidence it was the description of another royal feast (Críth Gablach, § 46), mistaken for an *airecht* by Mac Neill, that started the chain of error. But for our purposes I need only point out that an assembly of the scope and importance envisaged by Mrs. Green would never have been called an *airecht* in the older language.

The sober truth is that the historical Feast of Tara had nothing whatever to do with Mrs. Green's *airecht* or Dr. Ryan's 'national assembly' or Keating's 'Parliament'. It was an archaic fertility rite of a type associated with primitive kingship the world over.

In the course of an important article which appeared in this journal twelve years ago (ÉRIU xiv. 14 ff.), O'Rahilly has collected a mass of evidence, drawn not merely from poems and sagas but also from entries in the annals, to prove that the ancient inauguration ritual of the kings of Tara and Connacht amounted to a symbolical mating (*feis*, *banfeis*) with the local earth-goddess.<sup>1</sup> This was a survival from primitive times, 'when men regarded the material Earth as a Mother, and when the ruler of the land was inaugurated with a ceremony which professed to espouse him to this divine mother with the intent that his reign might be prosperous and that the earth might produce her fruits in abundance' (p. 21). Strangely enough, though he deals at length with the inauguration of a king of Connacht in 1310, about which the annals use expressions like *banais ríge* and *iar feis d'Fedlimid . . . re cóiced Connacht*, he never mentions the much more famous Feis Temro in this context. In the interval the omission has been repaired by Professor Carney (Studies in E.I. Literature, pp. 334 f.), who argues convincingly that in the light of the evidence collected by O'Rahilly the Feast of Tara, as recorded in the annals, was the ancient ritual by which the kings of Tara were inaugurated. He also rightly stresses the sexual connotation of the word *feis* (v.n. of *foaid*)<sup>2</sup> in this symbolical mating of the king with the goddess; for this is the supreme fertility rite, designed to secure that man and beast and earth shall be fruitful throughout the king's dominions.<sup>3</sup> Hence, despite the virtually uniform testimony of

<sup>1</sup> As early as 1930 Ó Máille suggested that Medb, who figures in saga as the mate of numerous kings, represented 'the sovereignty of Ireland' (ZCP xvii. 140). Thurneysen, more accurately, concluded that she was a goddess to whom the kings of 'certain tribes' were symbolically married at their inauguration-feast (*ibid.* xix. 110, xx. 352).

<sup>2</sup> Ped. ii. 524, 559. Cf. also the same ambivalence in the cognate W. *gwest*, BCS ii. 41 f. The attempt by Vendryes and Loth to distinguish two separate words (RC xxxv. 89 f., xxxviii. 297) has no foundation.

<sup>3</sup> We have an echo of this in Triads 202, where of the 'three things that hallow (*neimthigedar*) a king' (obviously the king of Tara) the last two are 'the Feast of Tara, abundance in his reign'.

the later legendary sources, it is unlikely to have had any connexion with the festival of Samain and the dying year; on the contrary, one would expect it to be held, like similar rites the world over, at seed-time. There seems no reason to doubt that all kings in Ireland, great and small, were 'dedicated' by a ceremony of this kind, though the details may have varied from tribe to tribe. Thus the celebrated description of Giraldus Cambrensis (*Top. Hib.* iii. 25) of the rites associated with the ruler of 'gens quaedam apud Kenelcunnil' (not necessarily the overking of the region, as some critics have supposed), despite the indignant denials of native historians ever since Keating's day, may well have some basis in fact, more especially as traces of a rather similar ritual are found among other Indo-European peoples.<sup>1</sup>

But naturally the inauguration of a provincial king was the most important of these occasions. According to the older recension of the Battle of Moira (*ÉRIU* v. 232) the three famous 'feasts' (*feiseanna*) of Ireland were 'Feis Eamna, F. Temra, F. Chruachna'. Doubtless in the pre-historic period, when Tara was still overshadowed by Emain, the inauguration feast of the king of the Ulaid, which is here put first, was regarded as the most prominent event of its kind. Keating was obviously embarrassed by references in his 'authorities' to the other two provincial 'feasts', and his attempt (iii. 42 f.) to distinguish them from the Tara 'Parliament' is singularly unconvincing. In spite of their name they were not really 'feasts' at all, but rather fairs at which the handiwork of the lesser craftsmen was tested by the 'masters' (*ollamhain*) and the 'magnates' (*uasail*). Since this far-fetched distinction is found in no other source, historical or legendary, we are probably justified in assuming that Keating himself was the first to draw it.

The myth of the sacred or quasi-divine king is as firmly embedded in old Celtic tradition as in the Eastern world. It is this myth that underlies the Feast of Tara, a kind of *ἱερός γάμος* of the king of the Midland Goidels with the Earth-goddess of the kingdom, which marked the apotheosis of this powerful monarch. Though for want of a better word I have called it his inauguration, it did not necessarily take place immediately or even shortly after his accession. Thus of the three examples recorded in the annals, Ailill Molt was at least six—and more probably eight—years on the throne before he held the Feast, and Diarmait was actually sixteen; the date of Loegaire's accession is too uncertain to warrant any calculation.<sup>2</sup> Hence the ceremony seems to mark the culmination of a reign rather than its beginning; perhaps the king had first to prove his worth in battle against traditional enemies, such as the Laigin, and to enforce his authority over all the subject tribes within the area of his rule. We may take it as certain that the

<sup>1</sup> See F. R. Schröder in *ZCP* xvi. 310 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Carney, *op. cit.* pp. 333 f.

rulers of these tribes attended the 'nuptial feast' in which the symbolical union of king and goddess was externalized, and by the opening of the historical period the attendance included all the Uí Néill kings. Their presence at the ritual banquet was, as Mac Neill suggests (cf. p. 131 *supra*), a token of allegiance, though his inclusion of the other provincial kings in this act of homage is totally unwarranted. On the other hand, the transformation of what Mac Neill (ignoring its deeper mythological significance) calls 'a great social function' into a 'political' assembly of the whole country is entirely the work of the pseudo-historians writing at least three centuries after the last Feast had been held.

For it is obvious that this pagan fertility rite, with a quasi-divine king at its centre, could not survive the christianization of the Tara dynasty. Indeed I suggest that the annalistic records of its celebration may be used to trace the progress of the new faith among the rulers of the Uí Néill. That Loegaire remained a pagan to his dying day is admitted even in the older Patrician documents; the legend of his 'conversion' is very late. I am inclined to believe that his five immediate successors were also pagans, or at least adopted an ambivalent attitude to the new religion. Yet, so far as the Feast of Tara is concerned, though it was held by Ailill Molt, we have no record of its celebration by Lugaid mac Loegairi (†507?) or Muirchertach mac Erca (†533) or Tuathal Mael garb (†544). The first of these is expressly stated in the Clonmacnoise group of annals to have 'rejected' Patrick and thereby to have provoked his own death by lightning ('Tig.' RC xviii. 126, CS 36, A. Clon. p. 74). The second was, as Dr. Ryan states (p. 75), 'in all probability a pagan like his forefathers'.<sup>1</sup> Of Tuathal we know only that his grandfather Coirpre figures in Tírechán's Memoir as a bitter enemy of Patrick (p. 122 *supra*), and he may have maintained this family tradition. None the less, had they all been inaugurated in the traditional manner, the silence of the annals on such an important event in each of the three reigns would be very difficult to account for, and I can offer no satisfactory explanation. One might conjecture that the Feast of Tara had been discontinued during this period in deference to Christian sentiment and was then revived by Diarmait as a deliberate gesture of defiance. Yet by his time the new religion must have been dominant throughout most of Leth Cuinn.<sup>2</sup> Or is there, after all, some truth in the stories of a recrudescence of paganism during the sixth century? The figure of Diarmait himself is so thickly encrusted with legend that one finds it difficult to decide whether he was pagan or Christian or both by turns. His alleged relations with Colum Cille and Ciarán of Clon-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. also Mac Neill in Arch. Hib. ii. 75, n. 2; Green, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> Leth Moga, as I hope to show in a future article, had been largely evangelized before Patrick's time.

macnoise are offset by the account of his two wives (LU 4220 f., etc.) and of his druid Froíchán who raised the 'magic barricade' (*airbe ndrúad*) in front of the king's enemies at the battle of Cúl Dremne in 561.<sup>1</sup> At all events a king who deliberately chose the old pre-Christian form of inauguration must have been at best lukewarm in his acceptance of the new religion.

Both of the older Clonmacnoise annals ('Tig'. RC xvii. 142, CS 52) describe Diarmait's Feast as '*cena postrema* Temra(ch)'. The adjective was not in the original 'Ulster Chronicle', since it appears neither in AU nor in AI, and hence must have been interpolated in the Clonmacnoise copy. Yet the description is quite accurate, for this was in truth 'the last Feast of Tara' recorded in historical (as opposed to legendary) sources. None of the subsequent kings used this old ritual, and the question as to what, if any, inauguration ceremonies replaced it can best be discussed in another context. All that concerns us here is that the disappearance of the historical Feast marks the final christianization of the Tara monarchy. Further, I suggest that we have here the only kernel of fact enshrined in the picturesque legend of the cursing of Tara by Ruadán and his fellow saints. Mac Neill has rightly dismissed these stories as fictional (Phases, pp. 233 f.); he might have added, however, that they probably derive from traditions of clerical hostility to Diarmait for his adherence to certain pagan customs, notably the Feast of Tara. Nor is there any truth in the story that Tara was forthwith abandoned. We may be quite certain, for example, that the eight kings of the line of Aed Sláne, Diarmait's son, continued to reside in the ancient capital of the Uí Néill. It was not until after the exclusion of the Brega dynasty from the kingship of Tara in 727 that the situation changed. And even during the following centuries, when the succession alternated between the kings of Mide and Ailech, Tara, though now a purely titular capital, occasionally figures in some important incidents. The most significant of them, so far as we are concerned, took place in 817, after the abbot of the Columban monastery of Raphoe had been slain. Apparently the king of Tara Aed Oirdnide, who was of the Northern line, was implicated in the affair, for we are told that 'the congregation of Colum Cille'—doubtless the monks of the neighbouring monastery of Kells, at that time the principal Columban house in Ireland—'went to Tara to curse Aed' (AU, A. Clon. p. 130). Perhaps, therefore, the late legend of the cursing by Ruadán arose from a confused memory of this incident superimposed on still earlier traditions about Diarmait and the last pagan Feast.

To sum up, then: The historical Feast of Tara was a primitive fertility rite culminating in the apotheosis of the sacred king. It was last held by Diarmait mac Cerbaill in 560, after which it was discarded as

<sup>1</sup> The story has found its way into the annals, e.g. AU 560 (= 561), etc.

a relic of paganism. More than three centuries later, however, the pseudo-historians resurrected it in the form of a 'constitutional organ' of the 'high-kingship', and we can actually trace the expansion of the legendary Feast of Tara until by Keating's day it has eclipsed the Fair of Tailtiu in importance and become the equivalent of a 'national assembly' or 'Parliament'. In this strange guise it continues to haunt our textbooks and examination papers. Together with Óenach Tailten it offers a cautionary example of the triumph of legend over history. The fact that both now figure among the 'national institutions' of medieval Ireland is a signal tribute to the ingenuity of our pseudo-historians of the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries who created the myth of the 'high-kingship' as the apex of an imaginary Irish *politeia*.

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