



## **The 7 Grades of Wisdom: Education in Early Ireland Lesson Transcript**

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In a sequel to the Críth Gabhlach, we learn about the 'Secht n-Gráidh Écna,' or 'Seven Grades of Wisdom,' referring to the various stages of progression a pupil went through as they developed in their studies. A similar process was used in the various different schools.

Quote: "The degrees of wisdom of the Church correspond with the degrees of the poet and of the storytellers lay schools. But wisdom is the mother of each profession of them, and it is from her hand they all drink." [End Quote] We will now explore these seven grades as they related to the filí, or poetry schools. The curriculum of the filí lasted twelve years in which Ogham (alphabets of understanding) tales, composition, philosophy and other standard learning requirements were met.

Having completed a basic first year elementary level, a student made their way through the following grades. The first grade, the Fochloc, or 'word-maker'. The second, Macfuirmid, meaning to 'set down,' or a 'son of composition. The third, a Dos. Meaning a 'young bush or tree'. The fourth, Cana or Cano, a 'wolf cub' or a 'whelp', The fifth Cli, meaning a 'pillar.' The sixth, Anruth, and 'the noble stream' or 'the master warrior'. And the seventh or highest grade was the Ollamh, meaning 'professor' or 'doctor'.

A student in year one was called an Oblaire, meaning an 'elementary student'. The course of study consisted of 50 oghams or alphabets, elementary grammar, and 20 tales. As they progressed through the grades, they gradually increased the number of poems and tales which they had to know by heart. At the end of the training this number would reach three-hundred and fifty individual stories and poems, the details of which had to be specific and there were no room for errors. Having completed his first year of elementary training, a student reached the first grade of wisdom when he became a folklock during his second year.

So in year two he entered the grade of Fochloc, meaning a 'word maker'. This course of study consisted of another 50 oghams, six easy lessons in natural philosophy, a number of specific and introductory poems, between 20 and 30 different tales, a type of grammar called the Uraicept na n-Eigsine, and he composed poems in a metre called dians. The customary honour price for a member of this grade was a heifer and he was allowed to travel with two



attendants. In his third year, he became a Macfuirmid, meaning 'set down' or a 'son of composition'. So-called because he is set to learn an art from his boyhood. The course of his study consists of another 50 oghams, six minor lessons in moral philosophy, diphthongal combinations, certain specified poems, and 40 tales.

In year four he entered the grade of Dos, meaning a 'young bush or a tree.' The course of study included the Bretha Nemed, a legal manuscript dealing with the judgments of the privileged classes. He also had to know 20 eman, poems with couplets sharing form and meaning, and he had to learn another 50 tales.

In year five, the Cano, meaning the 'wolf cub' or the 'whelp': His course of study included a critical analysis of Gaelic articles, adverbs and other grammatical niceties. And he also had to learn 60 more tales.

In year six, he became a Cli, or 'a pillar'. Now maturing in his education, he is strong and straight, he elevates and is elevated. He protects and is protected and is powerful from floor to ridge. His course of study included: the secret language of the Poets, 40 poems of this type called nuah or 'twins', and between 70 and 80 additional tales.

In year seven, he began the Grade of Anruth, meaning 'noble stream', that is to say: a stream of pleasing praise issuing from him and a stream of wealth to him in payments and presents for his poetry and learning. The Noble Stream actually lasted three years. In year seven, the course of study included the brosnacha, which were miscellaneous or collections assigned to the professor and the laws or special styles of bardic poetry.

In year 8, he had to learn prosody, a very complicated study, glosses, that is, the meaning of obsolete and obscure Gaelic words, illumination of song, the illumination of knowledge, extempore, incantation and the Dindsenchus, which was the historical and the mythology behind the place, names and topography of Ireland.

In his 9th year, he learned sennet, or poems of Ancient Wisdom lusca, which were chants that had swinging and rhythmic oscillation; nena or truth-saying; eochraid, or warding and shielding briocht or spells; sruith, or veneration, and calling of the ancestors; duili feda, or Wisdom Tales. And he had to be master of 175 total tales between this and the next two years.

In the 10th year of study, he left the Noble Stream and began the process of becoming an Ollamh, which also lasted three years. In year ten, the course of study included a further number of compositions and a portion of the 175 tales he was still learning.

In year eleven, the course of study consisted of one-hundred, compositions of Anamain, which meant to use the breath in magical toning.



And finally, in year twelve, a student had progressed through the grades and has become an Ollamh. The Ollamh of Wisdom or Learning teaches the four departments of Filidheacht, or knowledge, without ignorance of them.

The Ollamh course of study consisted of one-hundred and 20 cetals, which were religious chants; the Four Arts of Poetry; 175 Anruth, or glorious victories. During this year and the two previous he has to memorise and master the 175 tales together with the 175 Anruth, the 'Glorious Victories'. This completes the 350 tales that they had to learn by heart.

If completed satisfactorily, the student graduated from the Grade of Anruth, or Noble Stream, and became an Ollamh or professor. There are three key designations for an Ollamh. The first was Ollamh, meaning a 'professor or doctor;' the second was Eces, meaning a 'man of learning;' and the third was a file meaning a 'poet'.

The Ollamh was entitled to sit at the king's table as an honoured guest. In point of knowledge, he was qualified to answer all questions in the four great departments of learning, that is: in poetry, literature, history, and the equivalent of a legal degree in Canon and Civil Law.

He was entitled to bring four and 20 persons in his retinue, and neither he nor they could be denied food without incurring a severe penalty, which was one 7th of the fine that was due in the case of his death. His honour price one of the functions and rights was to be in the bosom of his disciples, always imparting knowledge to them on all suitable occasions. "Ollamh" was the title of the highest degree in any art or profession.

Thus, we read of an ollamh-poet, or an ollamh-builder, or an ollamh-goldsmith, or an ollamh-physician, an ollamh-lawyer, and so on, just as we have in modern times, a doctor of law, of music, of literature, philosophy and medicine, etc. In order to attain the degree of ollamh, a candidate had to graduate through all the lower steps, and for this final degree he had to submit his work, whether literary compositions or any other performance, to some eminent ollamh who was selected as judge. This ollamh made a report to the king of the territories, not only on the candidate's work, but also on his general character, that he was upright, free from unjust dealings, and pure in conduct and word, that is, free from immoral bloodshed and abuse of others. If the report was favourable, the king formally conferred the degree.