Ulidia 4: Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales, Queen's University, Belfast, 27–9 June 2013. Edited by Mícheál B. Ó Mainnín and Gregory Toner. Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2017. iv + 262 pp. €50. ISBN: 978-1-84682-631-3 (hardback).

The Ulster Cycle represents an important branch of Ireland's medieval literary heritage, and its scope and breadth has attracted sustained scholarly interest for well over a hundred years now. The previously published proceedings of the International Conferences on the Ulster Cycle of Tales have included important contributions that have helped advance our understanding of this rich and diverse material. The volume under review is the fourth such set of proceedings, and consists of eleven revised versions of papers read by early career and established scholars at the fourth Ulidia conference, held at Queen's University, Belfast, 27–9 June 2013. The authors have taken both traditional and innovative approaches, including manuscript studies, etymological studies, onomastics, linguistic analysis, and stylometrics, amongst others, and proffer new literary interpretations of the Ulster Cycle of tales while also taking into account law tracts, sagas, poetry and *dindshenchas*. The book includes a list of abbreviations, a combined bibliography and an index.

In the first contribution, we find a shift from the usual focus on the numerous well-defined Ulster Cycle narrative texts to those narratives found within the medieval Irish law tracts. Fangzhe Qiu, 'The Ulster Cycle in the law tracts', discusses how texts concerning the Ulster Cycle could serve different functions according to their narrative settings. Referring to previously ignored sources, he reminds us that the medieval Irish jurists continually adapted and reworked Ulster Cycle narratives and figures in drawing on the broader literature. Moreover, the prominence of the legendary *filid* in the law tracts may represent the interests of the readers, themselves perhaps *ollomain filed*, and the medieval jurists took these 'erudite poet-judges' not only as their intellectual forefathers, but also as 'models for all subsequent secular learned men to emulate' (p. 18).

David Stifter, 'Ulster connections of *Cín Dromma Snechtai*', examines the Ulidian connection in some of the *Cín Dromma Snechtai* (*CDS*) texts, the variously manifested seaward outlook in others, and the manner in which the 'super-poet' Mongán mac Fíachnai is represented throughout the *CDS* texts. He strengthens the argument for Bangor being the place where the exemplar containing these texts originated, rather than Druimm Snechtai. Stifter provides us an eye-crossing diagram (p. 31) to illustrate the 'wide intertextual cobweb' created by Mongán's presence in the *CDS* texts. Furthermore, he argues that the obscure poem *Fil and griän Glinne Aí* ('There is there the gravel of Glenn nAí') was also included in *CDS*. The poem bears striking similarities in style and diction to the works of Virgilius Maro Grammaticus and the *Hisperica Famina*, all of which display 'a spirit for learned, scholarly playfulness' (p. 35). One looks forward to more studies which will elucidate further the literary position of Bangor.

Several essays in the volume focus on the origin, portrayal, and function of certain female figures within the Ulster Cycle tales. Britta Irslinger, 'Medb "the intoxicating one"? (Re-)constructing the past though etymology', re-examines the traditional etymology of Medb (**méd^{h}u* 'the intoxicating one') and the more recently proposed etymology **medwā* 'the ruler'. She makes the valid point that scholars in the past based their literary

interpretation of Medb on the false etymology of Medb as ‘the intoxicating one’. Moreover, she argues that the association between goddesses of sovereignty and the offering of drinks was ‘established, or at least reinforced, by medieval scholars’ due to the wordplay of *flaith-laith* (pp. 56–63). Irslinger notes that Medb is a divine figure who has ‘a pre-Christian background’ (p. 45) and ‘likely to be the heritage of pre-Christian mythology, rather than literary inventions by medieval Irish writers or poets’ (p. 51). In evaluating the evidence preserved in medieval Irish manuscripts, due consideration must be afforded to the intellectual and cultural contexts and environments within which such literature was composed, contexts which were far removed in time from pre-Christian Ireland. This cannot be ignored nor should the scholastic and creative abilities, or motivations, of the medieval Irish literati be dismissed.

Tatyana Mikhailova, ‘Portraying a person: description devices in Ulster saga narrative’, distinguishes between ‘functional’ introductory descriptions and ‘ornamental’ non-functional descriptions of women in early Irish sagas, suggesting that ‘all descriptions’ of women in the Ulster Cycle of tales signalled to the audience firstly that the character is otherworldly and secondly that she is ill-intentioned and malevolent. The author suggests that such female descriptions were included because the tales ‘were compiled “by men for a male audience”’ (p. 113) and then vaguely states that perhaps the inclusion of male descriptions may allude to an apparent ‘homoerotism on the part of individual compilers’ (p. 114). This point has been made elsewhere and Mikhailova states that she does not agree with it, but cites no reference to such work, nor does she elaborate on why she disagrees. A close reading, which the author does not seem to have done, of the fine study and discussion by Damian McManus, ‘Good-looking and irresistible: the hero from early Irish saga to classical poetry’, *Ériu* 59 (2009), 57–109, would furnish numerous descriptions of males depicted as irresistible to both married and unmarried women. The descriptions of kings and heroes in early Irish sagas and classical bardic praise poetry served as a trope that should be viewed in the context of concepts of kingship and society at the time when the texts were composed. Lastly, in discussing classical influences on the Irish descriptive style, the author does not cite the stimulating and important contribution by Brent Miles, *Heroic Saga and Classical Epic in Medieval Ireland* (Cambridge, 2011; esp. pp. 186–8).

Joanne Findon, ‘A good (mortal) man is hard to find: Fand, Macha, Becfhola and bad romance’, applies Mieke Bal’s concept of ‘focalization’ to erotic relationships in *Serglige Con Culainn*, *Noínden Ulad* and *Tochmarc Becfhola*, taking into consideration how texts were changed and adapted depending on the manuscript context and audience. She concludes that the use of female otherworldly characters in these tales could open up ‘an imaginative space in which audiences could empathize’ with these persons in their search for love (p. 128).

Continuing with otherworldly women, Gregory Toner, ‘A tale of two wives: sense and senselessness in *Serglige Con Culainn*’, provides a welcome discussion of the tale as preserved in *Lebor na hUidre* and skilfully explores the narrative techniques of inversion and parallelism. By illustrating the relationships between all the otherworld characters and those of this world in the two separate and partial recensions of the tale, he argues convincingly that the narrative world portrayed in the surviving story ‘consists of several coordinated and

contrastive pairs based on gender and nature' (p. 138), which have the tendency to disturb the normal social order in this world.

Martina Maher, '*De Gabáil int Ṡída*: *remscél* or *remremscél*?', argues that this tale should be considered 'as a conscious and meaningful *remscél* to *Táin Bó Cúailgne*', rather than it being a *remscél* to *Aislinge Óenguso*, by examining the tale's manuscript context and the use of verbal deceit in various accounts of the taking of the *síd*. Maher writes: 'In both manuscripts [the Book of Leinster (LL) and RIA MS D iv 2], the title *De Gabáil int Ṡída* is the first in the list of *remscéla Tána Bó Cúailgne* and the tale itself is transmitted thereafter' (p. 151). However, RIA MS D iv 2, fol. 47, lists *De Ḟoillsigud Tána Bó Cúailgne* in the first instance, rather than *De Gabáil int Ṡíde*, and it is this text that then follows the list (a point which is clearly evident in p. 151, n.1). This is an unfortunate misrepresentation of the evidence. A lack of proper referencing to the manuscript witnesses is also frustrating for the reader. For instance, no reference to the diplomatic edition of the list of *remscéla* in the Book of Leinster is given. Maher discusses a passage from *De Gabáil int Ṡíde* preserved at the end of the LL copy only, but not in RIA MS D iv 2. Although Maher gives the text from her unpublished MA dissertation, she does not cite the diplomatic edition in LL, i.e. LL 32926–9. Maher argues that, if this passage was not in LL's exemplar, 'the evidence' suggests that it was added by LL's scribe F in order to create a connection between the text and *Táin Bó Cúailgne* (p. 154). This connection, following Kay Retzlaff's reading and interpretation in 'Pretext and context: the *remscéla* and the *Táin*', in Ruairí Ó hUiginn and Brian Ó Catháin (eds), *Ulidia* 2 (Maynooth, 2005), 285–95, is based on the use of *mucc ḟonaithe* 'a roast pig' in both texts. In the *remscél*, it is stated that there were three trees in constant fruit, an otherworldly ever-living pig (*mucc bithbeo*) and a roast pig (*mucc ḟonaithe*) but in the *macgnímrada* of *TBC* Rec. 1 (O'Rahilly 1976, 16, ll. 513) Conchobar eats only a roast pig (*mucc ḟonaithe*) and there is no otherworldly implication connected with the animal. Basing the connection between the two texts on the use of *mucc ḟonaithe* is therefore somewhat tenuous. On the other hand, it could be argued that scribe F copied this passage from the exemplar and that it was omitted in the later recension in RIA MS D iv 2. The late form *ni erchranand*, LL 32928, 'none decays' (from MIr *airchranaid* for OIr *ara-chrin*) would suggest that the scribe updated the language of this passage at the least, while the language of the rest seems to be in keeping with the suggested ninth-century date of the text (note for instance the neuter nom. sg. article *a* preceding neuter *tír*, LL 32926).

Patricia Ronan and Gerold Schneider, 'The interpolator(s) H in LU: using frequency measures to determine authorship', assess the stylistic differences of H in *Lebor na hUidre*. Elizabeth Duncan, 'The palaeography of H in *Lebor na hUidre*', in Ruairí Ó hUiginn (ed.), *Lebor na hUidre*, Codices Hibernenses Eximii 1 (Dublin, 2015), 29–52, esp. 36–45, has recently argued that H consists of six scribes, allowing also for the variability in the hand of a single scribe. The authors compare the use of function words in texts copied by H, as well as by hands M and A. By examining the frequency of the abbreviations **7* and *.i.*, as well as the augment particle *ro*, the starkest contrast is found between H1's *Fled Bricrenn* and H5's *Fled Bricrenn*. However, the authors are rightly cautious about taking the results as being a diagnostic criterion for establishing that H consisted of six hands, given that the stylistic differences may be inherited features from source copies. Nevertheless, Ronan and Schneider

remain hopeful that further studies of morphological and morpho-syntactic treatments may highlight scribal differences.

Sharon Arbuthnot, ‘Gesture and verbal pronouncement in some Ulster Cycle tales’, continues her examination of the portrayal and function of physical acts of grabbing various body parts in medieval Irish literature. This time she elucidates cases of grabbing the cheeks and chest revealing that this act was committed by a person in a weakened position and used as an act of defence, thereby serving as an attack on the honour of the stronger person.

The final two contributions focus on place-names in Ulster Cycle tales. Kay Muhr, ‘Tracing the influence of Uí Néill (and the later sept of Ó Néill) on names used in the Ulster Cycle tales’, highlights that the Ulster Cycle tales were intentionally modified as propaganda by those contesting control of the province, and the appearance of characters in texts fluctuated depending on the political situation at the time of composition.

Having previously considered the names of Emain Macha, Mag Macha and Óenach Macha, Mícheál B. Ó Mainnín, ‘Óenach Macha revisited’, delves further into the treatment of Óenach Macha in Irish literary sources, and in a careful evaluation of the sources and extant copies of *Noínden Ulad* and the *dindshenchas* of Emain Macha, he shows that Óenach Macha was a later introduction into the literary tradition, where it was used as a literary toponym and also as a topographical feature.

A great number of texts belonging to the Ulster Cycle await reliable editions and translations, so that scholars still depend on editions published over one hundred years ago, as is evident throughout the contributions in this volume. Moreover, catalogues need to be revisited, and in some instances updated, as not all texts have been included. A case in point is *Fil and griän Glinne Aí*, where David Stifter (p. 32) has brought to light a previously ignored copy in NLI MS G 2, ff. 34vb–35rb. In the case of Fangzhe Qiu’s article (pp. 9–22), he refers to the versions of the tale *Comracc Con Chulainn re Senbecc* (p. 12), one version of which is preserved in RIA MS D iv 2, f. 48v. Another copy of this version can be added here, namely, Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Rawlinson B 512, fol. 143va28, where it is followed by a set of *mirabilia* texts. Another version, similar to that found in *Bretha Nemed Dédenach* (*CIH* 1120.16–30) is preserved in TCD MS H 3.18 (1337), p. 60a22–33, where it is found amongst a series of short literary anecdotes. This manuscript is connected with a Mac Aodhagáin school and contains a mixture of law-tracts, glossaries and prose narrative. Neither of the aforementioned copies has appeared in print nor are there any translations available.

Although the quality of the contributions varies, and apart from the few criticisms offered above, this volume presents new approaches to, and interpretations of, the Ulster Cycle of tales and marks a welcome contribution to our understanding of this celebrated branch of Europe’s literary heritage.

CHANTAL KOBEL

Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies