

**John Carey**  
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# The Location of the Otherworld in Irish Tradition\*

*John Carey*

Professor James Carney remarks in a footnote to his review of Carl Selmer's edition of *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* that he has 'no confidence in any view which supposes that the primitive Irish believed in an Otherworld beyond the seas. It can be maintained, however, that there were primitive Irish tales which showed the hero visiting an Otherworld located under lakes or in mountains'.<sup>1</sup> In the present essay I shall pursue this question, and try to determine whether there is in fact any evidence that an overseas Otherworld formed a part of the indigenous tradition.

In a careful study of the genres *echtrae* (a tale of a hero's journey to the Otherworld) and *immram* (a more loosely structured voyage-tale in which the protagonists visit a series of Otherworld islands), D.N. Dumville has upheld the native provenance of the former while demonstrating that *immrama* 'can be seen and traced in a state of development in the Old Irish period from causes and sources which can be deduced from a knowledge of both the ecclesiastical history of the time and the literature available in this milieu'.<sup>2</sup> I shall therefore not consider any *immrama* apart from *Immram Brain*, essentially an *echtrae* despite the title generally given to it and the interpolation of an *immram* episode.<sup>3</sup> Nor, obviously, would there be any point in examining tales written after the *immram* became an influential genre; we must accordingly confine our attention to the material surviving in Old Irish.

*Immram Brain* is one of the texts which formed part of the lost eighth-century manuscript *Cín Dromma Snechta*. The tale is structured around two long poems. In the first a mysterious woman 'from strange lands' (*a tírib ingnath*) invites Bran mac Febail to join her in an Otherworld paradise 'in the ocean to the west of us' ('isind oceon frinn aníar'); in the second Bran and his fellow voyagers are addressed by Manannán, whom they meet driving his

\* First published in *Éigse* 19 (1982-3), 36-43.

1 Carney, 'Review of Selmer', 40 n. 9. [q.v. 46].

2 Dumville, 'Echtrae and Immrama', 94; cf. Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales*, 76-7.

3 Dumville, 'Echtrae and Immrama', 94, 83-6.

chariot across the sea. He tells them that what appears to them to be sea is to him the flowering plain of Mag Mell, speaks of the birth of Christ, and explains that he is on his way to Ireland to beget the wizard-king Mongán, who will assume the shapes of all animals ('biaid i fethol cech míl').<sup>4</sup>

In his article 'The Earliest Bran Material' Carney has edited and translated a poem – also apparently from *Cín Dromma Snechta* – in the form of a colloquy between Bran's druid and the prophetess (*banfáith*) of Bran's father Febal. Although it is allusive and often difficult, there can be no doubt that their dialogue deals with the bursting forth of Loch Febail and the consequent inundation of Bran's kingdom. It is this disaster, alluded to in other sources, which the prophetess describes; her speech is preceded by the druid's description of an Otherworld treasure:

My *fiss* (knowledge) reaches a pure well in which is the equipment of a band of hundreds of (Otherworld) women. The jewels of the shapely company of women would be a great find for the man who would get it.

For famous are the pure jewels that are beside Srúb Brain: it would ransom a *tuath*, or more than two (*tuatha*), the equivalent of the scions of kingship of the host of the great world.<sup>5</sup>

The immediate juxtaposition of a pre-eminently desirable Otherworld treasure (in a well in a king's territory) with the calamitous inundation of that territory by water (presumably bursting from a well) must almost certainly allude to a tale of how the king undertook to steal the treasure, and of the retribution which ensued. Carney has shown on the basis of this poem and various corroborative sources that an early flood-legend was modified under foreign influence to form the *Immram* account of Bran's voyage to an Otherworld populated by immortal women.<sup>6</sup>

The other major episode in *Immram Brain*, the encounter with Manannán, can also be associated with the early traditions of Loch Febail. A brief tale assigned by Meyer to the eighth or ninth century<sup>7</sup> and by Carney to the early seventh<sup>8</sup> describes a meeting on the shores of Loch Febail between Colum Cille and a youth who is perhaps Mongán ('asberat alailiu bod e Moggan mac Fiachnaoi'). The youth describes the prosperous country which the lake has covered, and says that he has at various times been a deer, a salmon, a seal, a wolf and a man.<sup>9</sup> Here the paradoxical contrast of land and water in the same

4 Text ed. Meyer in Meyer and Nutt, *The Voyage of Bran*, vol. 1, 2–34; and Van Hamel, ed., *Immrama*, 9–19.

5 Carney's translation, in 'The Earliest', 182–3 [q.v. 80].

6 Carney, 'The Earliest', 183ff [q.v. 81ff]. The question of foreign source material is discussed in the same author's *Studies*, 280–95.

7 Meyer, ed., 'The Colloquy of Colum Cille'.

8 Carney, 'The Earliest', 192 [q.v. 89ff].

9 The story has been edited and translated by Meyer ('The Colloquy of Colum Cille') and

place, and the series of metamorphoses, strikingly recall the main elements in the poem recited by Manannán in the *Immram*; it seems at the least very possible that this text stands in the same relation to Manannán's poem as does the colloquy of the druid and prophetess to *Immram Brain* as a whole. The similarity would be still closer if the submerged kingdom were believed to be an Otherworld region like Manannán's Mag Mell. This may have been the case: the Otherworld kingdom of Mag Da Chéo, reached by plunging into the waters of Loch na nÉn in the story of Láegaire mac Crimthainn, is identified with the lake itself in *Togail Bruidne Da Choca*.<sup>10</sup>

*Echtrae Conlae* was another of the stories in *Cín Dromma Snechta*. In both *echtrae* – and in them alone<sup>11</sup> – a fairy woman summons the hero to a life of peaceful bliss in an Otherworld beyond the sea. In the former the woman tells Bran that a silver branch which he has found comes from her country, and bears it away with her when she departs; in the latter she tosses Conlae a magical apple at the conclusion of her first visit. In each case the hero is told that he will reach his destination before sunset.<sup>12</sup> Explicit Christian references are found in both stories.<sup>13</sup> In the light of so much evidence for a close connection between the tales, it would be rash to take *Echtrae Conlae* as an independent source.<sup>14</sup>

Even apart from these considerations, it is noteworthy that the overseas location of the Otherworld to which Conlae is invited appears almost as an afterthought. There is no trace of the idea when the woman first visits him at Uisnech:

I have come from the lands of the living, where there is no death nor sin nor transgression. We eat everlasting feasts without toil, and have peace without strife. We are in a great *síd*, and are therefore called 'people of the *síd*' (*oeis side*) ... I love Conlae Rúad, and summon him to Mag Mell,

edited by Grosjean ('S. Columbae Hiensis cum Mongano'). Mac Cana has translated portions of the text, 'On the "Prehistory"', 36–7. He suggests (*ibid.*, 37–8) that it too formed part of *Cín Dromma Snechta*; this would make the case for its having influenced *Immram Brain* yet clearer (cf. Carney, 'The Earliest', 175 [q.v. 74]).

10 Stokes, ed., 'Da Choca's Hostel', 154; cf. note 18 below. In contemporary folklore towns submerged by lakes or the sea are often thought to possess Otherworld characteristics; see for instance Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook*, 506.

11 This point perhaps deserves to be emphasized, as it does not seem hitherto to have received adequate attention; see now, Carey, 'On the Interrelationships', 85 n.69.

12 'Emne co n-ildath féle | ricfe re fuiniud gréne' (Meyer and Nutt, *The Voyage of Bran*, vol. 1, 29); 'adchiu tairinde in ngrein | cidh cein ricfem ria n-aighid' (Oskamp, ed., 'Echtra Condla', 225). The context of the phrase from *Immram Brain* should be taken into account in assessing Oskamp's analysis of the *Echtrae Conlae* passage (*ibid.*, 217–8).

13 For a brief discussion of this aspect of *Echtrae Conlae* see Carney, 'The Deeper Level', 164–5.

14 This was already recognized by Nutt (Myer and Nutt, *The Voyage of Bran*, vol. 1, 148); cf. Carney, *Studies*, 292.

whose king is Bóadach the eternal, a king without lament or sorrow in his land since he took up sovereignty.<sup>15</sup>

At the second encounter there is no indication that Mag Mell lies across the sea until the woman's last speech: she refers to her glass boat (*long glano*), Conlae leaps into it, and the pair row out of sight. There has been no preparation for such a conclusion: at the beginning of the episode we are told only that Conlae 'saw the same woman coming towards him' ('co n-accai chuicci in mnai chetnai').<sup>16</sup> Even insofar as some of the tale's elements may be traditional, therefore, the theme of an Otherworld voyage appears to be secondary and extraneous.

These two problematical texts are so far as I know the only Old Irish sources in which the overseas Otherworld appears. Early accounts of mortal visits to Otherworld places are fairly plentiful, however. Otherworld beings are depicted as living within hills,<sup>17</sup> beneath lakes<sup>18</sup> or the sea,<sup>19</sup> or on islands in lakes<sup>20</sup> or off the

15 Oskamp, ed., 'Echtra Condla', 221–2.

16 Text ed. Oskamp, 'Echtra Condla', 220–5. The phrase 'to the people of Tethra' (*do daoinib Tethrach*), also in the final episode, may be a further reference to the sea: *vide* the examples in the RIA's *DIL* s.v. 3 *tethra*, in particular 'teathra .i. muir', O'Cl, 'as i an moir Mag Tetrai', Meyer, ed., 'Tochmarc Emire', 240.3 (cf. *ibid.* 233z). But all of these references suggest an underwater rather than an overseas Otherworld.

17 E.g. *De Gabáil in tSíd*, (ed. Hull); *Tucait Faghbala in Fesa do Finn*, ed. Hull, 'Two Tales about Find', 329–30; *Scél Mongáin*, ed. Meyer in Meyer and Nutt, *The Voyage of Bran*, vol. 1, 52–4; *Táin Bó Fraích*, (ed. Meid, 10). The Fomóire, represented in the later literature as coming from overseas, are said in an archaic poem to inhabit 'meadows beneath the worlds of men' ('srathu ... fo (for, v.l.) daoine domnaib', O'Brien, ed., *Corpus Genealogiarum*, 20).

18 'The Adventure of Laeghaire', ed. Jackson, 380–6. Cf. the magical birds which escape from Cú Chulainn by going beneath a lake (*foa lind*) in *Serglige Con Culainn* (*SCC*), ed. Myles Dillon, line 70. The lost *echtrae* of Bresal Brecc, alluded to in the *dindshenchas* of Ráith Mór Maige Line (Gwynn, ed., *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, TLS vol. II, 144; Stokes, ed., 'The Prose Tales' *RC* 16, 48–9), the genealogies of the Dál nAraide (Meyer, ed., 'The Laud Genealogies', 335.19, O'Brien, ed., *Corpus Genealogiarum*, 324), and the 'Tigernach' annals (Stokes, ed., 'The Annals of Tigernach, The Second Fragment', 7), appears to have dealt with his disappearance into Loch Laig.

19 *Echtra Fergusa maic Léti* (ed. Binchy, 'The Saga of Fergus Mac Léti', 36–8), describes an attempt made by the *luchorpáin* to carry Fergus into the sea. One of them is called an *abac*; on the aquatic associations of this word see Vendryes, *Lexique*, s.v., and the verse cited by O'Mulconry, 'Tuatha abacc usce uair | gluair conanat in gach dail' (Stokes, ed., 'O'Mulconry's Glossary', 235). Note that in the late version of this tale in Eg. 1782 the *tuatha luchra* live in a land overseas, north of Ireland ('san talmáin atua'): text ed. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica*, vol. 1, 244. An instance of transition between the conceptions of underwater and overseas *luchorpáin* may be furnished by *Acallam na Senórach*, where *Loch Luchra* is a place in Tír Tairngire (*ibid.*, vol. 1, 177).

20 *Tochmarc Becfola*, (ed. O'Grady, *Silva Gaedelica*, vol. 1, 85–7); the island is in this case Devenish, and belongs both to a monastic community and to a band of supernatural warriors residing in an Otherworldly hall. Cf. *SCC*, where Labraid's house is situated on

coast;<sup>21</sup> there are also tales of halls chanced upon in the night, which vanish with the coming of day.<sup>22</sup> Although in many of these stories the hero only visits the abode of one of the *áes síde*, there are also cases in which passage underground or underwater grants access to a supernatural land of abundance.<sup>23</sup>

an island in a lake (lines 144f; but in lines 577–8 Cú Chulainn's entry 'into the land' [*is tír*; presumably the Otherworld] precedes his arrival at the island). The view of Alfred Nutt (Meyer and Nutt, eds, *The Voyage of Bran*, vol. 1, 184) and Ó Cathasaigh ('The Semantics', 149 n. 44) that *SCC* describes an overseas Otherworld has so far as I can tell no basis beyond two lines of verse in the Middle Irish A-version of the tale: Labraid is said to dwell *dar ler* (line 445), while Fand comes 'do thonnaib dar leraib lánmóraib' (line 714). Giraldus Cambrensis describes an island in a lake in north Munster where no one ever dies of old age, *Topographica Hibernica*, ed. Dimock, *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*. 5, 80.

- 21 These are, however, actual islands; e.g. Tech Duinn as discussed by Meyer ('Der irische Totengott'); and Cú Chulainn's expedition against the Fomóire living on the Isle of Man in *Forfess Fer Falgae* (ed. Thurneysen, *Zu irischen Handschriften*, 56–7). The allusion to Crimthann Nía Náir's having brought treasures *dar ler* in *Reicne Fothaid Canainn* may refer to a similar foray (Meyer, ed., 'Reicne', 14); but Edward Gwynn has convincingly argued that the lost *echtrae* of Crimthann in the tale-lists was the relatively late result of a series of attempts to account for his epithet (Gwynn, ed., *The Metrical Dindshenchas*, TLS vol. 10, 500). Manannán, although by the time of such Middle Irish works as *Echtrae Cormaic* and *Acallam na Senórach* he is ruler of Tír Tairngire (Stokes, ed., 'The Irish Ordeals', 198, O'Grady, ed., *Silva Gaedelica*, vol. 1, 177–8), is obviously linked with the Isle of Man, and when in *SCC* Fand sees him approaching over the sea he is coming from the east (*anair*, line 762). We may compare one of the questions asked of the mysterious youth by Colum Cille: '... islands to the east of us, what is under them?' ('innsi friun anair cid fotha ní'); the youth replies with a description of companies of men, herds of cattle, deer and horses, and 'two-headed and three-headed ones', 'in unknown regions, in a green land' ('i tírib ingnath hferund glaiss', Meyer, ed., 'The Colloquy of Colum Cille', 315). Two points should be noted here: the islands are situated in the east (indeed the youth says that they are 'i nd[E]oruip i nAisia'), and the Otherworld beings there live underground.
- 22 E.g. the two versions of *Compert Con Culainn*, (ed. Windisch, 'Die Geburt'); *Baile Mongáin* (Meyer and Nutt, eds, *The Voyage of Bran*, vol. 1, 56–7); 'Finn and the Phantoms', (ed. Stern, 'Le manuscrit irlandais', 7). An Otherworld hall reached through a 'great mist' appears only in the two closely related Middle Irish tales *Echtrae Cormaic*, (ed. Stokes, 'The Irish Ordeals', 195) and *Baile in Scáil*, (ed. Meyer, 459 line 29).
- 23 Thus when Nera returns from a sojourn within Sídh Crúachan he says that he has been 'in fair regions' (*a tírib cainib*, Meyer, ed., 'The Adventures of Nera', 224); and of the Dagda's domain within Brug na Bóinne it is said 'that is a wondrous country' ('amra dano a tír hi-sin', Hull, ed., 'De Gabáil in tShída', 56). When Láegaire mac Crimthainn plunges into Loch na nÉn he finds himself in the kingdom of Mag Da Chéo, itself adjacent to Mag Mell; when he returns to the Otherworld at the end of the story he goes 'into the síd' (*isa síd*) and lives thereafter 'in joint-kingship of the síd ... that is, in the fort of Mag Mell' (Jackson, ed., 'The Adventure of Laeghaire', 386). In *Tochmarc Étaíne* Midir is lord of the síd of Brí Léith, but when he asks Étaín to join him he describes 'a marvellous country' (*tír n-ingnadh*, Bergin and Best, eds, 'Tochmarc Étaíne', 180).

Similar conceptions are reflected in contemporary folklore. Ó Súilleabháin lists the dwellings of the fairies as 'lakes or rivers, stones or rocks, woods or trees, caves, underground places, bridges, hills or mountains',<sup>24</sup> as well as ancient earthworks and ruins;<sup>25</sup> there are also tales of peoples and countries beneath the sea.<sup>26</sup> The latter can in some cases be reached by mortals at particular times,<sup>27</sup> and in this resemble the phantom islands attested since the time of Giraldus Cambrensis;<sup>28</sup> but such islands are almost invariably said to be uninhabited, and have no intrinsic connection with the fairies.<sup>29</sup>

Phantom islands just off the coast are a feature of Welsh folklore also. They are connected in some stories with a magical race called *Plant Rhys Ddwfn*, but this association is not invariable<sup>30</sup> and in any case the islands are essentially a feature of local geography despite their insubstantial character.<sup>31</sup> Throughout the Middle Welsh period the Otherworld region of Annwfn is, when its location is specified at all,<sup>32</sup> said to lie beneath the earth; the Book of Taliesin speaks of 'Annwfn below the world' (*Annwfyn is eluyd*);<sup>33</sup> the twelfth-century poet Cynddelw uses *Annwfyn* in apposition with *dwfyn* and *dyfynder*, both meaning 'depth, abyss';<sup>34</sup> and in the fourteenth century Dafydd ap Gwilym describes a fox's den as lying 'towards Annwfn'.<sup>35</sup> The evidence adduced in support of the view<sup>36</sup> that Annwfn was also imagined to be beyond the sea is

24 *Handbook*, 454; cf. Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Folk Custom*, 82, 86–7.

25 *Handbook*, 465–70.

26 *Ibid.*, 500–3; *Irish Folk Custom*, 89.

27 E.g. *Handbook*, 505–7; *Irish Folk Custom*, 89; Westropp, 'Brasil', 251–3.

28 Refs. in note 27, also Ray and Haddon, 'A Study of the Language', 249–57; Dimock, ed., *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*. 5, 94–5.

29 I know of only one exception, a story from Donegal in which a woman knitting on such an island throws a ball of yarn which sticks to a fishing-boat and, when the yarn is finally cut, sticks to the hand of one of the fishermen, Ó hEochaidh, ed., 'Sídhe-Scéalta', 221–2, reprinted Ó hEochaidh, ed., 'Seanchas Iascaireachta agus Farraipe', 21–3; *Siscéalta ó Thír Chonaill*, ed. Ó hEochaidh, Ní Néill and Ó Catháin, 214–8. The isolation of this example, and its close resemblance to an episode in *Immram Curaig Máele Dúin* (ed. Van Hamel, 45), make it likely that the story is ultimately of literary origin; the possibility was suggested by Murphy, 'Review of *Béaloides* 23', 276. My search has not been exhaustive, and in a field with the range and scope of folklore I do not doubt that further examples can be found; but the general character of the tradition is clear.

30 Rhys, *Celtic Folklore*, vol. 1, 160–73.

31 This is also true of the phantom islands of Ireland; Westropp notes that 'so unhesitatingly did the Irish give them a local habitation that they can be placed on the maps as definitely as any real islands', (Westropp, 'Brasil', 249); cf. Plate XXII. Cf. Gwales, a real island with supernatural characteristics, *Pedeir Keinc*, (ed. Williams, 46–7, 214–5).

32 Contrast Dafydd ap Gwilym's fanciful statement that summer goes to Annwfn in winter-time, *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym* (ed. Parry) §27, line 40.

33 *Facsimile and Text of the Book of Taliesin*, ed. Evans, 20.7–8.

34 *Llawysgrif Hendregadredd* (ed. Morris-Jones and Parry-Williams, 115).

35 *Gwaith Dafydd ap Gwilym*, ed. Parry, §22, line 42.

36 E.g. Williams, ed., *Pedeir Keinc*, 99–101; Loomis, *Wales and the Arthurian Legend*, 138–52.

drawn from three poems in the Book of Taliesin, none of which has yet been satisfactorily translated or explained: the phrase *Annwfn llifereint* 'Annwfn of floods';<sup>37</sup> the account in the poem *Preideu Annwn* ('Spoils of Annwfn'; title added *secunda manu*) of an attack by three shiploads of Arthur's men on a supernatural fort *Kaer Sidi*;<sup>38</sup> and the statement in a third poem that 'the streams of the sea' (*ffrydyeu gweilgi*) are around *Kaer Sidi's* corners.<sup>39</sup> Apart from the great ambiguity attaching to this material, it cannot be taken as representing an uncontaminated native tradition; as Rhys very plausibly suggested, the name *Sidi* is probably a borrowing from Irish *síd*.<sup>40</sup>

Outside the *immrama*, then, and the two closely linked tales *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Conlae*, the early sources give us no grounds for postulating belief in an overseas Otherworld; nor does there appear to be satisfactory evidence for such a belief in either contemporary Irish folklore or the traditions of Wales. Such a vacuum is clearly significant, despite the view of Ludwig Bieler that 'the "happy otherworld" at the end of the earth is a *Menschheitsgedanke* ... I do not see why [it] should have been absent from Celtic belief even if there is little positive evidence';<sup>41</sup> or Oskamp's assertion that the idea of an overseas Otherworld 'is inherent in the religious system of an island society'.<sup>42</sup> It seems reasonable to suggest, in light of the age and popularity of *Immram Brain* and *Echtrae Conlae*, that it is they and the Ulster literary movement which produced them which introduced this topos into Irish literature; that it was foreign to the native tradition at every stage appears evident.

37 *Facsimile and Text of the Book of Taliesin*, ed. Evans, 26.12.

38 *Ibid.*, 54.16–56.13.

39 *Ibid.*, 34.8–13. But the immediately following phrase 'And the fruitful fountain is above it' ('ar ffynhawn ffrwythlawn yssyd oducht') would suggest that *Kaer Sidi* is at the bottom of a spring. Taken as a whole the description is obviously enigmatic, perhaps allegorical; arbitrary concentration upon one or another of its details disguises this.

40 *Celtic Folklore*, vol. II, 678. He goes on to propose the identification of *Kaer Sidi* with Lundy Island; cf. Bromwich, *Trioedd*, 141.

41 'Two Observations', 15–6 [q.v. 91–2].

42 *The Voyage of Máel Dúin*, 85.