

EDUCATING CHRISTIANITY

Having heard that Bran Mac Feabhail had met Manannán Mac Lir, god of the sea, out at sea, St. Patrick turned in at his gate or, as it turned out, at the three sequent gates of his triple-ditched ringfort, each ditch perfectly palisaded and, as though he was expected, torches lighted at all three sets of gate posts.

And yes, Bran did look like someone who had seen God. Even as he looked at you, his eyes fully on you, he was still looking seaward.

What Manannán had said to Bran, singing it out over the manes and heads of his chariot horses at sea, that is what everyone Patrick had met walking west along the road had talked about, warrior and druid and child and crone and swineherd and cattle-reaver and seeress singing it:

Cáini amra laisin mBran
ina churchán tar muir nglan;
os mé, am charput do chéin
is magh sccothach ima-réidh.

A n-us muir glan
don náoi broindig a tá Bran,
is Mag Meall co n-iumat scoth
damsa a carput dá roth.

At-chí Bran
lín tonn tibri tar muir nglan.
At-chíu ca-déin i mMagh Mon
sgotha cennderga gin on

Taithnit gabra lir a sam
sella roiscc ro sire Bran.
Brundit sscotha sruaim do mil
a crích Manannáin mic Lir.

Lí na fairge fora taí
geldod mora imme-roí:
ra sert buidhe ocus glas
is talam nád écomrass.

Lingit ich bricc ass de brú
a muir finn forn-aiccisiu;
it láoig it úain co ndath,
co cairde, cin imarbad .

Manannán, a god, telling Bran, a mortal, what to you is bitter sea is to me a plain of delights, what to you is an endless, aimless heaving this way and that is to me a perfect world, nothing in it that isn't as perfect as an otter's face or as the fragrance of a primrose.

All of this Patrick knew, having heard it so often in so many local accents as it spread across the country, turning off chariot roads onto cow tracks, onto paths through woods and to wells and from wells to every house for miles about.

Why? Patrick asked a man he heard singing it at a fair. Why do sing it over and over and over again?

Because it is what it is, that's why I sing it, he said. I sing it because it is a Song of God, and while I'm singing it here at the centre, be sure that it is also being sung at the four corners of Ireland. For the first time ever all royal and tribal boundaries have gone down in Ireland. For the first time ever Ireland is one. It is one in a sung song of God.

And again, crowds around him, he began:

Cáini amra laisin mBran
ina churchán tar muir nglan;
os mé, am charput do chéin
is magh scothach ima-réidh.

What Patrick wasn't at all sure of, even though he had heard so much about it, was the silver branch. What had it to do with all of this? When and how did it first appear? Its music, could anyone endure it? Was it still among us? Had it come to stay? And if it had, what would that mean? A totally new way of understanding ordinary things? A totally new way, or perhaps a dangerously new way, of relating to river and star? The silver branch among us? Was that Manannán's way of seeing things among us? Is reality our way of seeing it or Manannán's way of seeing it? And if it is as Manannán sees it how can we ever pick it off a briar to feed ourselves, how can we ever chop it to warm ourselves, how when we need to piss can we so far dare as to actually piss on it? Or is it that the singing of the silver branch is in our pissing too? Is our pissing a Song of God? The Song of God the man sang at the fair?

A n-us muir glan
Don náoi broindig a tá Bran,
is Mag Meall co n-iumat scoth
damsa a carput dá roth ...

Is this the Pagan Gospel?

Patrick needed to know and that was why, night falling on him, that he walked through all three torch-lit gates and, sitting in front of him, put these two questions to Bran: how perfect is an otter's face when he has a brown trout between his teeth? what does the trout think?

A strange thing happened to me one day, Bran said. For the first time in my life I felt a big inconvenient need to be on my own, and silence, I wanted to know what that was like. At the cost of my people thinking that something bad was happening to me, I walked out and down and away into the wetlands, and yes, there was silence there, and solitude, more of both of them that I felt I could take. It was hard on me.

Anything I could hurl a spear at or take a sword to I could deal with, but how having beaten it back, how having cornered it, could I shove a sword in solitude. For the first time in my long warrior's life I knew defeat. 'Twas as if, cupping my hand down into it, I had drunk defeat. Me? Me defeated? Me defeated, not be Ferdia, but by solitude? Me defeated, not by Cuchulainn, but by silence? Would they see it in me? My people, would they see that I had been defeated, it making no difference by what? And what then of their continuing willingness to be led by me, to be ruled by me? Where normally I'd have turned for home I turned to day to come back and face insurgency. Then, listening downheartedly to the plashing of my feet in water as I

walked, I heard it, a music surely not of our world. Even my bones, even my mind. I thought it would melt. Turning round, I saw a silver branch, and it wasn't that it was making the music as a singer or as a harper might. It was the music. In its very being it was the music. It threatened me in all that I was. Not laying a hand on me, it raided me. Listening to it, if what I was doing was listening to it, I died to all habits of eye and mind in me. Listening to it, for a moment, only for a moment, I mattered as little to me as I do every night in dreamless sleep. Not because it had mercy on me, it ceased. Eventually, enough of who and what I used to be came back to me, and I walked home.

Caring not at all what druid or warrior or poet or harper or smith might think, I sat in silence that night, our usual bright life going on all around me.

Suddenly, in the middle of loud but good-humoured uproar there was silence.

Withdrawing my hand from before my eyes, I saw a woman surely not of our world and what startled me was that her singing was the singing of the silver branch.

Having no care for us, having no mercy on us, fifty quatrains she sang celebrating the world she came from and, the thing seeming like a doom to me, she invited me, or was it that she commanded me, to come and live in it.

Next morning, a company of three times nine warriors in each of three ships, we put out to sea, a spitting, wet wind of two minds where it wanted to blow from making life hard for us. After a day and a night our hands felt pickled. By evening it was our eyes, and soon, the way things were going, it would be our minds.

We toiled all night and, every ship's length of headway hard to hold on to, we toiled all morning, and then, hearing the thunder of him coming, we saw him, Manannán Mac Lir, god of the sea, coming over the sea.

Out over the manes and heads of his chariot horses he sang, Manannán singing to us, or, you could say, it was the silver branch singing to us, or, yet again, you could say that it was reality itself that was singing to us, telling us that it isn't as we perceive it:

At-chí Bran

Lín tonn tibri tar muir nglan.

at-chiú ca-déin i mMagh Mon

sgoitha cennderga gin on.

And what surprised us all the more, and frightened us all the more, was this: still singing to us out over the manes and heads of his thunder horses, Manannán, god of the sea, telling us that he will soon come ashore into Ireland, not to appear to us, but to lie with a woman called Caointigirn. As he sang of him, his singing the singing of the silver branch, we could see him, the Son of God who would be born among us, who would walk among us:

Moidfid sognáis gach sídhe;

bid treitil cach dagthíre;

at-fíi rúna rith ecne

isin mbith can a ecli

Bieid hi fethol cech míl

itir glasmuir agus tír;

bid druac re mbuidnib hi froiss;

bid cú allaid cech indroiss.

Bid damh co mbenuiph argait
hi mruig i nd-agthar carpait;
bid écni brec i llinn lain;
bid rón, bid eala fionnbán.

Biaid tre bitha síora
cét mbliadna hi findrighe;
silis learca lecht imchían,
dergfaid roí roth imrían ..

He will be welcome in all worlds and in all dimensions of any one world. To all mysteries and secrets he will have answers. When he needs to, he will be a dragon, he will be a wolf. Not limiting himself to one way, to one way only, of experiencing himself and the world, he will be a speckled salmon in a pool that mirrors mountains. The sea calling him, he will be a seal. A swan in a lake alone he will be. Seeing a silver-antlered stag walking to a river to drink, a swineherd will say to his fellow, that's him, that's the Son of God. Riding into it in a jewelled, four-horse chariot, he will redden a battlefield, fighting evil. Not just for thirty or sixty or seventy years will he live among us. No tree sown on the year of his birth will outlast him. People will think of him as they do of rivers and mountains, always with us.

Having heard as much as I was able to hear about reality and about our life with the silver-antlered Son of God, I commanded their captains to turn our ships round. An emanation of reality as it is, the silver branch ascended the shingles into Ireland with us.

It was to the land we had always lived in that the woman, one of our own, had invited us.

In every ordinary branch, whether oak branch or ash branch, is the singing of the silver branch.

Just as well that I didn't know that day that I was setting out on the most difficult of voyages, that the voyage to where we are.

More terrible than wonderful it is that our

Song of God

is about ourselves and our world, about our eyes and everything they see, about the holes in the sides of our heads and everything they hear, about our hands and everything we in our greed grab.

This voyage to where we are, it's what everyone all over Ireland is talking about, Patrick said. And they aren't only talking about it. Either they are turning their ships and their lives around or, the silver branch coming up the shingle shore before them, they are coming home to where they already are. It's to a state of eye and mind they are coming home. And ask anyone anywhere in Ireland now to sing a song and its our

Song of God

they will sing

Ireland, for now, is a voyage, it is a Bran's voyage to where we are. Indeed a man I met on the road welcomed me not to Ireland but to

BRAN'S VOYAGE TO WHERE WE ARE

It is what they are calling Ireland now, they are calling it

Imram Brain

You are welcome, he said, to silver branch seeing and to silver branch knowing. And you are welcome, he said, to settle here. To settle here, he added, in the delighting knowledge that the Silver Antlered Son of God is with us, is one of us. And it isn't only us who can say that. Seals say it. Wolves say it. Swans say it. Deer say it. Dragons say it. Singing it in every branch, trees say it. The shingles of the shore you climbed coming here say it.

And you, Bran asked, do you say it.

It will delight me, as it now so obviously delights everyone, when I am able to say it, Patrick said.

There is a question I would ask you, Patrick said.

Ask it, Bran said.

What do you do when you need to piss?

I go out and I piss.

With no sense of sacrilege against the singing of the silver branch in the grass you piss on?

The singing of the silver branch isn't in one thing and not in another, Bran said. It is in everything, even in the cancer that is killing me.

Now, the full moon lighting my way, I go north, Patrick said.

North to where? Bran asked.

North to a scatter of people who live near Foclut Wood.

And what, might I ask, is your business with them?

I will talk to them about the Son of God who knows what it is to be a brown trout in an otter's mouth.

Then there is a further question I would ask you, Bran said.

Ask it, Patrick said.

That scatter of people who live near Foclut Wood – will you sing Manannán's song to them? Will you induct them into silver branch seeing and knowing?

More likely, Patrick said, that they will induct me, challenging me as Christ does to consider the lily of the field, the twig on my path.

So why are you a Christian?

I have told you, haven't I?

Tell me again.

The coincidence of silver branch ontology and savagery in an otter's teeth, in my own teeth.

