

Irish tale-types

The extensive narrative literature which has been preserved in Irish manuscripts is now usually classified into four groups or cycles, the *mythological cycle (or cycles of the gods and goddesses), the *Ulster cycle, the *Fionn cycle (or Ossianic cycle), and the king or *historical cycle. The earlier classification, however, was according to the first word of the title of the story. *Togail Bruidne Da Derga was classed among the Togla [Destructions], *Táin Bó Cuailnge among the Tána [Cattle-raids], *Tochmarc Etaíne among the Tochmarca [Wooings], and so on. Two lists have come down to us of the stories which a medieval Irish poet would be expected to narrate or explicate. The first of these (conventionally called List A) survives in the twelfth century *Book of Leinster and a manuscript of the sixteenth century; the second (list B) is included in *Airec Menman Uraird maic Coise. These lists derive from a common source of the tenth century, but each of them was subsequently expanded. In addition to Destructions, Cattle-raids and Wooings, both lists include Battles (Catha), Feasts (*Fessa*), Adventures (*Echtrí* [see *Eachtra, Echtra.]), Elopements (*Aithid*), Slaughters (*Airgní*), Eruptions (*Tomadma*), Visions (*Físí* [see *Fís* ...]), Loves (*Serca*), Expeditions (*Slúagaid*), Migrations (*Tochomlada*). List A also has Caves (*Uatha*), Voyages (*Immrama* [see *Immram ...]), Violent Deaths (*Oitte* [see *Aided ...]), and Sieges (*Forbassa*), and List B Conceptions and Births (*Coimperta* [see *Compert ...]) and Ecstasies (*Builí* [see *Buile]).

These lists constitute an index of the purported narrative repertoire of the medieval Irish poet. While many of the items included in the lists correspond to the titles of tales which survive in the manuscripts, some of the items in the lists do not seem to refer to any of the extant tales, and some of the extant early tales are not represented in either list. Moreover, there is no clear correlation between the items and the actual manuscript texts which bear identical or very similar titles. *Cath Maige Tuired, for example, is included in both lists, and this indicates that the poet would have been expected to know the story of the battle and to be able to tell or explicate it. What we do not know is how the poet would have dealt with the story, and, particularly, what relationship his version would have had to the extant manuscript tales. The early version of Cath Maige Tuired, although based on Old Irish materials, is preserved in a single manuscript of the sixteenth century, where the title is given as The Battle of Moytirra, and the Birth of Bress Son of Elathan, and his Reign. This analytical title reflects the considerable attention given in this version of Cath Maige Tuired to the birth and reign of Bress, but we cannot say whether any medieval Irish poet would have included this material in his treatment of the story. The literary

activities of the authors of the extant sagas extended beyond the telling of stories, to combining (and sometimes comparing) different stories or different versions of a single story.

The saga-lists nevertheless give a good summary indication of the thematic range of the materials used by the authors of the sagas. The Conceptions and Births, the Adventures and Voyages, the Wooings and Elopements, and the Deaths deal with crucial events in the lives of heroes and heroines; some of the other categories, such as the Battles, the Eruptions and Migrations, the Destructions and Slaughters, and the Cattle-raids have to do with cataclysmic events in the social and political history of population-groups. It is with personal and socio-political events of this kind that early Irish narrative is primarily concerned. The sorting of Irish narrative into the categories enumerated in the saga-lists and reflected, to an extent, in the titles of the manuscript saga, may also reflect the social function of the tales. There is evidence to suggest that Battles were narrated to kings about to embark on war. Likewise, the Cattle-raids may have been told before undertaking a cattle-raid, Voyages on setting out to sea, Conceptions and Births at births, Wooings at weddings, Death Tales at wakes, and so on.

The categories of the saga-lists can be described as tale-types only in a very loose sense. The individual members of the various categories, insofar as they are represented in the surviving corpus, differ greatly among themselves in extent, and in their structure and content. They nevertheless have as an irreducible common core a destruction or cattle-raid or wooing, or whatever else is indicated in the title of the category, and some of them, such as the Conceptions and Births, tend to conform to a common pattern. See Proinsias *Mac Cana, *The Learned Tales of Medieval Ireland* (1980); also Alwyn and Brinley Rees, *Celtic Heritage: Ancient Tradition in Ireland and Wales* (1961).