

Adomnán's  
*'Law of the Innocents'*

*Cáin Adomnáin*

A seventh century law for  
the protection of non-combatants  
translated with an introduction by

Gilbert Márkus

2008

Kilmartin House Trust

Adomnán's Law of the Innocents: *Cáin Adomnáin*  
© Gilbert Márkus 2008

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored or transmitted in any form without the express written  
permission of the author.

Published by  
Kilmartin House Trust  
Kilmartin  
Argyll PA31 8RQ

ISBN  
978 0 9533674 3 6

Cover illustration: *The Book of Kells*, fo. 200r.  
reproduced by kind permission of The Board of Trinity College Dublin.

## Adomnán's *Law of the Innocents*

The ninth abbot of the Hebridean island monastery of Iona, Adomnán mac Rónáin, is rather overshadowed in the popular imagination by his predecessor St Columba, or Colum Cille as he is known in Gaelic. Columba founded the monastery of Iona on the west coast of Scotland in the year 563, and it became one of the most influential churches in the Gaelic world, its monks also penetrating into Northumbria, Pictland, and beyond. By the mid-eighth century the bishop of Salzburg, Vergil (a Latinisation of Gaelic Fergal), was probably a monk of Iona. Columba became one of the most popular saints of later medieval Scotland, revered as a national protector. Even now, fourteen centuries later, his name is one of those that most readily spring to mind when people begin to talk about 'Celtic Christianity' – though mention of Columba's name does not always guarantee that the views proposed as 'Celtic' would be remotely recognisable to him.

But if Columba achieved widespread celebrity, and if he has rather overshadowed the memory of his successor, Adomnán, we should note that this is mostly because of Adomnán's own success in promoting Columba's memory. It was Adomnán who wrote the *Life of Columba* in the late seventh century, about 100 years after the founder's death in the year 597, and without that *Life* we would know next to nothing about Columba. That book was the foundation on which much subsequent Columban cult would be built: his profile as a prophet and a visionary, a miracle-worker and a healer, a father of monks, a king-maker, a pastor and a protector of the poor – all this is based on Adomnán's portrayal of Columba, his 'blessed patron'.

We should therefore not allow Adomnán's success in promoting Columba to blind us to his own achievements. Not only did he write the *Life of Columba*; he was better known in the Middle Ages for his work *On the Holy Places (de Locis Sanctis)*, which explored the Holy Land and its topography, its architecture and religious cult, and other parts of the Mediterranean too, in order to shed light on the meaning of scripture, and perhaps to give his readers examples of religious practice which had the prestige and authority of being the practice in Jerusalem, or in other important churches.<sup>1</sup>

There are other texts associated with Adomnán – some poetry which is attributed to him, probably mostly falsely, and at least one poem which has not traditionally been attributed to him but which in fact he probably did write.<sup>2</sup> Some canons (church regulations) have also been traditionally ascribed to Adomnán – nineteen concerning dietary regulations and one about women who leave their husbands and remarry.

---

<sup>1</sup> See for example Thomas O'Loughlin 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Márkus forthcoming, '*Adiutor Laborantium*'.

Our present interest, however, is in a text of quite a different character. It is a legal text. Indeed it is the earliest surviving law that can be said to be in some sense Scottish. In the year 697 the *Annals of Ulster* record that ‘Adomnán went to Ireland and gave the Law of the Innocents to the peoples.’<sup>3</sup> This brief entry refers to his involvement at a major gathering (probably both a church synod and a royal assembly) at Birr, a monastery in the heart of Ireland, at which he succeeded in promulgating a law whose main aim was the protection of women – and to a lesser extent other ‘innocents’, children and clerics – from violence.<sup>4</sup> Though it is less well known than the *Life of Columba* and *On the Holy Places*, the Law is arguably his greatest achievement. What follows in this booklet is an English translation of this ‘Law of the Innocents’ (otherwise known as *Cáin Adomnáin* ‘Adomnán’s Law’). The text given here comprises the original legal material, pretty much as it must have appeared in 697, and a lot of preliminary material which was probably added to it in the tenth century. It was written mostly in Old Gaelic, with a few lines of Latin as well. Although an edition and translation of the text was published in 1905 by Kuno Meyer,<sup>5</sup> it remained little known outside academic circles for many decades.

I published a new translation in 1997, the 1300th anniversary of the Law’s first promulgation and the 1400th anniversary of St Columba’s death. In the following decade of reading and conversation with colleagues and friends, some further thoughts have occurred to me. A few corrections and additions have therefore been incorporated into this new edition. The fact that the first edition is now out of print provides further justification for this one. Since its publication in 1997, it has been used by students of law, medieval history and Celtic society, as well as – most importantly, in my view – activists concerned with peace-making and the protection of vulnerable people in places of violence and oppression.

---

<sup>3</sup> *Adomnanus ad Hiberniam pergit et dedit Legem Innocentium populis*. The word *innocens* means ‘harmless’, and this is exactly what a non-combatant is for the purpose of the law: someone who does no hurt or harm. The word evokes both biblical laws and laws made in the Gaelic church. Thus we find another legal text associated with Iona during Adomnán’s abbacy which, citing Deut. 27:24, states: ‘Cursed be he who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood’ (*sanguinem innocentem*) (*CCH* lxi, 6).

<sup>4</sup> In early Irish laws, these three groups were ‘innocent’ in that they were not expected to bear arms. The *Annals of Ulster*, in the year 814, record a military expedition with the note ‘many innocents were slain’ (*plurimi interfecti sunt innocentes*). Such a record, probably made by a monastic scribe, reflects the continuing sense of the wrongness of slaying non-combatants. Note also how in the late medieval Scottish tradition, the violence of William Wallace is shown by Hary as respecting the same classes of innocents: ‘None escaped but priests, women and children’ (Yeid nane away bot preistis, wyffis and barnys) (*Wallace* vol. i, 170). The immunity of non-combatants in church law is not unique to the Gaelic world (see Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* ii, 20, though Bede presumably knew about Adomnán’s Law, and may have been influenced by it). Of course, the whole western church had been working on such ideas for some time, partly developing Augustine’s views on the obligation of acting justly even in time of war.

<sup>5</sup> Kuno Meyer 1905. Apart from my own translation in 1997, another was subsequently published by Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha (2001), and a third by Ó Néill & Dumville (2003).

## Protector of Women

Around the year 800 AD, Adomnán was remembered in the *Martyrology of Oengus* for one thing, out of all the many things for which he might have been honoured. His feast-day is marked thus by the martyrology:

To Adomnán of Iona,  
whose troop is radiant,  
noble Jesus has granted  
the lasting freedom of the women of the Gaels.<sup>6</sup>

The seventh abbot of Iona was remembered as the defender of women and their protector against violence, because of the Law which he had made for them. He sought to establish this protection not only in his Law, but in other writings too. He used his *Life of St Columba* to promote the same idea. He frequently shows the saint helping and supporting women, but in one story in particular there is a clear presentation of Columba as a protector of women against violence:

When the blessed Columba was still a young deacon, living in Leinster and studying divine wisdom, it happened one day that a certain man, a cruel and pitiless persecutor of the innocent,<sup>7</sup> was pursuing a young girl as she ran away across the level plain. When she happened to see the young deacon's elderly teacher, Gemmán, reading on the plain, she fled straight to him as fast as she could. Alarmed by this sudden event, Gemmán called Columba, who was reading a little way off, so that together they might defend the girl from her pursuer in so far as they could.

But when the man drew close he showed them no reverence, and he killed the girl with his spear as she hid under their robes. Leaving her lying dead at their feet he turned away from them and began to go away.

The old man was deeply saddened then, and he turned to Columba and said, 'How long, O holy boy, Columba, will God the just judge allow this crime and our own dishonour to go unpunished?' Whereupon the saint pronounced this sentence on the wicked man, saying, 'In the same hour in which the soul of the girl whom he has killed rises to heaven, let the soul of her killer descend to hell.'

And quicker than speech, like Annanias before Peter (Acts 5:5), at Columba's word that killer of innocents fell dead on the spot before the eyes of the holy youth. The news of this sudden and terrible vengeance immediately spread around many provinces of Ireland, with the wonderful renown of the holy deacon.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Stokes 1905, 196.

<sup>7</sup> It is surely no coincidence that in a passage that may be seen as giving Adomnán the authority to enact the *Lex Innocentium*, his opponent is described as a *persequutor innocentium*, 'oppressor of the innocent'.

<sup>8</sup> *Vita Columbae* ii, 25 (my translation).

It is important to realise that when Adomnán tells this story he is not merely recounting some past event in Columba's life. Adomnán is Columba's successor, the abbot of Columba's monastery, and he tells the story about his patron saint and predecessor because it reflects his own agenda and the agenda of his monastery: what Columba did then, his monastery and his successor must do now. The story portrays Columba as a man of divine power as well as compassion. As the girl comes to Columba seeking safety or sanctuary, Adomnán shows the dreadful punishments that will fall on those who violate Iona's protection. Note that the man's offence is two-fold: it is a crime against the girl (he is called a 'persecutor of the innocent'), but it is also a crime against the honour of the two saints who have given her their protection, Columba and Gemmán. So the miracle offers a kind of divine justification for the present Law of Adomnán, showing that Iona has a special role to play in giving women protection and also justifying the punitive mechanism by which the Law is to be enforced: death for those who kill women and compensation to Iona for the violation of its honour which occurs when a woman is killed.

### **The archaeology of the text**

The *Cáin Adomnáin* as it now stands is a composite text, probably put together in the tenth century at Raphoe in County Donegal, a monastery which by this time was presenting itself as the true possessor of Adomnán's Law, and whose abbot presumably saw himself as Adomnán's heir. The oldest material is that contained in §§ 34-53, which seems to be the strictly legal material of the original seventh-century promulgation by the abbot of Iona, concerning offences and the penalties associated with them, as well as aspects of the Law's enforcement, though even this part may have been altered in transmission in some ways.

A great deal of new material was added to the original text of the Law to create the text as it now stands. The additions contain material of various literary genres: poetry and prose, dramatic narrative and liturgical prescription, Gaelic and Latin. The first part of this additional material (§ 1-27) describes the situation of women, the process by which Adomnán 'obtained' his Law, and some of its supposed advantages as seen by the writer perhaps as much as three centuries after it was promulgated.

### **The situation of women**

The story begins with some of the later material, an account of how awful women's lives were before the enactment of the Law. We need not assume that the condition of women before the Law was anything like as bad as we are told in §§ 1-3, whose description owes more to the imagination of the writer than to a knowledge of how things were for women in the seventh century.<sup>9</sup> But it is probably true that women's social and legal position did improve in some

---

<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, readers tempted to imagine a more or less pacific society, or one where the lives of non-combatants were respected, would do well to read Lawrence Keeley's *War Before Civilisation*.

respects with the coming of Christianity to the Gaelic world (Ireland and western Scotland) between the fifth and seventh centuries, and it is likely that women were occasionally involved in certain kinds of military encounter and war-making (as suggested by some provisions of the Law, which would otherwise have had no function, such as § 52) even if the appalling picture of §3 is greatly exaggerated.

### **How Adomnán obtained his Law**

The dramatic and rather gruesome tale (§§ 5-15) of how Adomnán and his mother persuaded God to give them this Law is a great story well told, though it was written more than two hundred years after the Law and owes little to historical fact. What it does reveal, however, is a fascinating picture of the medieval Gaelic view of God's relationship with humanity, how people could almost force God's hand by fasting and by extreme forms of asceticism. There is an echo in this tale of the old Gaelic legal procedure of *troscud*, in which someone with a complaint against a person of high status could pressurize him to concede justice by fasting against him. The writer therefore sees Adomnán's struggle to 'obtain' this law from God in terms of native Irish legal procedures. Here, as in every society and in every age, religious ideas are expressed in the language, metaphors and imagery available to the writer.

The tale is full of pity and compassion in its touching picture of a child with milk on one of its cheeks and blood on the other.<sup>10</sup> But there are moments of light relief and laughter as we see seagulls shitting on Adomnán's head, or when we are told, when Ronnat buries him in a stone chest, 'It is not many women who would do this to their son.' The first part of the text (§§ 1-27) may originally have been a sermon to be preached on Adomnán's feast day, or on an occasion when the Law was being promulgated among the people, which might explain some features of its style.<sup>11</sup>

### **Resistance and Compliance**

Having received the Law from God, Adomnán attempts to promulgate it (§§ 16-21) with the support of various kings, several of whom refuse to comply. Some of the kings attempt to kill Adomnán, but he rings his bell against them and curses them, killing some of them and depriving others of kingship for their hardness of heart. It is worth recalling here that this section of the text was written in about the tenth century, and the cursing of these kings and their consequent political demise is a reflection of the political realities faced by their descendants in that later epoch rather than those of the seventh century when the law was actually promulgated.

Sureties, human and natural, living and dead, are called to support the law (§

---

<sup>10</sup> Again, such motifs owe much to native Gaelic literary tradition.

<sup>11</sup> The narrative style of sections 1 to 27, and the way in which women listeners seem to be directly addressed by the narrator, confirm Professor Thomas Clancy's suggestion (pers. comm.) that this part of the text was a sermon.

22) and the complex interweaving of mutual obligations between Iona and Irish women, between the protectors and the protected, is described: what women owe to Iona, and what Adomnán will do for women – not only protection from violence, but protection from judgement and hell (§ 25). This most dramatic and narrative part of the document finishes with a poem (§27) in praise of Adomnán, encouraging women to support him (i.e. to support his monastery).

### **Enactment**

The next part of the text (§§ 28-32) narrates the enactment or promulgation of the Law, how it took place at Birr and how its authority extended over Ireland and Britain, and who were the authorities, ecclesiastical and secular, who were its ‘guarantors’, lending their authority to the Law and swearing to support and enforce it. Professor Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha (1982) has shown that not all of the *titles* of these individuals are accurate – some are slightly anachronistic and some are mistakes – but the *names* of the guarantors seem to be an authentic record of Adomnán’s contemporaries who guaranteed the Law, and so the names in this passage seem to be part of the original seventh century stratum, however embedded they may be in later material. This later material continues with the description of the oaths sworn to fulfill the Law, and the invocation of heavenly support for it, including an order of cursing (§ 32) for those who do not enforce it.

### **An angelic addition**

Another obviously additional piece of material is the ‘decree of the angel to Adomnán’ (§ 33), written in Latin and describing the process by which an angel – not his mother in this account – rather forcibly persuaded the abbot to promulgate his Law. Like the other later material, this section shows its distance from the original *Cáin Adomnáin* by focussing entirely on the Law’s protection of women, making no mention of children and clergy, though the original legal material itself is clearly concerned with all three groups. The angelic addition also speaks in broad sweeping terms about women being killed, about the role of Mary the mother of Jesus in this Law, and about the blood-thirsty punishments to be imposed on those who kill women, and is thus very different in style from the following legal material, which is couched in the far more specific, complex, technical and nuanced terms typical of early Gaelic laws.

### **The legal content**

The *Cáin Adomnáin* from §34 on is probably mostly original material, though it may have been altered in some places. These original sections, often in difficult and technical legal language, forbid assaults on women, clergy and children (though women are mentioned more often) and prescribe punishments for crimes against them.

The Law does not come from a gentle and peaceful milieu, but from a world



ruled by warrior aristocrats who were engaged in a constant struggle for power, as we know from the annals of the period. Warfare was a normal mechanism of the political process rather than a consequence of its failure, and this is clearly a problem that vexed Adomnán. In the *Life of Columba* he repeatedly describes kings and kingship in a very untraditional way for an Irishman. He says that kings are 'ordained by God' for example, and people are cursed for assaulting them. The creation of stable kingship, strong law and peaceful transition from one reign to another under church guidance all seem to be things that Adomnán is proposing for his contemporaries, perhaps in the hope that such things would reduce the level of violence in society as a whole.

The word *cáin* in the title of this Law, the *Cáin Adomnáin*, is a term used in two ways in this text. It refers first to the law itself. In the Gaelic legal system *cáin* law was not part of the old customary law which formed the great bulk of the legal corpus, but was promulgated as the act of a legislator. But the term *cáin* has another meaning, referring to the tribute and fines which are payable under the law to the authority which promulgated it. So we find that the law is supported by payments of goods, and violations of the law are punished by payment of fines to Adomnán's community.

The community which first promoted the law and received the *cáin* payments was Iona,<sup>12</sup> probably acting in the name of Columba, but by the time the text reached its present form the community responsible for the Law seems to have been Raphoe, a monastery with close ties to Iona and to Adomnán himself. Promulgation of the Law involved the abbot or his representative travelling around the country with the relics of the patron saint, which by the time this version of the text was produced meant Adomnán rather than Columba, whose name is not mentioned at all in our text. We first hear of such a journey being made in the *Annals of Ulster* in the year 727: 'The relics of Adomnán are brought over to Ireland, and the Law is renewed.' On these journeys or 'circuits', the abbot would presumably re-affirm the authority of the Law, enforce sanctions and collect revenues, though we have no contemporary descriptions of how this business was conducted.<sup>13</sup> To some readers this might all seem to be nothing more than a divinely inspired protection racket, but this is surely too cynical a view and one conditioned by an anachronistic approach to the matter. Iona was a seventh century monastery operating in a seventh century legal culture, bound in many ways by the conventions and concerns of her own society. What is striking is the skill with which Iona's monks used the legal means available to them in their world for such a remarkably original and gospel-inspired project.

---

<sup>12</sup> This is clearly suggested by §43, where 'Adomnán's community' is named as the payee of fines for injuries.

<sup>13</sup> It is hard to know whether these 'circuits' were simply a reflection of native Irish legal practice, or whether perhaps there was also a conscious echo of a biblical precedent. 1 Samuel 7:16 reads 'Samuel went on a circuit year by year ... and he judged Israel in all these places' (in Vulgate: et ibat [Samuel] per singulos annos circuiens ... et iudicabat Israelem in supradictis locis).

## War and peace

The Law of Adomnán was an early attempt to limit the effects of war by protecting those who were not combatants, who did not bear arms: women and clergy, and children who had not yet taken up weapons for the first time. It is not a pacifist text, and it did not seek (unrealistically) to stop war altogether, but rather to do what it could to enforce what would later be called *ius in bello*, the imposition of moral principles on the conduct of war.

There is much more that could be said about the background and significance of the Law, but the foregoing is sufficient to let readers judge for themselves something of its significance in its historical context. The following translation is based on Meyer's 1905 edition of the Gaelic-Latin text, with some adjustments based on the edition of Ó Néill and Dumville (2003). It started life as a translation exercise in a post-graduate Old Irish reading group in the Department of Celtic at the University of Glasgow with Thomas Owen Clancy and Abigail Burnyeat. Their suggestions during our weekly meetings helped me to make sense of several difficult passages, and I am grateful to them both. All surviving errors are my own. There are some passages where I have opted for clarity rather than strict literalism: slight adjustments and corrections for the sake of intelligibility are made silently, while more substantial ones are identified by square brackets [thus]. There are other passages which will probably be unintelligible at first reading: Gaelic law texts are as dense, technical and complex as those of any other legal tradition, and not always easy to understand.

I am indebted to Thomas Owen Clancy, Varese Layzer and Rachel Butter for their comments on earlier versions of this text.

I hope that this work will be read not merely as a contribution to the study of Gaelic law and society, but as an act of *pietas* towards Adomnán himself, and as an attempt to make the text of his Law available to a wider readership. I also hope that readers will be inspired to learn from Adomnán and from his passionate concern to protect the most vulnerable people from violence and the horrors of war. In 2007 British weapons are being sold to countries all over the world where they are often used against defenceless civilians. Land-mines scattered like seed yield a harvest of death and injury for tens of thousands of innocents every year. Nuclear weapons aimed at civilian populations make a mockery of international laws such as the Geneva Convention, the successors of Adomnán's Law, which forbid direct attacks on non-combatants. The current inferno of violence in the Middle East is fuelled by the conduct of those who are unable or unwilling to distinguish between those who are 'enemies', in the sense of using violence to threaten the peace, and those who are innocent. Many of those who flee such violence seek asylum in countries where they are labelled 'bogus', and where they are imprisoned or left destitute on the streets and forbidden to work. The cruel conditions to which Adomnán's Law was a response are no less real now than they were in the

seventh century. If the reader is moved by the plight of the 'innocents', he or she might like to consult the list of addresses of modern agencies with which this booklet concludes.

Kilmartin House would like to acknowledge the support of Writing Scotland, the Ashfield Trust, the Binks Trust and the Scottish International Education Trust for their generous contributions to the cost of producing this book.

## *Cáin Adomnáin*

There were five ages before the birth of Christ: from Adam to the Flood, from the Flood to Abraham, from Abraham to David, from David to the captivity in Babylon, from the captivity of Babylon to the birth of Christ.<sup>14</sup> Women were in servitude and in oppression during that time, until there came Adomnán son of Rónán, son of Tinne, son of Áed, son of Colum, son of Lugaid son of Sétna, son of Fergus, son of Conall, son of Níall.

2] 'Slavey' (*cumalach*)<sup>15</sup> was the name for women until Adomnán came to free them, and this was the *cumalach*: the woman for whom a pit was dug at the end of the door so that it covered her nakedness. The end of the spit was on her until the cooking of the portion was finished. After she came out of that pit in the earth, she dipped a lamp the size of four men's hands into her lump of butter or tallow. That candle was to be in her hand until the division and the sharing and the spreading of bedding was finished in the houses of king and rulers. There was no share in bag or basket for that woman, nor in the main dwelling of the master of the house, but she was left in a cold shed outside the enclosure, lest harm should come upon her master from sea or from land.

3] This was the work that the best of women would do: going into battle and battlefield, into encounter and encampment, expedition and hosting, wounding and slaughter. Her bag of provisions hung on one side of her, her infant on the other side; her wooden pole was on her back, thirty feet in length, with an iron hook at one end which she would plunge into the hair of another woman out of the opposing ranks. Her man would be behind her, a fence-post in his hand, flogging her into battle. It was a woman's head or her two breasts that were carried off as a trophy at that time.

4] After the coming of Adomnán now, a good woman is not deprived of her testimony on earth, if it is secured by righteous deeds. For a mother is a venerable treasure, a mother is a good treasure, the mother of saints and bishops and just men, one deserving of the kingdom of heaven and a propagation on earth.

5] Adomnán suffered much hardship for your sake, O women, so that half of the house is yours and there is a place for your chair in the other half; so that your contract is free, and your legal protection, from the time of Adomnán. The *Cáin Adomnáin* is the first law in heaven and on earth which was arranged for women.

---

<sup>14</sup> Elements of this five-fold division of history until the coming of Christ can be found in the genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1:17; it is more fully developed in Augustine's *City of God* xviii, i, Isidore of Seville's *Chronicon* (preface) and also in the Roman Martyrology for 25th December.

<sup>15</sup> *Cumal* is the word for a female slave in Old Irish, but it came to mean a unit of currency. In several eighth-century texts, a *cumal* was equivalent in value to three cows.

6] This was the beginning of the tale: once Adomnán and his mother were travelling on the road by Áth Drochait<sup>16</sup> in Uaithne in Uí Aedo Odba in the south of Brega. ‘Come up on my back, mother dear,’ he said.

‘I will not go,’ said she.

‘What’s this? What is the matter with you?’ he said.

‘It is because you are not a dutiful son,’ she said.

‘Who is more dutiful than I? I put a strap across my breast to carry you from one place to another, and to keep you out of all the piss and shit. I don’t know of any duty a man’s son could do for his mother that I don’t do for you, except making that humming tune that women make ...<sup>17</sup> Since I can’t do that humming tune, I will have a harp made for you to delight you, with a strap of white bronze.’

‘If that were so,’ she said, ‘your dutifulness would be good. But that is not the duty I mean, but rather the freeing of women from encounter and encampment, from expedition and hosting, from wounding, from slaughter, and from the slavery of the cauldron.’

7] Then she went up on her son’s back, till they came upon a field of slaughter. This was how thick the carnage was on which they came: the two feet of one woman reached to the headless neck of the next one. Of all they saw on the battlefield, they saw nothing which they found more touching or more wretched than the head of a woman lying in one place and her body in another, and her infant on the breast of her corpse. There was a stream of milk on one of its cheeks and a stream of blood on the other cheek.

8] ‘That is touching and pitiful to me,’ said Ronnat, Adomnán’s mother, ‘what I see at your feet, O dear cleric. Why do you not let me down to the ground, so that I may give my breast to the child? But it’s a long time since my breasts ran dry. Nothing would be found in them. Why do you not prove your clerical skill for us on that pitiful body to see if the Lord will revive it for you?’ This is where the old saying comes from: ‘Every pup is lovely under its mother.’<sup>18</sup>

At the word of his mother, Adomnán turned and set the head on the neck, and he made a sign of the cross with his staff over the woman’s breast, and she rose up.

9] ‘Alas, O my great Lord of the Elements,’ she said.

‘What makes you say alas?’ said Adomnán.

‘My having been put to the sword on the battlefield, and then my having been put in the pains of hell. I do not know anyone, either here or there, who

---

<sup>16</sup> This is now Drogheda, on the Boyne.

<sup>17</sup> The words here are obscure. The manuscript may be corrupt, but suggestions have included ‘with a rustic’s rude flesh-fork which they have,’ perhaps a kind of Jew’s harp, or ‘in the broad-mouthed peasant way they have,’ as Prof Clancy has suggested (pers. comm.).

<sup>18</sup> I have no idea what this proverb meant, nor what exact relation it bears to this story. But note that Adomnán is ‘under his mother’ in this story, and perhaps the child is seen as ‘under’ the corpse of its mother, too.

would do a kindness or a mercy for me except for Adomnán, with the Virgin Mary urging him on to it on behalf of the community of heaven.’

10] And the woman who was brought back to life there at the word of Adomnán was Smirgat daughter of Áed Find, king of the Bréifne of Connaught, the wife of the king of the Luigni of Tara; for the women of the Uí Aedo Odba and of southern Brega and of the Luigni of Tara had come together in battle around the ford, so that of all of them not a soul had remained in its body, but they had fallen sole to sole.

11] ‘Well then, Adomnán,’ said Ronnat, ‘it has been granted to you now to free the women of the western world. Neither food nor drink will go into your mouth until women have been set free by you.’

‘No living creature can be without food,’ said Adomnán. ‘If my eyes see it, my hands will reach out for it.’

‘But your eyes shall not see, nor will your hands reach it.’

12] Then Ronnat went to Brugach son of Deda and got a chain from him. She put it around her son's breast under the bridge of Loch Swilly in Cenél Conaill, the place where the covenant had been made between his mother's kindred and his father's kindred, i.e. between Cenél nEndai and [Cenél] Lugdach, so that whoever of them should break the covenant would be buried alive in the earth, but whoever should fulfill it would dwell with Adomnán in heaven. And she takes a stone which is used for striking fire – it filled her hand. She puts it into one of her son's cheeks, so it was on that he had his satisfaction in food and drink.

13] After that, at the end of eight months, his mother came to see him, and she saw the top of his head. ‘My little son there,’ she said, ‘is like an apple on the wave. Little is his grasp on earth, and he has not a prayer in heaven, but salt has burned him and the sea-gulls have shat on his head. And I see that women have still not been freed by him.’

‘It's my Lord who ought to carry the blame, dear mother,’ he said. ‘For Christ's sake, change my suffering!’

14] This is the change of suffering she made for him, and not many women would do this to their son: she buried him in a stone chest in Raphoe of Tír Chonaill, so that maggots ate the root of his tongue, and the slime of his head burst out through his ears. After that she took him to Carraic in Chulinn, and he stayed there another eight months.

15] At the end of four years, angels of God came from heaven to talk with him. They lifted Adomnán out of the stone chest and took him to the Plain of Birr, to

the provincial boundary between the Uí Néill and the Men of Munster.<sup>19</sup> ‘Rise up now out of your hiding-place,’ said the angel to Adomnán.

‘I will not rise,’ said Adomnán, ‘until women have been freed for me.’

Then the angel said, ‘Everything which you ask of the Lord you shall have, for the sake of your labour.’

16] But Loingsech Bregbán said, ‘If it is done, it will not be done during my time.’ He was from Fanat of Cenél Conaill. ‘It is an evil time when men’s sleep is murdered because of women, that women should live and men be slaughtered. Take a sword to the deaf and dumb one who says anything but that women should be in captivity forever until the very Day of Judgement.’

17] These are the kings who rose up then at Loingsech’s word to put Adomnán to the sword: Dóelguss son of Óengus son of Donnfráigh, the high king of Munster; Élodach, king of the Deisi; Cú Cherca, king of Osraige; Cellach the Red, king of Leinster; Irgalach grandson of Conuing, the king of Brega; Brugach son of Dedad; Fingen Éoganach - of those who were there from among the kings of the western world. Adomnán did not carry a sword with him into the battle, but the bell of Adomnán’s Anger, i.e. the bell of Adomnán’s table. Then Adomnán spoke these words:

18] I strike this little bell  
beside Lettir for one purpose:  
that bright Dóelgus may not drink  
the ale at which Óengus<sup>20</sup> has been.

Today I will sing my psalms in a cave of stone  
– may it not be a good omen –  
that bright Dóelgus may not drink  
the beer which is drunk to the dregs.

The curse of God on Élodach,  
on the ruler of Femen of the Déisi,  
so that no king be born from him,  
nor the makings of a king after him.

O humble, gentle lad,  
O son armed with the Rule,<sup>21</sup>  
strike the bell against Cellach of Carman,  
that he be in the earth before the year’s end.

---

<sup>19</sup> This is where the synod and royal assembly took place at which the *Cáin Adomnáin* was first promulgated. It is on the boundary between the two great power blocks of northern and southern Ireland.

<sup>20</sup> Óengus is the father of Dóelgus, and drinking his father’s ale represents Dóelgus inheriting his kingship. So Dóelgus is being deprived of rule here.

<sup>21</sup> This lad is his monastic servant or attendant, who has no defence except his faith in God – either Christ’s rule of the Gospel, or the Rule of his monastery.

19] ‘Red Cellach, the king of Leinster, apart from the son that is in his wife's womb now, shall have no seed or descendants; and even that one, there will be blight and ruin on his children unless they follow my will. As long as they levy my tribute for me, no other tribe will have supremacy over them. From them will come victory of nobility, the victory of battle and the victory of plunder. The kingship of the Uí Chellaig will spring from them.’

20] O laddie armed with holy orders,  
    who have come to noble Maistiu,  
    strike the little bell against Domnall,  
    that his year should not be complete.

‘Domnall son of Murchad, the king of Ulster, will not leave seed nor descendant, except for the son and the father, and even so madness will carry off one of them, and wasting will carry off the other. I take away from them the over-kingship of Ulster.’

21] My own wee true-judging bell  
    by which Irgalach is made childless:  
I beg the true-judging King  
    that there be no king from Irgalach.

Vengeance of God upon Irgalach,  
    that he may not rule Brega of the true farmsteads.  
May there be no children nor kindred;  
    may he be forsaken, childless.

The bell of truly miraculous Adomnáin  
    has laid waste many kings.  
Each one against whom it gives battle one thing awaits:  
    it has laid them waste.

As well as laying waste strongholds, Adomnán's bell has laid waste kings in defence of women, bringing them to belief, so that women's contract and their legal protection is free from the time of Adomnán until now. So the *Cáin Adomnáin* is the first law arranged [for women?] in heaven and on earth.

22] Adomnán did not take anything until sureties and bonds were given to him concerning the freedom of women. These are the sureties: sun and moon, and the elements of God besides; Peter, Paul, Andrew and the rest of the apostles; Gregory, the two Patricks, the two Ciaráns, the two Crónáns, the four Fintáns, Mobíu, Mobí, Momáedoc, Munnu, Scothíne, Senán, Féchíne, Dúilech, Cairnech, Cíanán, Carthach, Victor, bishop Curetán, bishop Móeldub, Ionán son



of Samán, Foelán abbot of Imlech Ibair, Cillíne abbot of Lothra, Colmán son of Sechnusach, Eochaid abbot of Clúain Uamai, the two Finnéns, the son of Labraid Lán.

23] Those guarantors gave three shouts of malediction on every man who should kill a woman with his right hand or his left, or with his foot or his tongue, so that his heirs would be elder and nettle and cornrake.<sup>22</sup> The same guarantors gave three shouts of blessing on every woman who would do something for the community of Adomnán, though his relics were to come often: a horse every quarter-year to his relics, to his heir,<sup>23</sup> to be brought to the bath in Raphoe, but that is only from queens. Other women give according to their ability.

24] Women said and promised that they would give half their household to Adomnán for delivering them from the bondage and oppression in which they had been. Adomnán would take only a little from them, i.e. a white tunic with a black border from each penitent spouse,<sup>24</sup> a scruple of gold from each ruler's wife, a linen cloth from each sub-chieftain's wife, seven loaves from each unfree woman, a wether from every small flock, and the first lamb that is born in every house, whether it be black or white, for God and for Adomnán.

25] In return for this tribute, small and large, two women would go with him to heaven every Monday; three women every Tuesday, four women every Wednesday, five women every Thursday, six women every Friday, twelve women every Saturday and fifty women on Sunday. In addition, any namesake of his mother, any woman on earth who is called Ronnat, and every woman who chooses to be buried in his cemetery, it is decided that they should be carried into Heaven without judgement.

26] Adomnán did not take anything until sureties and bonds were given into his hand concerning the fulfilling of that *cáin* to him, great and small. For security is given to him against a bad debtor, to be paid by the guarantor if the debtor does not pay: his son for the master of a house, his soul for a confessor, every creature that moves about, every noble who steps on the earth, every bell on which the hours are struck are guarantors and sureties in the hand of God and of Adomnán for the fulfillment for him of that *cáin*. It is then that Adomnán said these words:

---

<sup>22</sup> The flourishing of elder, nettle and cornrake are indicators in medieval Gaelic tradition of the ruin and desolation of a place.

<sup>23</sup> The 'heir' (*comarba*) of Adomnán here is his successor as abbot, in this case presumably the abbot of Raphoe. The arrival of his relics would elicit the making of gifts to his community.

<sup>24</sup> For this translation of *caillech aithrigh* as 'penitent spouse' rather than 'penitent nun', see Ní Dhonnchadha 1994.

27] ‘If you do not do good to my community on behalf of the women of this world, the children you beget will fail, or they will perish in their sins. Scarcity shall fill your larder and the kingdom of heaven will not be yours. You will not flee from Adomnán of Iona by your meanness or falsehood.’

Adomnán of Í  
will help you, O women.  
Give to your lord  
every good thing that is yours.

Adomnán of Í, loved by all,  
has read the books of custom of the Gael.

28] This is the enactment of the *Cáin* of Adomnán of Í. At Birr this enactment was imposed on the men of Ireland and Britain<sup>25</sup> as an everlasting law until Doom, a proclamation of the nobles, the clerics and the laity – the rulers and their chief poets, their bishops and their wise men and their soul-friends.<sup>26</sup>

- 1 Fland Febla, learned bishop of Armagh
- 2 Díblíne of Eilne, abbot of Emly
- 3 Cenn Fáelad, abbot of Bangor
- 4 Fáilbe Becc, abbot of Clonmacnoise
- 5 Conodhar, abbot of Lismore
- 6 Cillíne son of Luibneán, abbot of Birr
- 7 Colmán son of Sechnusach, abbot of Lothra
- 8 Eochaid, abbot of Cloyne
- 9 Forandán of Kildare
- 10 Suadbar of Inis Deimle
- 11 Díbléne, abbot of Terryglass.
- 12 Mochonna of Derry (Dísert Dachonna)
- 13 Osséne son of Gallust, abbot of Clonfertmulloe
- 14 Mainchíne of Lethghlenn
- 15 Moacru
- 16 Mobeoc of Art
- 17 Muirchú of Balla
- 18 Moling of Lúachair
- 19 Mend Maiche, abbot of Ferns
- 20 Colcu son of Móenach, abbot of Lusk
- 21 Céti, bishop

---

<sup>25</sup> ‘The men of Britain’ in this context are those of the Scottish kingdom of Dál Riata (roughly modern Argyll) and the kingdom of the Picts, both of which territories provide guarantors in the following list.

<sup>26</sup> I have numbered these only for ease of reference; there is no numbering in the original. For details on the titles of the individuals, on the churches and kingdoms from which they came, see Ní Dhonnchadha (1982), some of whose corrections of name-forms I have adopted.

- 22 Curetán, bishop
- 23 Conamail son of Cano, bishop
- 24 Colmán grandson of Orcc, abbot of Clonard
- 25 Áed, bishop of Sletty
- 26 Colmán son of Findbarr
- 27 Cairtide of Ross Mór
- 28 Togiállóc grandson of Lúan, the Wise
- 29 Ichtbricht, the bishop
- 30 Feradach grandson of Artúr
- 31 Fáelchú son of Máel-Rubai
- 32 Fáelán from Clonfert Brennain
- 33 Dibchéne mac Fileth
- 34 Mosacra
- 35 Máelcoisne son of Dall
- 36 Muirchú the descendant of Macthéine
- 37 Máeldub, bishop
- 38 Ioan the wise, son of the Smith
- 39 Ioain son of Samuel
- 40 Fáelán grandson of Silne
- 41 Loingsech son of Oengus, king of Ireland
- 42 Congal(ach) son of Fergus, king of Cenél Conaill
- 43 Fland Find son of Máel Tuile, king of Cenél Eogain
- 44 Conchobur mac Máel Dúin, king of Cenél Coirpre
- 45 Eterscél son of Mael Umaí, king of Munster
- 46 Cú Dínaisc son of Cellach, king of East Munster
- 47 Cú Chercca, king of Osraige
- 48 Congal son of Suibne, king of the Déisi
- 49 Eóganán son of Crundmáel, king of Uí Fidgeinti
- 50 Andelaith, king of the northern Déisi
- 51 Éládach son of Dúnlang, king of South Munster
- 52 Ailill son of Cú Cen Mathair, king of Mag Féne
- 53 Fíachra Cossalach, king of the Cruithne
- 54 Bécc Bairche, king of the Ulaid
- 55 Níall son of Cernach, king of Brega
- 56 Cellach son of Gerthide, king of the double Leinster
- 57 Condálach son of Conacc, king of the Corcu Duibne
- 58 Cairpre son of Cú Coluim, king of Uí Chennselaig
- 59 Congal son of Brachaidi
- 60 Conall son of Doinennach, king of Uí Fidgeinte
- 61 Cellach son of Ragallach, king of Connacht
- 62 Dluthach son of Fidhellach, king of Uí Maine
- 63 Dúnchad king of Uí Amalgaid and Uí Fiachrach of Muirisc
- 64 Muirgius son of Máel Dúin

- 65 Maicnia king of Ard of the Uí Echach
  - 66 Murchad of Meath
  - 67 Colmán son of Rechtabra, king of Feorann
  - 68 Máel Fothartaig son of Mael Dúin
  - 69 Dub-Díberc
  - 70 Maine son of Níall
  - 71 Máelcáich son of Nóindenach
  - 72 Aurthuile grandson of Crunmáel
  - 73 Áed of Odba
  - 74 Eochaid son of Dúinchad, king of the Déisi
  - 75 Áed son of Dlíthach, king of the Fir Chúl
  - 76 Flaithnía son of Fergal
  - 77 Fiannamail grandson of Dúinchad
  - 78 Feradach grandson of Ciarán
  - 79 Feidlimid grandson of Fergus
  - 80 Fallomun, king of Uí Tuirtri
  - 81 Fergus Forcraid
  - 82 Fogartach
  - 83 Garbán, king of Meath
  - 84 Eochu Lemnae, king of Uí Chremthainn
  - 85 Eochu grandson of Domnall, king
  - 86 Conall Grant, king of southern Brega
  - 87 Túathal grandson of Dúinchad, king of Uí Chonaille Gabra
  - 88 Taicthech son of Cinn Fáelad, king of Luigne
  - 89 Bodbchath, king of Luigne
  - 90 Írgalach grandson of Conaing, king of the Ciannachta
  - 91 Bruide son of Derile, king of the Picts
- and the prayers of all the men of Ireland, both layfolk and clergy.

29] They all swore, both laity and clergy, to fulfill the whole of the *Cáin Adomnáin* until Judgement. They offered to Adomnán the full *éaraic*<sup>27</sup> for their wounding of women, and to every heir that should occupy his seat until Judgement. And Adomnán does not take away the fines from lord and church and kin to whom they are due.<sup>28</sup>

30] Then all the holy churches of Ireland, around Adomnán, begged the divine Unity, Father and Son and Holy Spirit, and the community of heaven and the saints of earth, that everyone who fulfills this law in claiming and levying and fulfillment and payment should have long life and wealth, and that he may be honoured by God and man, and that he may be exalted in heaven and on earth.

<sup>27</sup> *éaraic* (later *éiric*) is the fine for homicide, the 'body price'.

<sup>28</sup> In other words, fines due under Adomnán's Law are in addition to any other penalty a person might have to pay under the already existing laws.

31] The holy churches of Ireland around Adomnán then begged God and the orders of heaven<sup>29</sup> and the saints of earth that anyone who shall violate the *Cáin Adomnáin*, either clergy or laity, whoever shall not enforce it and shall not fulfill it according to his strength and his ability, and shall not enforce it on everyone, both prince and church, that his life shall be short with suffering and dishonour, without attainment of heaven or earth for any of them.

32] Adomnán has established an order of cursing for them, i.e. a psalm<sup>30</sup> each day for twenty days, and with it an apostle or a noble saint to be invoked each day, i.e. *Quare* and Peter; *Domine, quid multiplicati* and John; *Verba mea* and Philip; *Domine deus meus* and Bartholomew; *Dixit insipiens* and Thomas; *Deus, deus meus, respice* and Matthew; *Iudica, Domine, nocentes me* and James; *Dixit iniustus* and Simon; *Domine ne in furore* and Thaddeus; *Dixi custodiam* and Matthew; *Deus deorum* and Mark; *Quid gloriaris* and Luke; *Dixit insipiens* and Stephen; *Exsurgat Deus* and Ambrose; *Savlum me* and Gregory of Rome; *Deus, uenerunt gentes* and Martin; *Deus quis similis* and Old Paul; *Deus laudem* and George; *Audite caeli quae loquar*, and *Non nobis, Domine, non nobis*, and the rest.

33] The decree of the angel to Adomnán begins:<sup>31</sup> after fourteen years Adomnán sought this law from God, and this is the cause. The holy angel of the Lord came to him on the vigil of Pentecost, and again after a year at the next Pentecost, and seized a staff<sup>32</sup> and hit his side and said to him: 'Go out into Ireland and make a law in her, that women may not be killed by a man in any way, neither by slaughter nor by any other death, nor by poison, nor in water, nor in fire, nor by any beast, nor in a pit, nor by dogs, but [shall die] in their own lawful bed. You must pass a law in Ireland and Britain for the mother of every one, because a mother has borne everyone, and for the sake of Mary the mother of Jesus Christ through whom everything is.'<sup>33</sup> Mary prayed to her son

---

<sup>29</sup> The 'orders of heaven' in Gaelic are the angels.

<sup>30</sup> The first word or words of the psalms of the Vulgate (and of a canticle from Deuteronomy) are cited for each day during which the cursing rites take place: these are, in the above order, Psalms 2, 3, 5, 7, 13, 21, 34, 35, 37, 38, 49, 51, 52, 67, 68, 78, 82, 108; Deut 32:1-43; Psalm 113B (this appears in the Vulgate as one psalm in two parts, but is treated as two separate psalms in the Hebrew bible, nos. 114-5). The seventh psalm of the above list was indicated by Meyer *Iudica me, Domine innocentium*. No psalm has this opening phrase. Ó Néill & Dumville rightly correct this reading to *Iudica, Domine, nocentes me*. No saint is given for the last two days of the rite.

<sup>31</sup> The whole of section §33 is written in Latin.

<sup>32</sup> MS  *poculum*, a 'little cup', but we should probably read  *baculum*, a 'staff'.

<sup>33</sup> The Latin here, *per quam totus est*, means that it is Mary 'through whom everything is'. One might suspect a scribal error: in the Latin Creed, as used in the early medieval Gaelic world like everywhere in the West, it is Christ 'through whom all things were made' (*per quem omnia facta sunt*). We should probably emend one letter of the phrase in *Cáin Adomnáin*, giving *per quem totus est*, echoing the Creed. On the other hand, as he was dying Christ had given John the disciple (perhaps representing all Christians) to Mary, saying 'Behold your mother' (John 19:26). As the means by which the Incarnation took place, her motherhood is necessary for God to become human, and for humanity to become divine, and so to 'be' in the fullest sense. I think it is more likely that *quam* is a scribal error.

on behalf of Adomnán concerning this law. For whoever kills a woman is condemned to a double punishment, i.e. his right hand and his left foot are cut off before death, and then he shall die, and his relations pay seven full *ancillae*<sup>34</sup> and seven years penance. If a fine is imposed instead of life and amputation, the payment is fourteen years of penance and fourteen *ancillae*. If it is a host that has offended, every fifth man up to three hundred is condemned to this punishment: if they are few they are divided into three groups. The first group of them, decided by casting lots, shall be put to death, a hand and foot having been cut off. The second group shall pay fourteen full *ancillae*. The third group is cast out in exile across the sea under the rule of a hard discipline, because it is a great sin when someone kills the mother and sister of the mother of Christ, and the mother of Christ, and her who carries the distaff and her who clothes everyone. From this day, whoever puts a woman to death and does not do penance according to the Law, not only will he perish and be cursed before God and Adomnán, but all who hear of it and do not curse him and do not punish him according to the judgement of this Law will themselves be cursed.<sup>7</sup> That is the decree of the angel to Adomnán.

34] This is the enactment of the *Cáin Adomnáin* on Ireland and Britain: the freedom of God's church with her community and her insignia and her sanctuaries and all her property, living and inanimate, and her law-abiding laymen and their lawful wives who are under the authority of Adomnán and of a lawful, wise and pious soul-friend. The enactment of the *Cáin Adomnáin* stands as an everlasting *cáin* for clergy and women, and for innocent children until they are capable of killing a man, till they have a place in the tribe and till their first armed conflict is known.<sup>35</sup>

35] Whoever wounds or kills a young cleric or an innocent child, his fine under the *Cáin Adomnáin* is eight *cumals* and eight years of penance for each hand raised against the victim, up to three hundred offenders, and one *cumal* and one year of penance for each person from three hundred up to one thousand, or an innumerable crowd. And it is the same payment for someone who does the injury and for one who only looks on and does not protect the victim with all his might. If there is negligence or ignorance, the fine for it is half, and payment of security that it is negligence and ignorance.

---

<sup>34</sup> *ancilla* here is simply Latin for the Gaelic *cumal*, which as we have seen originally meant a female slave, but became a unit of value. The fines later in the Law are described partly as multiples of a *cumal*.

<sup>35</sup> Evidently a boy becomes a man, and therefore a combatant in a society where all adult males except for clerics were expected to bear arms, when he first appears armed for battle. Note that in early Irish laws a man is penalised if he stands by while a murder is being committed and does not oppose it; he cannot be an 'innocent bystander', since if he stand by he becomes guilty of an 'eye-crime' (*cin síllo*). See Kelly 1988, 154-6. But women, clerics and children are not penalised for such non-intervention, the rationale being that as they do not bear arms, they are not expected to be able to oppose a murderer.

36] There is another enactment of this *Cáin*: full honour price is paid to each church of lawful customs; half payment to her [for an offence committed] in her confines beyond the green; full payment to her for [an offence against] each ecclesiastical order, for wounding and robbery and burning; half payment for [offences against] her sanctuaries; half payment only for [an offence against] the tonsured<sup>36</sup> clergy if it is without wounding and without robbery. Full payment is made to any church for violating her relics, wherever it is done.

37] These are the judges of the *Cáin Adomnáin* in every church and in every tribe: the clergy whom the community of Adomnán shall choose, and to whom they commit the enactment of the *Cáin*.

38] These are the pledges of this *Cáin*: a third of the pledge in bronze or silver, according to the estimation of every territory, of the entitlement of each case. The pledge is to be redeemed by the third day, judgement given by the fifth day, and payment made by the tenth day in all other cases. When the pledge is redeemed at once, judgement by the third day and payment by the fifth day in this case.

39] There is another enactment of the *Cáin*: someone is to be appointed as surety for each lawsuit, for both the ranks of the tribe and the ranks of the church, in the territories inside and in the territories outside, for small and large fines, according to the will of Adomnán or his community. There is giving notice and impounding, and the *Cáin* of Adomnán and his community will not become extinct.

40] There is another enactment of the *Cáin*: if innocent children are killed, or clerics, it is to their burial places<sup>37</sup> that their fines under the *Cáin* come, while their fines under native law go to the chiefs of their kindred.

41] There is another enactment of the *Cáin*: that full fines must be paid to Adomnán for any woman who is killed, whether there is the participation of a human in it, or cattle or a dog or a fireplace or a ditch or a building, for everything which is made must be paid for under the *Cáin*: ditch and pit and bridge and hearth and doorstep and pools and drying kilns, and every other danger besides, unless the woman deserves it.<sup>38</sup> But a third [of the fine] is remitted if it is a senseless person who dies. Of the other two-thirds, one third belongs to whoever has the right to it.

---

<sup>36</sup> *Foltmaise*; literally, 'beautiful haired'.

<sup>37</sup> Literally 'to their tombs of burial', but the fine is not paid to the tomb. Every person belonged to a church which had the right to give that person burial when he or she died, and to receive the relevant dues. See *CCH* xviii, *de jure sepulturae*.

<sup>38</sup> Perhaps meaning 'unless negligence on the part of the woman can be shown to have caused the hurt'.

42] Whatever be the violent death which a woman shall die, unless it is an act of God, or of proper lawful marriage,<sup>39</sup> it is paid for in full fines to Adomnán, for both slaying and drowning, burning and poison, crushing and perishing in a quagmire, wounding by domesticated animals, and by pigs and by cattle. However, if it is the first offence committed by the cattle, the pigs or the dogs, they are to be killed immediately and half the fine of a human hand for it.<sup>40</sup> If it is not the [animal's] first offence, the full fine is paid.<sup>41</sup>

43] Now, there ought to be no counter-claim in the *Cáin Adomnáin*, nor balancing of guilt, but each one pays for the offences of his own hand. Any injury that is committed under the *Cáin Adomnáin*, the community of Adomnán is entitled to an additional fine for it – in addition to crimes against women, those against innocent children or clerics, or anyone concerning whom they command it, viz. a *cumal* of additional fines are paid to the community of Iona where seven *cumals* [of ordinary fines] are paid, and half a *cumal* when seven half-*cumals* are paid. Six *séts* of additional fines on top of thirty *séts*, and three *séts* on top of five *séts*.<sup>42</sup>

44] An eighth of everything small and everything large is paid to the community of Adomnán for the slaying of clerics and of innocent children. If it is a life-wound [i.e. not deadly] with which someone has wounded a woman or a cleric or an innocent child, seven half-*cumals* from him, fifteen *séts* are due from his close kin or the distant kin as if for being accomplices. Three *séts* for every white blow;<sup>43</sup> five *séts* for every shedding of blood; seven *séts* for every wound requiring a staunch;<sup>44</sup> a *cumal* and payment of the physician as well for anyone requiring sick-attendance. If the injury is greater than that, the penalty increases to half the fine for killing a person. If it is a blow with the palm of the hand or with the fist, an ounce of silver for it. If there is a bruise or a red mark or a swelling, six scruples and one ounce [of silver] for it. For seizing the hair of women, five wethers for it. If there is a fight among women with the bringing of outrage, three wethers for it.

45] Men and women are equally liable from now on to all small and large

<sup>39</sup> Probably referring to death in childbirth.

<sup>40</sup> The actual agent (dog or pig etc) is destroyed, but the person whose property it was must still pay half of the fine that would have been due had it been done by himself.

<sup>41</sup> This has echoes of Exodus 21:28, where an ox which gores a man or woman is destroyed, but if it has gored someone in the past and does it again, the ox and the owner must both die.

<sup>42</sup> Like *cumal*, a *set* is a unit of value.

<sup>43</sup> i.e. one which does not cause blood to flow.

<sup>44</sup> *indrige*. Ó Néill & Dumville, also Ní Dhonnchadha, suggest 'requiring a staunch'. *DIL* suggests tentatively 'a tent for a wound', which guided my earlier translation. But this may be the same word as *anre* that appears in *Thes. Pal.* ii, 38 (l. 18), and note the gloss there *colirio* (for *collyrio*) 'salve'. In Late Latin *collyrium* takes on other meanings, some metaphorical – 'something to clear the cobwebs from the mind' (Souter, *Glossary of Later Latin*), 'bribe' (Baxter and Johnson, *Medieval Latin Word-List*).



punishments for fights involving women, except for death. For although a woman deserves death for killing a man or a woman, or for giving poison from which someone dies, or for arson, or for digging under a church, she is [instead] put into a one-oared boat one *muircrech* out to sea, to [see if she will] go back to land before the wind. Let her have a pot of gruel with her. The judgement on her belongs to God.<sup>45</sup>

46] If it is charms which someone gives to another person, and which cause death, the fine for it is the same as the fine for murdering someone and hiding the corpse. Secret raids and *cnáimchrói*<sup>46</sup> which are found out in the four nearest lands: if they cannot place the blame on any particular person, the four nearest lands deny by oath that they know who is to blame, on pain of the destruction of their souls, and they themselves pay for it. If they suspect someone and have evidence, it is he himself who will be liable to the fine. If the suspicion rests on two or more people, let their names be written on leaves; each leaf is wrapped around a lot, and the lots are put into a chalice on the altar. The one on whom the lot falls, it is he who is liable to the fine.<sup>47</sup>

47] If someone who is guilty of violating the *Cáin* does not pay, his kindred pays his full fine according to the extent of his crime, and his security is forfeited and he is expelled after that until the end of the law. Seven half-*cumals* for being an accomplice is the fine on every 'true-kindred',<sup>48</sup> and on the distant

---

<sup>45</sup> The *muircrech* seems to be a certain distance from the land, possibly the distance from the land at which a white shield on the shore was still just visible - possibly a mile or so? The penalty of setting adrift was used for men also, in cases where death would normally have been the appropriate sentence, but was mitigated when, for example, homicide was non-deliberate; or in cases of kinslaying (*finjal*) when the offended family and the offender were related, and they could not punish him with death without committing *finjal* themselves. On this form of punishment, see Mary Byrne 1932. Under the terms of the law, anyone who slays a woman is subject to the death penalty; but a woman cannot be slain – not even a woman murderer. When a woman slays another woman, the law seems to be thrown into a crisis, and the instruction about setting such a woman adrift is a way of dealing with it: 'the judgement on her belongs to God'. This makes sense of a passage in the tenth-century *Life of Adomnán*, when a diabolical visitor asks Adomnán what should be done with a woman who had killed another woman. Adomnán, in this story nearly three centuries after the *Cáin Adomnáin*, seems to have forgotten his own instruction about setting adrift, as he does not answer in those terms. He simply says, 'God has freed the woman', and curses the visitor who has just offered to kill the homicidal woman himself (*Betha Adomnáin* § 3).

<sup>46</sup> *cnáim* 'bone'? or *cnám* gnawing, wasting? *Cró* or *crú* is 'blood'. Ó Néill & Dumville and Ní Dhonchadha translate it 'dismemberments', but note that in modern Gaelic folklore *cnaimchroí* is an enchantment that can be fatal, which fits better with the context here. I am grateful to John O'Leary of Allihies, Beara, Co. Cork, for a personal communication in which he gave an example of *creecraw* (sometimes *crawcree*) in recent use in Co. Cork, applied to a 'young girl who was love sick'. It is also mentioned in a poem by Tom MacIntyre, 'Field Observations on the Craw Cree', which is essentially a magical cure for the condition (*A Glance will Tell You and a Dream Confirm*, Dedalus Press, 1994, 42). The term in the *Cáin* seems to refer to a death encompassed by magic.

<sup>47</sup> On casting lots as part of legal process in early medieval Ireland and Scotland, a part recognised and given biblical justification in an ecclesiastical text, see *CCH* lib. xxvi (pp. 83-4).

<sup>48</sup> The *derbfine*, the patrilineal descendants of one great-grandfather.

kin after that. If there is aiding and abetting, and a cover-up and connivance, it is death for that. But whatever the fine is for a crime, it is the same for being an accomplice in it.

48] There is another enactment of the *Cáin*: they shall feed the administrator of the *Cáin Adomnáin* with the noble food of his company, however many they are, i.e. five men as guarantors, and the feeding of every one who is exacting the fines of the *Cáin* according to each man's rank, both noble and church and tribe. A *cumal* is the fine for withholding food from someone at the time when fines are being exacted; and those guilty [of such withholding] must feed [the administrator of the *Cáin*] and they sustain a joint contract of fines. If they do not feed them, two *cumals* from those who offend.<sup>49</sup>

49] Now this is the immunity of every surety who comes to exact this *Cáin*, i.e. the guilt of their kindred does not come on them, as long as they uphold their suretyship, and remain in suretyship and do not default; but [if they do not uphold it, or if they default] their own guilt does come on them, and the guilt of their family, and of their children, and of their servants.

50] If it is rape of a girl, seven half-*cumals* is the fine for it. If a hand is laid on her, or on her girdle, ten ounces is the fine for it. If a hand is put under her clothing to her shame, three ounces and one *cumal*<sup>50</sup> is the fine for it. If there is [as a result of assault] a blemish of her head or her eyes, or in her face, or in her ears or nose, in her tooth or tongue, in her foot or in her hand, the fine for it is seven *cumals*. If there is a blemish in some other part of her body, seven half-*cumals* is the fine for it. If there is tearing of her clothing, seven ounces and one *cumal* for it.

51] If it is making a good woman blush, by [accusing her of] lust or by denying her children's paternity, seven *cumals* is the fine for it down to [but not including] the wife of an ordinary lord. Seven half-*cumals* if she is the wife of an ordinary lord.<sup>51</sup> From there down to the wife of a *muire*,<sup>52</sup> seven ounces.

52] If there is deployment of women in slaughter or in hosting or on a raid, seven *cumals* is the fine for each hand [involved] up to seven men, and from there on it is as the crime of one man. If a woman is made pregnant by stealth,

<sup>49</sup> I prefer Ó Néill & Dumville's sentence-division (p. 49) to that offered by Meyer.

<sup>50</sup> Ó Néill & Dumville (p. 49) emend the text here to *tri uinge for cumal*; Meyer has *secht cumal* 'seven cumals'.

<sup>51</sup> The *aire déso* is, in the Irish law texts, the lowest grade of lord. Though such texts are schematic theoretical accounts of lordship rather than accurate descriptions of reality – which was presumably much messier – and though they differ in various details, they agree in presenting the *aire déso* as being at the lowest level of lordship.

<sup>52</sup> A kind of minor chieftain or leader.

without contract, without rights, without bride-price, without betrothal, the full fine is paid for it. Whatever payment is made of hand-produce, great or small, there is [that payment] for the madder and woad and beans.<sup>53</sup> If it is red-dye of a cloak, the payment of a cloak for it.<sup>54</sup>

53] Three guarantors for the *Cáin Adomnáin* from every chief church, i.e. the prior and the cook and the guest-master; and a guarantor of the *Cáin* from every family in Ireland, and two guarantors of the *Cáin* from the high-chieftains and hostages taken for its payment, if there be eye-witness evidence of women.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Ó Néill & Dumville and Ní Dhonnchadha translate *sep* as ‘onions’, but if Old Gaelic *seib* or *sep* is a loan-word from Latin *fabā*, as it seems, it means ‘beans’ (Kelly 1997, 249).

<sup>54</sup> I cannot make much sense of this sentence. Could it be meant as a metaphor for the foregoing rule about women being made pregnant. It may be that these metaphors about dyeing (madder, woad and onions are all used to produce vegetable dyes) refer to a particular view of legal responsibility: just as you can’t harm the dye on a red cloak without harming the cloak (or *vice versa*), so you can’t harm a woman’s reputation without harming the woman. But this is a wild guess.

<sup>55</sup> This may refer to the collective evidence of female eye-witnesses. It is interesting to note that in general early Gaelic laws did not allow women to give evidence in law (though there were some exceptions). This suggests that the *Cáin Adomnáin* had yet another impact on the lives of women, in that it envisaged their ability to give evidence in respect of this law. See Kelly 1988, 207-8.

## References and Further Reading

- Betha Adomnáin Betha Adamnáin: The Irish Life of Adamnán*, eds. Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Ríain, Irish Text Society, London 1988.
- Byrne, Mary, 1932, 'On the Punishment of Sending Adrift', *Ériu* 11, 97-1-2.
- CCH Die irische Kanonensammlung* (Collectio Canonum Hibernensis), ed. Hermann Wasserschleben (Leipzig, 1885, reprinted 1966).
- Clancy, T. O. and Márkus, G., 1995, *Iona: the Earliest Poetry of a Celtic Monastery*, Edinburgh.
- Clancy, T. O., 1997, 'Columba, Adomnán and the cult of Saints in Scotland,' *Innes Review*, 48, 1-26.
- Wallace Hary's Wallace*, ed. M. P. McDiarmid, Edinburgh 1968.
- Herbert, Máire, 1988, *Iona, Kells and Derry: the History and Hagiography of the Monastic familia of Columba*, Oxford.
- Keeley, Lawrence H., 1996, *War Before Civilisation: the myth of the peaceful savage*, Oxford.
- Kelly, Fergus, 1988, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Dublin.
- Kelly, Fergus, 1997, *Early Irish Farming*, Dublin.
- Márkus, Gilbert (forthcoming), 'Adiutor Laborantium – a poem by Adomnán?', in R. Aist et al. (eds), *Adomnán of Iona: Theologian, Law-Maker, Peace-Maker*, Dublin.
- Melia, Daniel Frederick, 1983, 'Law and the Shaman Saint', in Ford, P. K., *Celtic Folklore and Christianity*, Los Angeles.
- Meyer, K. [ed.], 1905, *Cáin Adamnáin: an Old-Irish Treatise on the Law of Adamnán*, Oxford (*Anecdota Oxoniensia*).
- Ní Dhonnchadha, Máirín, 1982, 'The Guarantor List of *Cáin Adomnáin*, 697', *Peritia* 1, 178-215.
- Ní Dhonnchadha, Máirín, 1994, 'Caillech and other terms for veiled women in Medieval Irish texts', *Éigse* 28, 71-96.
- Ní Dhonnchadha, Máirín, 1995, 'The Lex Innocentium: Adomnán's Law for Women, Clerics and Youths, 697 AD' in M. O'Dowd and S. Wickert (eds), *Chattel, Servant or Citizen: Women's Status in Church, State and Society*, Belfast, 58-69.
- O'Loughlin, Thomas, 1992, 'The Exegetical Purpose of Adomnán's *De Locis Sanctis*', *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 24, 37-54.
- O'Loughlin, Thomas [ed.], 2001 (ed.), *Adomnán at Birr, AD 697: essays in commemoration of the Law of the Innocents*, Dublin.
- Ó Néill, Pádraig P. and Dumville, David N., 2003, *Cáin Adomnáin and Canones Adomnani*, Cambridge (Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, University of Cambridge).
- Sharpe, Richard [ed.], 1995, *Adomnán of Iona: Life of St Columba*, London.
- Stokes, Whitley [ed.], 1905, *The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee*, London.
- Vita Columbae Adomnán's Life of Columba*, eds. Alan Orr Anderson and Marjorie Ogilvie Anderson, revised edition, Oxford 1991.