Summary of Progress

***Research Topic and Major Theoretical Issues***

It has been suggested in recent decades (eg. Mac Eoin 1982: pp.124–25; Breatnach 1996) that the focus for research into the personnel who produced medieval Gaelic literature should tend more towards individuals involved in poetry or scholarship in Old and Middle Irish and away from discussing broad categories of literary activity, such as the opposition set up between monastic scholars and native *filid*. As the theorising of medieval Gaelic literary culture has become significantly more nuanced, an approach which is more open-minded concerning particular pieces of evidence and contexts and more sceptical towards the labelling of authors and sources is surely welcome. Many short studies of individual poets are now to be found in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, such as those on Eochaid Ua Flainn (Carey 2004a) or Flann mac Lonáin (Smith 2004b) and elsewhere, such as Murray’s (2004) study of Gilla Mo Dutu Ua Casaide. Smith’s work on Gilla Cóemáin (2004a; 2007) is more detailed and is integrated with an edition of his major works.

Flann Mainistrech (ob.1056), who has also been the subject of recent focused attention (Pődör 1999; Carey 2004b), is a particularly interesting topic for research in this context for a number of reasons. First, in terms of his time and place, he occupies an intriguing liminality. The early eleventh century saw the end of the Uí Neill monopoly on the kingship of Tara and possible aspirations towards the kingship of Ireland as a result of the brief overlordship of Brian Borúma and a growing uncertainty concerning relationships between old and emerging regional dynasties. Some later sources state that the kingship of Ireland ends during this period (eg. Scowcroft 1987: p.131). Flann thus worked during a time of quiet turmoil; the impact of political developments on the intellectual and literary sphere at the time is still by no means fully understood (Herbert 2007). Flann was based at Monasterboice, located just north of the River Boyne in modern Co. Louth. Along with many senior figures at Monasterboice, he was of the Ciannachta, a federation of local tribes that at some point was either ally or vassal to the Uí Neill (Dobbs 1921–1924; Byrne 2000) but whose history is still largely obscure. The location of Monasterboice and the Ciannachta between the southern Uí Neill, the Airgialla, the Ulaid and the northern Uí Neill, as well as its proximity and connections to the political flashpoint of Armagh (Ó Fiaich 1969), make their involvement in politics at regional level, if not more widely, fairly certain but also place them in a potential no-man’s land between the various factions.

As well as often concerning historical legends and data of great potency in the political context outlined above, the texts attributed to Flann Mainistrech are theoretically of some interest. While primarily known for his verse king-lists, both secular and hagiographical narrative and apocryphal lore are also attributed to him, raising interesting questions about relationships between genres. Many of his poems give the impression of being compiled from a range of written sources, some explicitly stating so. In one poem (‘Cia triallaid nech aisnis senchais Ailig eltaig’[[1]](#footnote-1)), Flann openly places himself in the tradition of *compilatores* by citing an anecdote used to illustrate *compilatio* by Isidore of Seville, Jerome and others. A celebrated colophon in *Lebor na hUidre* (ed. and transl. T. Ó Concheanainn 1975‒1976: p.146) describes him consulting a variety of manuscripts in the company of another poet, Eochaid Éolach Ua Céirin. While he appears to be operating in a distinctly literary environment, the types of poetry he composes‒ king-lists, battle-lists or other sorts of lists, at times almost mnemonic, as well as ballad-like narrative‒ are often thought in modern scholarship to be derived from an oral context. The conception of orality and literacy and their relationship has been, at times, of intense interest in Celtic Studies and the influence of both on work attributed to Flann and his persona in later sources could offer important insights into this topic.

In terms of sources, study of Flann Mainistrech seems promising due to the potentially large number of sources by and about him. Around forty poems and three prose texts are attributed to Flann, the poems ranging in size from four lines to several hundred quatrains (see attached lists for manuscripts and editions). In addition, a corpus of material exists about him or mentioning him, including two poems, obits, a genealogy, various colophons and the citations of his work within compilations. While not as exciting or in depth as some of the narratives concerning Flann mac Lonáin, for example, the material concerning Flann Mainistrech is more varied, although often of uncertain provenance and reliability.

However, Flann Mainistrech, like any medieval poet or author, cannot be approached directly. No autograph copies of his work exist, the earliest manuscript containing even fragments of a text by him (Oxford, Bodleian Library MS. Rawl. B. 503) dating from 1092. His extant corpus is also the work of later scribes, scholars and compilers, who are in control of which texts are preserved, in what context they are presented and to whom they are attributed. An understanding of the later medieval and early modern transmission and use of Flann Mainistrech’s work is necessary not only as source criticism of the extant evidence but to understand its significance in medieval Gaelic literature and its various potential interpretations, which, it might be argued, is as much part of the text's identity as the authorial intention. A distinction must thus be drawn between Flann Mainistrech the historical individual and his multifarious and developing personae on which some attributions or uses of his poetry might be based. Why is he necessary? What is he adding to texts by being put forward as their author? What were the connotations around his name or the type of scholarship he seemed to represent? An interest in who he is thought to be might also indirectly reveal information about the historical individual via explicit sources no longer extant.

Therefore, Flann Mainistrech, in both his life and his afterlife, as a historical actor and a theoretical problem, offers a diverse range of insights. There are, however, some major problems with reaching firm conclusions when studying him. The most serious is the lack of means of establishing certainty as to what is to be regarded as a particular medieval poet's work. As mentioned above, there is no text which is definitely Flann's composition. Attributions, found within a text or in a note added by a scribe, can never be entirely reliable. Even if an attribution is for some reason given absolute trust, one then confronts the question of what precise level of responsibility is being implied. Given that Flann is depicted as cooperating with others and compiling texts from various textual sources and given more generally the influence of genre, literary form and established doctrine in medieval composition, it is almost certainly helpful to conceive of different shades of authorship.

The latter is a theoretical issue which I hope may be illuminated by this project. The former, however, is more practical and obviously inhibits research into individuals like Flann Mainistrech. What methodologies might be deployed to resolve this sort of question have really been discussed at length in scholarship, although the issue of what he composed is occasionally addressed. O’Curry (1873: vol.II pp.149–69), Carney (1982–1983: p.180), Carey (2004b) and Byrne (2005: pp.865–67) all list what they believe to be accurate and, in Byrne’s case, inaccurate lists of Flann’s poems but none discuss in detail how they established their lists. Also, only O’Curry even appears to consider the large corpus of poems attributed to Flann in the sixteenth-century *Book of Fenagh* and other late manuscripts, despite Mac Eoin’s plea (1982: p.124) that these sources be at least assessed when discussing Middle Irish poetry. Boyle (1981) and Simms (2008) have discussed the *Book of Fenagh* corpus from a historical but not textual perspective.

Linguistic dating and dating by means of historical references within the text, even when reliable, cannot confirm authorship; they can only refute it or maintain its feasibility. However, Ó Cuív (1967–1968) and, on a larger and more detailed scale, Pődör (1999) have both undertaken studies in which they have analysed a corpus of poems attributed to Flann in terms of language and metrics and compared the profiles that emerge from each text. Unfortunately, both studies lack controls so it is not clear whether the similarities or differences would be replicated when comparing any medieval Gaelic poems to each other. They also reach different conclusions: Ó Cuív doubts that all of the poems he examines are by the same author while Pődör affirms that all of Ó Cuív’s corpus and several others are all by the same author, whom she believes it is credible to regard as Flann. Out of this body of scholarship, a small number of poems can be found which are repeatedly cited as credible compositions by Flann and can thus be thought of as his corpus by consensus, although the lack of credible arguments from many of the individual scholars does not inspire confidence in such a list.

In this context, it is also reasonable to suspect that extant texts by Flann Mainistrech exist but are unattributed or attributed to a different poet. While stylistic and linguistic comparison might lead to their inclusion in the corpus, there appears to be no methodical means by which particular texts might be short-listed for the close analysis involved, although transmission or close complementarity with another text attributed to Flann might be reasonable causes of further investigation. For an example, see the discussion concerning ‘Érimón is Éber ard’ in the enclosed sample chapter (pp.22–25).

How to proceed with a credible exploration of the other issues outlined above with the uncertainty surrounding Flann’s supposed work, other than with caution and frequent use of caveats, is not clear. Ultimately, it is hoped that a study of Flann’s intellectual and historical context and interests might assist in assessing what he might have composed by establishing his potential motivation. However, in a somewhat vicious circle, such a study must necessarily be based on some sort of corpus in the first place. There is also the possibility of asking the same questions with various approaches to the corpus ranging from the totally naïve to the highly sceptical. This seems an appropriate response to the ambiguity surrounding the issue but may be expensive in terms of time and space if deployed on a large scale.

Another issue is how to understand the purpose of Flann Mainistrech's poetry and how to avoid reading purposes and interests derived from our study back onto the poetry. Many texts in the corpus are bald presentations of data with no explicit statements as to their wider relevance. In some cases this can be inferred. For example, the list of the kings of Tara spread across ‘Ríg Themra dia tesbann tnú’ and ‘Ríg Themra toebaige iar tain’ can be understood as broadly supportive of the Uí Neill, which fits in with other evidence of Flann's political affiliations, not just because the poem ends with Mael Sechnaill II but because the promotion of the kingship of Tara is generally understood to have been in the interests of the Uí Neill. Other cases are far less clear. *Aided Nath Í 7 a adnacol* could be understood as of interest to Flann on account of Nath Í’s pivotal position as the last pagan in the line of the kings of Tara, on account of Flann's tribal connections with various branches of the Ciannachta settled near both Cruachu (Nath Í’s burial place) and the lands of Uí Fhiachrach (Nath Í’s descendants) or as part of a now lost compilation by Flann and Eochaid on tombs of prominent Irish kings. Developing some plausible ideas as to why a medieval text came to be produced is obviously the task of scholars working in this field. However, given that the proposed study aims to find ways of understanding Flann independent of his corpus of texts the better to explain that corpus, there is the risk of assuming that the texts in the corpus will make sense in light of a particular independent line of investigation. To what extent can we legitimately read his work through our reconstruction of his loyalties and identity? To what extent did his scholarly interests take precedence over tribal or political identity? The unassertive nature of many of Flann's texts regarding purpose exacerbates this problem although, as a stylistic feature, it is worth further investigation.

The state of the extant source material and of scholarship on Flann Mainistrech and the biographical study of medieval Gaelic poets generally seems to call for a balanced approach which includes an awareness of all the potentially relevant texts but also the shortcomings in our knowledge about them, a willingness to go beyond the vexed matter of Flann’s corpus and examine his wider context and, finally, a distinction between studying Flann and what later literary culture may have made of him.

***Progress in the Past Year***

In terms of what I have done thus far in terms of research on the above topics and attempts to overcome the problems cited, I believe I have made slow but steady progress. One major task was to compile a database of every manuscript version of every text attributed to Flann Mainistrech as a basis for the rest of the investigation. A single attribution to Flann Mainistrech or even simply to ‘Flann’ where this has been interpreted as Flann Mainistrech in a manuscript of any date qualifies a text for inclusion in the database. This is included as part of this review. This was compiled through consulting manuscript catalogues. I have consulted the catalogues of the Royal Irish Academy, Trinity College Dublin, University College Dublin, the National Library of Ireland, the British Library, the Bodleian Library, Cambridge University Library, the National Library of Scotland and Glasgow University Library as well as investigating manuscripts kept elsewhere, mainly through ISOS.

With the provisional corpus thus established, I compiled a bibliography of editions and translations of the relevant texts in the corpus, as well as scholarship which mentioned or discussed them. While some texts having been edited and discussed by multiple scholars, many have received very little attention and some are receiving attention in this study, apparently, for the first time other than their appearance in the relevant manuscript catalogues. As well as being interested in any sort of commentary, I have taken careful note of how likely scholars believe each text is to be by Flann.

There are five unedited texts (four poems and one prose text). I have taken transcriptions of most of the manuscript versions of these texts and, where possible, acquired images of the manuscripts. I have edited the texts to the extent of expanding abbreviations, working out word division and, in the case of the poems, metre and line division. However, accurate translation of the raw manuscript forms is proving a problem and I am yet to engage in any sort of textual criticism, although this is only actually necessary in the case of ‘Cedrigh ro gab Érenn uill’, the other texts all represented by single manuscript witnesses.

Many of the texts have been edited but not translated and in these cases I have translated them myself. Some, however, have been edited from only one manuscript or were edited and translated some time ago. The *Book of Fenagh* group, for example, falls into both categories. In these cases, while I already have a basic understanding of the text, it seems necessary to investigate the various versions further. This has not progressed much, as I have been giving other matters priority.

As well as searching for texts attributed to Flann, I have also gathered a corpus of references to Flann in medieval and early modern sources. While this sort of search is more difficult than finding attributions or copies of texts, I have searched annals, genealogical compilations, major texts on poetry and authors as well as searching large online databases, such as CELT. In the course of my search for attributions, I also found a number of extended prologues or colophons to texts attributed to Flann which go into more detail concerning him. The sources compiled are sporadic in terms of genre, date and content and provide little solid and reliable biographical information. Some provide names of individuals with whom Flann may have had transactions; however, my attempts to pursue further details concerning them have usually not produced plentiful results. There are some exceptions: for example, Flann's collaborator on *Aided Nath Í*, Eochaid Eolach Ua Céirin, turns out to have strong connections to the Uí Chennselaig dynasty of Leinster, which is surprising, given the subject matter of *Aided Nath Í* and the other circles in which Flann seems to move. Many of the later sources attest to Flann Mainistrech having some kind of persona beyond his name in subsequent literary culture, what it might have been remains tantalisingly obscure.

In terms of Flann’s context, my reading has included studies of political history particularly pertaining to the eleventh century and among factions and polities that seem relevant to Flann and the topics addressed in his texts. I have also focused on the history of Monasterboice, including other texts and poets associated with the monastery, and the turbulent politics at Armagh during the tenth and eleventh centuries, with which Flann appears to have had connections. Despite the fact that his personal ancestry figures very little in texts attributed to him, I have also researched the Ciannachta, his own tribe. In terms of literary history, I have attempted to trace the narratives and literary forms used by Flann in the medieval Gaelic literary tradition and identify potential sources. Finally, I have tried to contextualise Flann's approach to various topics, such as the kingship of Tara, in terms of other medieval Gaelic texts and the modern, scholarly perspective of the issues involved.

As well as this general reading, I have focused on particular texts, namely ‘Scela Cluana na clog’, an unedited and obscure poem which mentions Flann in the *Book of Uí Maine* (fol.56r), ‘Éstid a eolchu cen ón’ and *Aided Nath Í*, partly in order to prepare conference papers and partly to be able to explore some of the wider issues of this project through detailed case studies. ‘Scela Cluana na clog’ led me to research the cult of St. Tigernach of Clones and saints’ cults in western Airgialla. ‘Éstid a eolchu cen ón’ led to the exploration of the medieval Gaelic perception, depiction and treatment of non-Christian supernatural beings and mythology and the textual history of *Lebor Gabála Érenn*, in which it appears. The enclosed sample chapter is essentially an expansion of this study. The nature and meaning of the attribution to Flann of *Aided Nath Í* proved ambiguous, depending on the manuscript version used or how the relationship of the colophon in question to the rest of the text was conceived, leading to an interesting study of how our awareness of different manuscript versions of a text can affect its meaning.

I have also been considering broader strategies for dealing with the data involved in this study. Discussions took place with Dr. Christopher Yocum, who holds both a Ph.D. in medieval Irish literature and a research fellowship at the School of Informatics (University of Edinburgh), about devising a computer program that would analyse the language of texts, especially syntax, and group linguistically similar texts together. These groupings could then be checked against other factors to assess the reliability of the texts’ attributions. The ability to speedily analyse and compare texts linguistically is obviously desirable. However, it was eventually decided that this method did not take enough account of the possible alterations made to texts in the normal process of manuscript transmission, did not take account in fundamental changes to language made a result of a change in genre, for example. It would also have involved a large amount of clerical work on my part from which I did not feel I would learn particularly useful skills.

During the last month, Dr. Yocum has devised a program similar to what was envisaged in our earlier discussions and has shown me the initial groupings made by his program of texts from the diplomatic edition of the *Book of Leinster*, which includes several poems attributed to Flann Mainistrech.Some interesting correlations occur between the groupings made by this technique and independent studies of the texts but there were also considerable anomalies and we both agreed that a lot more work needed to be done on the technique. Other than advising informally on some matters, I am not assisting Dr. Yocum, but I am keeping an open mind about the relevance of his ongoing work to my project.

I have also been investigating various computer-based means by which I might plot a network of individuals, factions, institutions and texts with which Flann can be shown to have interacted. I have investigated both prosopography and social network analysis as well as more generic database design, reading some general guides and sample studies in relation to each, as well as discussing the issues with various specialists, including my father, Dr. Peter Thanisch (University of Tampere), and Dr. Tom Leonard, former Professor of Statistics (University of Edinburgh). Despite many of the techniques being of interest, my attempts to research individuals connected to Flann Mainistrech turned up less information than expected and I am thus not certain whether I will actually have enough data to justify any database-style infrastructure. Also, an often cited reason for the use of computer analysis in these situations is the removal of human bias. However, given the incomplete and ambiguous nature of much of the data, I am tending to believe a human mind is more appropriate than an objective analysis, which may give misleading results on account of the nature of the data. This being said, I am still a beginner with these sorts of research techniques and am looking for ways to develop my knowledge in this area.

***Plans for the Coming Year.***

I envisage my final thesis consisting of three chapters:

1. A survey of all the texts attributed to Flann Mainistrech, including manuscript contexts and notes on the probability that the attribution is accurate.
2. A study of Flann Mainistrech's connections, social network and historical context.
3. The use of Flann Mainistrech's work in later manuscript tradition and the personae that can be inferred from attributions and references to him.

I feel that establishment of a broad corpus of works associated with Flann is almost complete. Several continental repositories, such as the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris or the Bibliothèque Royale in Brussels, are known to contain medieval Irish material. However, I have been unable to use their catalogues. While the chances of finding a major, new, relevant source in these locations are slim, I intend to find a way to check their catalogues, such as asking fellow students for help, as soon as possible.

The currently unedited material may be printed in an appendix, although I also hope to publish some of these texts ideally before the end of my Ph.D. Research. If any sort of database is produced, I may try to include that as a table in an appendix as well. ‘Aenach na n-ocht n-ech’, a poem on customs associated with the Tara kingship linked to apocryphal topics which is framed as a dialogue between Flann Mainistrech and Mael Sechnaill II, would make a particularly good publication but damage to the manuscript page means it is not certain if a coherent text can be produced.

In many ways, I feel that, in order to produce the chapters above, I need to continue doing what I have been doing over the past year and deepen my knowledge of the texts attributed to Flann and of his political and literary context. In the course of this year, and thus in my sample chapter, I focused in particular on the eleven poems from the corpus in *Lebor Gabála Érenn*. The sample chapter demonstrates the complexities that can lie behind each poem, meaning that 1. will require careful planning and discipline. Other than basic reading and bibliographical work, I have devoted very little attention to Flann's *Book of Leinster* corpus (seven poems) or the *Book of Fenagh* corpus (eight poems) and will need to deepen my knowledge of these texts and the issues surrounding them in the course of this year.

In terms of commenting on authorship, other than quoting published scholars on this issue, I am already in the process of devising a linguistic test, based on the work of Pődör and others, to apply to other texts to gain a very general idea of whether the attribution is linguistically credible. Given the probable later orthography of texts in manuscripts like the *Book of Fenagh*, the emphasis in devising this test has been on linguistic features that do not change on the basis of orthography and cannot easily be dispensed with metrically.

As stated above, I am still considering compiling some sort of formal database in relation to 2. and may seek further training in the skills and concepts involved through IAD or another body. Other than that, I will continue to research Flann's context by trying to trace individuals or their apparent families by consulting the annals and various genealogical compilations. I will also read sources concerning institutions like Armagh much more closely to try and pick up the particular background of individuals. The main focus of my first year has been on gathering texts and confronting issues to do with authorship so I have not really given this aspect of the project proper attention.

What work I have done thus far has been focused on tracking down information specifically concerned with Flann Mainistrech and his context. I feel I need to deepen my knowledge of other medieval Gaelic poets, the poetry associated with them and their social and political context for the purpose of comparison with Flann. For instance, the extant anecdotes concerning Flann mac Lonáin, some of which do not appear to have been published, might be a useful example of a poet's subsequent persona. I would also like to develop a greater understanding of how poets in general were conceived. To this end, I intend to read the *Mittelirische Verslehren*, which will also improve my knowledge of metrics. *Lebor Ollaman*, a currently unpublished history of poets, would also be of use but an edition and translation by Roisín McLoughlin will apparently be published in the next few years. This being the case I am uncertain whether the time involved in reading it in manuscript would be well spent. Dr. McLoughlin has already informed me that Flann Mainistrech himself is not mentioned in the text. Legal texts might also be a useful source in this regard but I have very little experience in this area.

In relation to 3., I intend to look more closely at the attributions to Flann, the terminology used to describe him and his work and look for particular individual scribes who seem keen to attribute texts to him. In the enclosed sample chapter, I have already noted the disproportionate number of poems associated with Flann by Giolla Íosa Mór mac Fhirbhisigh.

I also intend to develop better understanding of the theory surrounding medieval concepts of authorship as I appreciate that this can be conceived different from how it is in the modern age. Given that attributions of texts to Flann underpins this project in multiple ways, it seems critical to understand what sort of meanings these statements might have had. Also, I feel my study of later medieval scholars' treatment of Flann Mainistrech, exemplified in the sample chapter, could contribute to the wider discussion of this issue in medieval studies.

***Conference Papers and Publications***

In the course of the past year, I have presented papers relevant to my Ph.D. research at the Cambridge Colloquium of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic (CCASNaC; University of Cambridge), the Late Antique and Medieval Postgraduate Studygroup Seminar Series (LAMPS; University of Edinburgh), the Irish Conference of Medievalists (ICM; University College Dublin) and the Scottish Celtic Colloquium (University of St. Andrews). I have also presented a paper based on work I did during my MSc. at Rannsachadh na Gàidhlig (University of Glasgow).

A written version of the paper presented at CCASNaC is currently undergoing peer-review for the colloqium's proceedings volume and I am in the process of writing up my paper presented at the Scottish Celtic Colloquium for peer-review and publication.

**Schedule**

* Literature Review/Methodological Defense. 20,000 words. Hand-in: January 2013.
* Chapter 2 ‘Flann Mainistrech’s Social and Intellectual Context’. 20,000 words. Hand-in: May 2013.
* Chapter 3: ‘Flann Mainistrech in Later Medieval Gaelic Manuscript Culture’. 15,000 words. Hand-in: August 2013.
* Chapter 1: ‘A Survey of Texts Attributed to Flann Mainistrech’. 25,000 words. Hand-in: December 2013.

**Abstract**

This Ph.D. thesis focuses on the Middle Irish historical poet, Flann Mainistrech (ob.1056). He appears to hold considerable potential as a case-study of literate activity and historical writing in eleventh-century Ireland. However, information about him is sporadic and there is uncertainty over which texts can be reliably ascribed to him. This study therefore takes a multi-pronged approach. The texts attributed to him, some of which are as yet unpublished, are surveyed and an assessment is made of how likely each text is to be by Flann. This corpus is then placed in the context of research into Flann’s connections in terms of scholarship, tribal identity and politics as well as more general developments in these areas before and during his lifetime. Finally, it is asked how he might have been regarded by subsequent medieval scholars, how this might have shaped modern scholarship’s impression of him and what implications this has for assessing authorship of texts attributed to him. It is hoped that this study will clarify and magnify understanding a significant literary figure of the Middle Irish period and offer insights into the workings of literary culture at that period. However, through its diachronic approach, it is hoped this study will also offer insights into different understandings of authorship and raise questions about how texts were read and interpreted in the Middle Ages.

1. Unless specified, editions of text's attributed to Flann Mainistrech can be found by title or incipit in the relevant section of the bibliography. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)