

# THE CELTIC MANUSCRIPT

3,381 words

## THE CELTIC MANUSCRIPT

by M. J. Marzec

The manuscript was nested in a violet, cloth-covered folder, on the top shelf of a high bookcase, in the study of the large apartment of a nearly abandoned building, in the suburbs of the failing city of Detroit. After retirement from his professorship in Archeology, the old man, an antiquary, had worked in the rare book archives of the University library where he continued his research in Celtic mythology. On Tuesday, the old Professor's heart had failed, much like the city—the brick that smashed the window, the arsonist that torched the conflagration, consuming the ruined site in a flash—and on Friday, his nephew, Malcolm MacCuill, the Professor's only surviving relative, also an academic, buried him. Malcolm lolled at the Professor's desk reading the manuscript. He had pulled it out from the oak-stained bookcase in solemn tribute to his uncle, not from interest in mythology, but because he felt the need to do something to appreciate his uncle's sixty years of commitment to research. Malcolm gave no thought to whether the manuscript was one of his uncle's personal affects or the library's property. He would sort out those problems in the following weeks. Today, he mourned his loss.

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Malcolm pulled his cup across the table, watching the light reflect off the standing waves in the coffee, like a massage that comforted him into a state of reflective bliss. He noticed that the pages of the manuscript were fresh, and the print was the product of a word processor, not the relic of an ancient world, not an artifact uncovered from where it would have been buried in a ruined castle only to be buried again in the University vaults. Evidently, the Professor had copied an earlier source and annotated, in the margins of the manuscript, in his own hand, passages of what Malcolm took to be a tale of Celtic gods and heroes.

Born in his rath and sent by Dagda  
To claim the stone of Aedh and Tagd,  
The stone of Neit and Bodb Derg,  
It rests deep in its wet grave,  
It spits the sun's fire at him.

The tale concerned a hero, named Nuallan, half god, half man, told in a friendless objectivity about the hero's domination over his people, the trials bestowed upon him by the gods, and the hero's failure to overcome the obstacles that the gods set before him.

The Professor had noted in the margins of these opening stanzas:

Thesis: Early Mythology—Typical detachment of hero from human qualities.

Antithesis: Atypical failure of hero to overcome his trials.

Malcolm read on. The gods had commanded Nuallan to recover the valuable stone of his ancestors' from the bottom of the firth. The stone was an enormous emerald that bestowed upon its possessor invulnerability in battle. Nuallan dove within sight of

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the stone but was unable to reach its depths. He fished for the stone but was unable to snag it. He rode down on the back of a fabulous aquatic monster but was unable to control it in the firth's strong currents. The gods set as a second trial for Nuallan to discover the cave of the witches and answer their riddle. They would bestow upon the successful crusader a ring that carried knowledge of the future but would reward failure with the crusader's death. Nuallan discovered the cave, but the witches informed him, in their cackling cynicism, that a rival king of Saxon descent had beaten him to the reward, and that he would have to defeat the King to obtain the ring. He set out to find the King, who appeared to be aware of his coming. He challenged the King for the sacred band and lost his left hand in the battle.

He came late and they cackled,  
Wecta had carried it off. Nuallan pursued  
And left his awkward hand at the Isle of Thanet.

In the margin, the Professor had written:

Thesis: Formulaic entanglement with external forces.  
Antithesis: Hero succumbs to his obstacles.

The king, impressed by his opponent's bravery, cared for Nuallan, who lingered on the verge of death. After Nuallan's recovery, the king befriended him, and the two set off on a quest to plumb the depths of life's mysteries. Not surprisingly, the quest led them to the verge of the Underworld where, if successful, they would learn the secret of eternal life. In their adventures, they rescued a maiden from a castle of three ferocious giants. She was the daughter of a scribe of one of the kings of Gaul, whose father had taught her to read and write. Nuallan fell in love with the maiden, kidnapped her, and

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abandoned the king who then must pursue the quest alone. The King died in his efforts.

The Professor noted:

Thesis: Typical male/male bonding, showing the growing humanity of the hero.

Antithesis: Atypical preference of the hero for the male/female relationship. This is much later origin, probably heraldic. Atypical abandonment of the quest for descent into the Underworld.

The manuscript continued with anecdotal events in a much later heraldic mode, expressing human sentiments and personal esteem for the hero's bravery. In an ellipsis, typed between these anecdotal events and the continuation of the manuscript story, the Professor wrote: "Physical evidence, based on the where the original manuscript was found, on the dating of the materials (tablets, writing implements, and lettering) used by the poet, and on the language (the allomorphy of Old Irish, as discussed by Thurneysen and Bergin<sup>1</sup>), and graphic style, the manuscript predates many of the literary elements of the story, such as didactic, spiritual, moralistic, and psychological narration, as follows. Very curious." The story then continues with tropes reminiscent of the Middle Ages and narrative reminiscent of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the margin, the Professor had written:

Thesis: This story is of later origin.

Antithesis: Given the physical evidence, it cannot be of later origin.

Here the manuscript came to an abrupt end. Malcolm, a historian who worked on 16<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> century sources, recognized the stylistic jumps indicated by his uncle. He sat back and pondered the ellipsis. Perhaps his uncle was mistaken about the physical evidence; but, given his uncle's reputation as an Archeologist, this seemed unlikely. The

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Professor could not have been duped by some sophomoric forgery; but the poet could not have been sufficiently prescient to have broken through centuries of literary development to produce such sophisticated work. Malcolm struggled with the mystery. He opened the Professor's computer and searched through his files for a clue. He rummaged through the volumes in the Professor's library for an answer. He sat back, broken by his failure.

Malcolm had not yet reached the golden age of thirty, that moment when life strikes one with one's mortality. He was tall, slender, and sedentary, a confirmed academic who travelled to visit library collections, historical sites, and specialists with special knowledge to share. He had never married and felt, when an attractive lady occupied his time, torn between hormonal desires and the work that he was neglecting. Humanity intruded on his work, and he ignored humanity as much as possible, sometimes going months between haircuts, weeks between visits with friends, whole afternoons and evenings, sunk in work, without meals. Even now, when nature called upon him to mourn his uncle's death, his attention sank, like water in a muddy pit, into the tomes surrounding him in his uncle's library. As he searched the dense literature, he disappeared into other worlds where neither uncle, nor university, nor time existed. Only the dim shadows of the evening interrupted his efforts, forcing him to rise from the littered desk and turn on the library lights. Then he returned to his work.

The mystery set by his uncle drove Malcolm's consciousness, interfering with his sleep, toilette, and payment of bills. He realized the need for research into the primary sources. Fortunately, his reputation at the University was sufficient to gain him access to sources that would be denied even to professors who had no special need or distinction in the field of ancient studies. He was quick to discover that he could not comprehend the

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original tablets. He needed a translator; but whom could he trust? If he withheld the purpose of his research, could he depend upon the accuracy of the translations? If he revealed his purpose, would the academic world label him as a quack; or worse, could he trust the translator not to preempt him and steal his results? Malcolm's generally congenial nature turned inward at the threat. He withdrew into his interior life of research, clutched his books closer to his chest as he walked on campus, and refused to dine with his peers. His change became a topic of faculty chatter—something was afoot! He became a mystery surrounding his own mystery.

Blocked at the beginning of his search by his own deficiencies, Malcolm decided on a solution: he would learn Old Irish and become his own translator. For the next four years, he wore away the saddleback of his youth in the study of Old Irish. Older now, enriched by his new knowledge, and graying above the ears, he returned to the University vaults.

He began by verifying, to his satisfaction, his uncle's translation. He marveled at the old Professor's acumen and hoped that he could continue the translation with a comparable authority. The tablets dated from the earliest periods of writing in Old Irish. Malcolm's uncle was certain of the dating, and other specialists confirmed the findings. But, were they prejudiced by what they had previously known about the period of the onset of written Irish? Could the tablets have predated this; were they a new source that could upset the old dating? If anything, the tablets' narrative would have encouraged the experts to date them later, not earlier. Terminology inconsistent with the dating had somehow crept into the story, terminology necessary for spiritual, moralistic, and psychological narration, terms for soul and mind, conscience and angst. Boudicca, the

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woman rescued by Nuallan and King Wecta, rose to a level of respect nearly equivalent to a goddess, and Nuallan established her as Queen. Since he had absconded with Boudicca, his trials and quests met with more success. The people revered Nuallan as a seer, a hero who could foretell the minutest details of a quest before his departure, the names of his opponents before he should know who they were, the method of his conquest, and the precise value of his booty. He developed from an uncertain warrior who dwelt on his fears at approaching the enemy, to a bold adventurer who bulled forward without the least timidity or qualms about the outcome. He ran the gamut of psychology based upon types, individual psychology based upon the etiquette of his court, individual psychology based upon the self, to a virtue that separated from theology and became secularized. Eventually, he separated himself from material nature and, in a leap of introspection, called himself a god.

How was this advancement in psychology possible for an ancient Celt whose culture bordered on barbarism? Malcolm appeared to have reached the end of his line of thoughts. Amazed at what he read, he could push his ideas no further. He was incredulous. The impossible was sitting before him, challenging him to solve the mystery, but offering up no resolution. Was this an incredible hoax—a White Salamander Paper, a Loch Ness Monster, a War of the Worlds, an alien autopsy? He could not accept that his uncle had been duped, that the professionals who had authenticated the tablets were dilettantes, or that the science of Archeology was so primitive that dating of the sources could have failed by centuries. He wrote in his notebook:

Thesis: I've been duped.

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Antithesis: It's impossible that we've all been duped.

Malcolm walked back to his apartment in a daze. What was the next step? Was there a next step? He sat in the overstuffed chair he had taken from the Professor's flat, envisioning himself as Nuallan, attempting to feel what the Celt felt as he wandered through his trials. Initial failure, then success—what did it mean? How could this man, inept as he had been in his early quests, the man with one hand, suddenly turn into a god? Of course, Nuallan was not a god; but his quests proved him a superior individual. Perhaps, the quests were mere stories, fictions dreamed by the poet to stir up the people's enthusiasm for their race.

Thesis: The stories are fictions.

Antithesis: But the narrative itself is an impossible wonder. How could the ancient poet have written in these varied and sophisticated styles?

Malcolm's thoughts turned from the stories to the poet. Who was this amazing man, and how were his achievements possible? He began to research ancient Celtic poets. A year of research brought him no closer to an answer. None of the poets of the Celtic past approximated the writings of this chronicle; none mixed styles of the deepest past with styles that drew closer to the present. As more gray hairs appeared on his head, he became more convinced that he was losing the thread of the wonderful problem. He had to set it aside.

Malcolm reverted to his original historical interests, and slowly the dark curtain that had drawn over his behavior lifted to reveal the colleague his peers had once known. He published two more respected histories, one on the Sack of Antwerp by disgruntled Spanish soldiers in 1676, the second, a history of the Isle of Thanet in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. In



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his early fifties, he met an attractive Welsh woman, a graduate of Trinity College Dublin, who came to teach classical languages at the University. They married and lived a contentious life for two decades. Malcolm enjoyed talking with her about Celtic literature, often querying her about writing styles in different eras, and the genealogy of ancient families, but never revealing the mystery that had captured his soul after his uncle's death. That was a mystery too personal, too sacred, and too impossible for him to share even in marriage. Bridget was ten years younger than Malcolm and possessed a morose seriousness that seemed as though it had spawned during the Irish Potato Famine. Her mind was filled with lore, but her temperament captured the cynicism of Bernard Shaw, ready to expose the hypocrisy of society's ideals. Whether he feared appearing foolish for believing in his dilemma, or defeatist for giving up on it, the mystery in his mind kept him forever removed from a deeply personal relation with his wife. After twenty years of marriage, Bridget contracted cancer and died.

Now Professor Emeritus at the University, his health failing from ulcers and sclerosis of the liver, but his mind still active and his eagerness for research undiminished by life, perhaps stimulated in rebellion against the trivial social media society of the day, he traveled to London to research the lives of Addison and Steele. For years, he had not thought through his mystery of Nuallan. Stepping from a cab in Trafalgar Square, careful not to jostle his upset stomach or try the sturdiness of his failing legs, he spotted a shimmering light reflecting from a puddle of water from a recent downpour and grabbed his heart. A resolution had struck his mind—an idea that hit his chest like the stroke against an anvil, an incredible light like a spark from a magnesium torch, buoyancy like an expanding bubble of soap-film rising in the air. Of course, it must be that! He felt

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like Archimedes stepping from his bath, like Newton watching an apple fall, like Poincare discovering, in his sub-conscious, the key to Fuchsian functions. What else—what else could it be!

Immediately, he got back into the cab and asked to be returned to his hotel. He took out his old notebooks that he carried with him everywhere—always at his side, but never reviewed during the past thirty years. The final passages that he had translated dealt with Nuallan's death. The King had begun to lose interest in Boudicca and took up a dalliance with his steward's daughter, Fiona, a fair young girl with emerald eyes and skin with the whiteness of a floating cloud irradiated by the sun. The dalliance grew to a passion, and Nuallan pushed Boudicca into the background. Suddenly, Nuallan's quests began to revert to failures, culminating in his defeat in battle with a prodigious warrior from the highlands of Moray. The foresight that protected the King in his earlier triumphs had left him, and Nuallan strode unknowingly to his doom. The poet narrates the battle with savage clarity and mourns Nuallan with cold morbidity as though the poet, who had formerly described Nuallan as an object of love, had suddenly turned frigid.

Malcolm's old chest began to pound with excitement, his hands shook, and his brow began to perspire. "Of course, of course!" he repeated to himself. "What else could it be?—the rapid change from failure to success as soon as he abandoned Wecta, the tremendous foresight he immediately acquired, Wecta's sudden failure, Nuallan's stature as a seer, Boudicca's as a queen. And, besides that, the textual evidence: the abundant use of pronouns, the feminine adjectives used over and over—why had I not seen that—the feminine sentiments expressed in successively more emotive language—Boudicca must have been the poetess! Then, there was Nuallan's loss of psychic powers

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with his rejection of Boudicca—Boudicca must have been the seer! She counseled Nuallan throughout his successes and withdrew her counsel when he fell in love with Fiona. And, how could she have been so prescient, sufficient to guide Nuallan through his victories, sufficient to anticipate the cultural changes in narrative that spanned centuries? The ring! Of course, the ring! She stole it from Wecta and left him without the source to predict his successes and avoid his failures. Certainly, Nuallan would not have known about her theft, and so, relied on her prophetic powers, else he would have forced the ring from her and used it himself.” These thoughts coursed through Malcolm’s mind as he read and re-read his notes. The ring has the power, perhaps not absolute power, perhaps not absolute veracity, or Wecta would have foreseen Boudicca’s theft, or perhaps he did not ask the right questions. Whatever it was, only the ring could explain the mystery.

Malcolm now knew his task. He must track down the grave of Boudicca and retrieve the ring. With the ring, he could know the future, counsel the world, write tracts that would live throughout history. Why had it taken him so long! Without him, the ring would die in its ancient grave, never of use to him, never of use to mankind. He could found a secret society that would rule the world. He had solved his mystery, and a new mystery rose in his mind. He must locate the source of the tablets, he must track down Boudicca’s grave, and he must keep the secret of the ring and palm it off the rotting bones of the Celtic queen. Where would he begin? Of course, the University vault, the archeologists, the British government! It would be difficult, but not impossible, not as impossible as the solution to his initial mystery. His face grew an intense red, and a great

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flow of pressure built in his blood vessels. He beat his old brain to develop a plan of attack. If only he had the ring, he would know how to proceed.

Malcolm called the desk to reserve him a seat on the next day's flight back to the States. They should come to his room at eight to collect his luggage—bring breakfast at six. He sat again at the table in his room and began to draft e-mails to the library staff to be ready for his arrival. Never had he felt such life flowing through his body, never had he begun a project with such enthusiasm. The night wore on in silence as he worked at the table. The next morning at six, when breakfast arrived, the porter found his lifeless body at the table with his fist clenched tightly on the shirt against his chest.

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<sup>i</sup> Rudolf Thurneysen (1857-1940) and Osborn Begrgin (1873-1950)