

My News for You

ALSO BY GEOFFREY SQUIRES

Drowned Stones*

Figures

XXI Poems

Landscapes and Silences*

Untitled and other poems*

Abstract Lyrics and other poems

Hafez: translations and interpretation of the ghazals

**also translated into French by François Heusbourg
and published in bilingual editions*

My News for You:

*Irish Poetry
600-1200*

*translated by
Geoffrey Squires*

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I. Preface

The poems translated here were, with some exceptions, written between the 7th and 12th centuries AD, making them the oldest vernacular poetry in Europe. Latin, which arrived with Christianity in the 5th century and brought a script, was the only other language in play, although there are occasional loanwords from Norse and other tongues.

Scholars can roughly assign the poems to centuries, on the basis of changes in syntax and word forms, but many that were written earlier exist only in later manuscripts. Dating is thus hazardous, nor do we usually know the author. It is likely that one was written by a druid, six by women and rather more by professional bards; the remainder are probably by clerics or scribes.

This poetry gives us a window onto a world that is in some respects very different but in others seems strangely close. There are poems about war and warriors, the geography and topography of the country, the religious life, nature and the seasons, the Viking threat, about love, exile, old age and death. They comprise a mixture of pagan and Christian in a period when the two cultures intermingled, with the latter gradually displacing the former. However, there is no simple shift or trend here, but rather a complex and emerging accumulation of pieces, as in a mosaic.

Even for people who know Modern Irish, Old and Middle Irish require specialised study and this book has been facilitated by the recent appearance of a new grammar and the placing online of the magisterial *Dictionary of the Irish Language*. In addition, almost all the early editions and translations from the great initial flowering of Celtic scholarship between about 1880 and 1920 are now available online and modern websites have brought together much of this material.

This book represents only a small proportion of extant early Irish poetry, which includes many more bardic and religious poems and longer, narrative combinations of poetry and prose, most of which have been translated elsewhere. Many of the poems here

can be read straight off, referring if necessary to the Glossary of unfamiliar names and terms near the end. Readers who would like some initial sense of the background should turn first to the Contextual Notes. These are followed by Textual Notes which provide more detailed information on the sources and content of each poem. Seven originals with brief explanatory comments are appended so that readers who do not know Irish can see what they look like and understand a little of their prosody. There is a general Bibliography at the end.

Literal translations of almost all these poems are already available, although scattered across a wide variety of often arcane sources. Here, however, my over-riding aim has been to make of these originals an equivalent poetry in English, and without attempting to reproduce the very different Irish prosodies, to capture something of their form, dynamics and style. The translations are typically close without being literal, and draw on the painstaking scholarly work that has been done in the field over the last century and more. But they are offered as poetry, as texts that despite the great chasm of time, and without in any way diminishing their otherness, still somehow speak to us.

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II. Translations

Over the sea comes Adzehead
off his head
with a hole in his cloak for his head
and a stick with a bent head

he stands in front of a table in front of his house
intoning impieties
and his followers all respond
amen amen

How many Thirties in this noble island
 how many half-Thirties allied to them
 how many townlands side by side
 how many yoke of oxen in each townland

how many townlands and Thirty-hundreds
 in Ireland rich in goods and chattels
 I tell you straight
 I defy anyone else to work it out

and do not presume to challenge me
 I who am known as Fintan the wise
 the most learned man that ever was
 in the whole of Scotland or Ireland

ten townlands in each Thirty-hundred
 and twenty more to be precise
 and although they might seem small to us
 together comprising a great country

a townland sustains three hundred cattle
 with twelve ploughed fields to be exact
 four full herds can roam there without
 one cow rubbing up against the next

eighteen Thirties this is my tally
 for the rich and fertile county of Meath
 and one score and ten Thirties
 belonging to the fair-haired men of Connaught

and fifteen thirties and another twenty
 I can tell you as a matter of fact

and without fear of contradiction
in the mighty province of Ulster

eleven Thirties and another twenty
in crowded affluent Leinster
from the mouth of Inver Dublin
as far west as the pass of the drovers

ten thirties and another three score
living together in harmony
in the two illustrious provinces
of the far reaches of Munster

of the Thirty-hundreds I have reckoned
nine score altogether
and not a townland or half a townland
short in any one of them

five thousand five hundred and twenty townlands
by enumerating them and adding them up
believe me

this is how I have arrived
at the number of townlands in Ireland

Each one has his double his like
though their origins differ

the O'Neills and the Scots
Saxons and Munstermen

Ulstermen and Spaniards
their ranks massing on borders

Welshmen and the men of Connaught
Leinstermen like Franks

I see a fine fair-haired man
who will perform great feats of weaponry
despite the many wounds on his noble flesh

with the fierce brow of a warrior
his forehead the meeting-place
of manifold victories

his eyes shine with the light of seven gems
his spear-head unsheathed
clothed in a red mantle fastened with clasps

he is good-looking
women fall for him
this handsome young man who in a fight
turns suddenly into a dragon

his prowess suggests he is
Cu Chulainn of Muirthemne
I do not know who this is but this I know
he will spill the blood of your army

four flashing swords in each hand
with which he attacks those surrounding him
each weapon used in its own particular way

and when he carries his gae bolga
as well as his sword and spear
no one can keep this man
wearing a red mantle
from the field of battle

two spears lashed
to the rim of his chariot-wheels
he transcends bravery
this is how he appears to me
but he might come in another form

he approaches the fray
and if he is not warded off
he will wreak havoc
for he will seek you out
Cu Chulainn mac Sualtaim

slaughtering dozens of you
decimating your forces
you will leave him nothing but your heads
on the battlefield

I Feidelm the prophetess
will not hide this from you

the blood of warriors shall flow
and it will be remembered for a long time
men's bodies cut to pieces
women weeping

all because of this Hound I see

I invoke the seven daughters of the sea
 who spin youth's threads of longevity

may three deaths be spared me
 may three lives be granted me
 may seven waves of good fortune wash over me

may the spirits not harm me as I make my rounds
 in my flashing breastplate
 may my good name endure
 may I enjoy long life let death
 not come to me until I am old

I call upon my silver champion
 who has not died and will not die

may my life be as fine as white bronze
 as valuable as gold
 may my status be enhanced
 my strength increased

may my grave lie unprepared
 may death not come to me
 while I am travelling
 may I return home safely

the visceral snake shall not take hold of me
 nor the pitiless grey worm the mindless black beetle
 no robber shall assail me nor coven of women
 nor band of armed men

may my lifespan be prolonged
by the King of the universe

I invoke the Ancient One of the seven ages
whom fairy women suckled on their flowing breasts
may my seven candles be not extinguished

I am a strong fort
an immovable rock
a precious stone
a weekly benediction

may I live a hundred times a hundred years
one succeeding another
enjoying all the blessings of life
may the grace of the Holy Spirit be upon me

Domini est salus (thrice)

Christi est Salus (thrice)

super populum tuum Domine benedictio tua