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The Land beneath the Sea – in Honour of Anders Ahlqvist
Ollam na nÉces:
Anders Ahlqvist and Celtic Studies in Australia

PAMELA O’NEILL

In July 1992 a quite ordinary but at the same time quite extraordinary thing happened. Anders Ahlqvist attended the launch of a book. There is nothing unusual about that. Unsurprisingly, the book was an edition, translation and discussion of an early Irish text. Its author was a former student whom Anders had guided in his study of Old Irish. Possibly surprisingly, the launch took place in Sydney, Australia. The author was an Associate Professor of Law from Perth, Australia. The event was the launch of the first volume in the Sydney Series in Celtic Studies: Neil McLeod’s *Early Irish Contract Law*. It took place during the First Australian Conference of Celtic Studies. There is a pleasing symmetry in the fact that, twenty-one years later, the present small tribute is the fourteenth volume in that same series, and that it is presented during the Eighth Australian Conference of Celtic Studies, which has been organised by Professor Ahlqvist himself.

Of course, the story of Anders Ahlqvist’s involvement in Celtic Studies in Australia starts much earlier than 1992. For Neil McLeod, it starts on the day in January 1980 when he knocked on Anders’ door in Galway to ask about studying Brehon law – a fortunate event which led ultimately to much more than *Early Irish Contract Law*: it was an important part of Australia gaining one of the world’s foremost scholars of early Irish law, in the person of Neil. One might claim that for William Gillies, who was also present at the 1992 conference, it started over a decade earlier when Anders studied Celtic in Edinburgh – for even Anders was a student once.

Nonetheless, by his own account, the First Australian Conference of Celtic Studies was a very important event in the chain that led up to Anders Ahlqvist becoming the inaugural Sir Warwick Fairfax Professor of Celtic Studies at The University of Sydney. The conference organisers, Aedeen Cremin prominent amongst them, made Anders and others feel warmly welcome, and presented a positive impression of a small but

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1 The University of Sydney.
thriving centre of scholarship in Celtic Studies that remained in Anders’ mind when the Chair was advertised almost fifteen years later.

That scholarship had been carefully nurtured over many years. Sydney’s Celtic Studies programme, then headed by Helen Fulton, had been gradually built up. It had its origins in the late 1950s, when the late Bernard Martin introduced an Honours elective in Old Irish in the English Department. Stephen Knight then added Middle Welsh in the early 1970s. Later in the 1970s, Lynette Olson was appointed as a lecturer in the History Department, where an overview Celtic course was then taught. In 1986, Celtic Studies expanded and postgraduate degrees were introduced.

Which brings us back to 1992. Following the First Australian Conference of Celtic Studies, the conference became a triennial event, with proceedings of all but the second conference published in the Sydney Series in Celtic Studies. Celtic Studies continued at Sydney, reduced considerably by the retirement of Aedeen Cremin in 2000 and the departure of Helen Fulton for a post in the United Kingdom in 2005. The Celtic Studies Foundation, together with various community groups and individuals, continued the campaign for a Chair in Celtic Studies, which was finally realised with an advertisement for the post in late 2006.

The gods were smiling, for Anders Ahlqvist applied. Good sense prevailed and he was appointed to take up the post on 1 July 2008. Earlier that year, he travelled to Sydney to put in place the mechanisms to enable him to ‘hit the ground running’. He met with the Celtic Studies Foundation and others, and took on the monolith of the University administration to arrange for units of study to be offered to students the following year. In this truly appalling task he soon found a good friend and reliable adviser in Daniel Anlezark, an Anglo-Saxonist and colleague in the School of Letters, Art, and Media who has been consistently supportive of Celtic Studies.

On his return to Australia in June 2008, Anders lost no time in building relationships with community organisations. He addressed the winter schools of the national Scottish Gaelic and Irish language associations the same weekend he landed in Sydney. By the end of the year, he was a member of the Celtic Council of Australia, the Aisling Society of Sydney, the Sydney Society for Scottish History and more, and had also established important links with the small but vibrant Breton community in Sydney. On Friday 17 October he delivered his inaugural lecture to a standing-room-only audience on the topic ‘Celtic!’. In a memorable tribute to both his country of birth and his chosen area of scholarship, he was piped into the lecture hall – to Sibelius’ Finlandia. The lecture reviewed, in a typical blending of diplomacy and scholarship, some important Australian Celtic connections as well as material from each of the Celtic literary traditions.
Teaching began for Anders at the beginning of 2009, when he commenced the Herculean teaching load that he would retain throughout his five years at Sydney: three ‘units of study’ in each semester. Every student in his large Defining the Celts class received just as much care as those in his small classes in Old Irish, Middle Welsh and Modern Irish Linguistics. Alongside Anders’ own teaching, he was able to secure Desmond O’Malley to teach Modern Irish Language and Culture (with funding from the Irish Government), together with John Coombs to teach Modern Welsh Language and Culture (funded by a bequest for that purpose). Lynette Olson and Sybil Jack completed the undergraduate offerings in Celtic Studies with a history-based course each.

In October 2009, Anders hosted a one-day symposium on Early Celtic Legal Language, when funding from the Australian Research Council Network for Early European Research brought Neil McLeod and his student Jade Harman from Perth and postgraduate students Julianna Grigg and Celia Scott from Melbourne to Sydney.

2010 saw Anders hosting the Seventh Australian Conference of Celtic Studies. Reflecting the widespread respect and friendship for Anders and his scholarship, an array of senior and significant scholars of Celtic from around the world came to Sydney. Anders’ old friend Tomás Ó Cathasaigh from Harvard was a particularly welcome visitor. Anders’ postgraduate student Pierre Noyer and his honours student Kylee Nicholls were among those presenting papers. Papers from the conference were published as Language and Power in the Celtic World, co-edited by Anders, shortly afterwards. The cover of that volume featured an image that had characteristically caught Anders’ imagination when pointed out by Murray-Luke Peard: a window at St John’s College in the University of Sydney bearing an inscription partially in the Irish language.

The 14th International Congress of Celtic Studies took place in Maynooth in August 2011, immediately preceded by the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies Summer School in Mediaeval and Modern Irish Language and Literature. Anders organised scholarships for two of Sydney’s most promising undergraduate students, Josephine Barton and Murray-Luke Peard, to attend both the summer school and the congress. Ruairí Ó hUiginn, who has aided the cause of Celtic Studies at Sydney in a number of small and not-so-small ways, obligingly arranged for Language and Power to be available for sale to the wider Celtic Studies community during the congress.

In October 2011, Anders hosted a day symposium on Early Medieval Mariners in Britain and Ireland. This symposium welcomed Daniel Anlezark, Helen Appleton and Hannah Burrows, colleagues from the Anglo-Saxon and Norse area of the English Department at Sydney, who joined Celtic Studies researchers to share scholarship on this overlapping area of interest. The nautical theme was one close to Anders’ heart, and one which also appears from time to time in this book.

2012 saw the graduation of Anders’ first Australian postgraduate student, Pierre Noyer. It also saw the securing of an Australian Research Council grant by Anders Ahlqvist, Neil McLeod, David Stifter and me for a project relating to early Irish law. One major feature of this project was a specialist conference on Medieval Celtic Law Texts at Sydney in October 2012, which drew several excellent papers from postgraduate students from Britain and Ireland, as well as papers from Anders’ undergraduate students Merrin Marks, Murray-Luke Peard and Timothy Causbrook. The second major feature was volume 12 in the Sydney Series in Celtic Studies,\(^3\) including papers based on those from the conference together with other invited papers.

In 2013, Anders published his *Grammatical Tables for Old Irish*,\(^4\) designed to assist his students, and based on teaching materials he had used in both Galway and Sydney. Of course, Anders also hosts the Eighth Australian Conference of Celtic Studies in 2013.

This account is a mere skeleton. As well as many more activities in Australia, Anders has constantly come and gone between the hemispheres, fulfilling his commitments to Celtic Studies elsewhere – of many of which we in Australia were only dimly aware. Doctoral theses were examined, board meetings attended, Congresses planned, and much else besides.

Anders will retire from the Chair of Celtic Studies at the University of Sydney in December 2013 – but not before co-editing one more collection of papers in the Sydney Series in Celtic Studies. He will leave behind him a postgraduate student and well over a hundred undergraduate students who have had the privilege of being taught by an outstanding teacher and scholar. At least one of those undergraduate students is expected to pursue a doctorate in Celtic Studies in the United Kingdom. Anders will also leave behind untold numbers of colleagues, community members and friends whose intellectual and personal lives have been

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4 Ahlqvist, Anders, compiler 2013 *Grammatical Tables for Old Irish*, Sydney Series in Celtic Studies 11, The University of Sydney Celtic Studies Foundation.
enriched by his contribution to Celtic Studies in Australia – although of course we expect to be seeing more of him, both here and abroad.

This book is a small token of the esteem and gratitude of those Australians, and others who have been involved in Anders’ Australian odyssey. Of course there are many others who could have contributed to this book, and many others who would have liked to. I take this opportunity to apologise to them for the limitations of time and space which made it impossible for them to do so. I am sure that they will find other ways to extend their best wishes to Anders.

I have called my contribution *Ollam na nÉces*, an unattested phrase in Old Irish which I believe describes Anders: the scholars’ scholar.\(^5\) Doubtless he will, in his gentle, tactful and scholarly way, correct me on that in private – or at least point out that I ought to have marked the unattested nature of the phrase with an asterisk. As a person and as a scholar, I am greatly honoured to have had the opportunity to work alongside Anders and to get to know him. If I have been of some small help to him in his work at Sydney, then that, together with my part in the production of this book, is but small repayment for his many kindnesses and generosities.

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\(^5\) It also gives passing recognition to an Old Irish text which has long interested Anders and on which he spoke at the First Australian Conference of Celtic Studies: *Auraicept na nÉces*, ‘The Scholars’ Primer’.