The Man Who Never Slept
The Irish Merman Legend and the *Lai de Tydorel*

Barbara Hillers and Matthieu Boyd

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*About the book*

*The Man Who Never Slept* is the first in-depth, coordinated treatment of a strange and fascinating story in its only two attested forms: a multiform oral legend from the Irish-speaking west of Ireland, and a so-called “Breton *lai*” in medieval French. A woman who has been seduced or raped by a water-being (fairy knight, merman, or otter) has a son who cannot sleep; the supernatural world has left its mark on him. When at last he learns who his father was, he vanishes into his watery realm.

The book is in two parts. The first part, which deals with the modern Irish legend, is written by Barbara Hillers, a specialist in Gaelic literature and folklore. It has the scientific rigor of a traditional tale-type study – looking at all twenty-five versions of the Irish story and mapping their regional distribution – but it is much more than that. It seeks to learn as much as possible about the story and its storytellers, about the psychological meaning of the legend and its social function within the community, and about the artistic shaping of the individual stories and their transmission within the tradition at large. The relatively limited number of versions means that is possible to cover all of them as thoroughly as they deserve. This is likely to be the definitive treatment of the subject for a long time to come.

For the second part of the book, Prof. Hillers is joined by Matthieu Boyd, who specializes in medieval French and Celtic literature and Breton folklore. This part deals with the Old French *Lai de Tydorel*, a narrative poem of a type that purportedly derives from Breton songs. This genre of the “Breton *lai*” is thoroughly discussed, and some long-held assumptions about it are called into question, via a focus on *Tydorel’s* manuscript context, its relationship to the medieval genealogical fable and to essential characteristics of oral folklore, and its sensitivity to twelfth-century Breton politics. We suggest answers to the questions: how Breton, how Celtic, and how traditional is the *Lai de Tydorel*? How does it compare to the other “Breton *lais*”, and what does it reveal about the genre? In the final section we discuss the relationship between the Old French *lai* and the Irish stories about the Man Who Never Slept. We argue that the Irish legend is derived from the French *lai*, and we discuss how and when the tale may have traveled to Ireland and taken root there. We place this culture transfer in the wider context of the cultural revolution that accompanied the expansion of the Anglo-Norman sphere of influence throughout Europe. The Norman influence on medieval French and English literature has been well-charted; our study will be a pioneering
contribution to our understanding of the reception of Anglo-Norman literature in Gaelic Ireland, as well as to the wider question of the relationship between folklore and literature.

Prior, competing and complementary work on this topic

The Irish stories about the Man Who Never Slept have never been studied before on this scale. Within the field of Irish folkloristics, the legend has attracted a certain amount of attention, at least partly due to the fact that it was a favourite of such stellar storytellers as Peig Sayers and her poet-son Micheál Ó Gaoithín. Scholars Robin Flower and Kenneth Jackson collected and published the legend from Peig; Bo Almqvist collected it from Mícheál. Modern Irish writers such as the poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill and novelist Pádraig Ua Maoileoin were familiar with the legend from Peig's telling as well as through other oral channels, and created their own interpretations of the story.

The first scholar to draw attention to the Irish merman legends and their relationship to the Lai de Tydorel was A. H. Krappe, who in a short 1929 contribution to The Modern Language Review (24.2, 200-204), suggested that the Irish legend represented a survival of a Celtic story current in medieval Brittany as well as Ireland. The modern Irish versions, Krappe felt, were in some sense more 'archaic' attestations of the legend's 'Celtic provenance' than the medieval French lay. Krappe's insights were hampered by his lack of source materials - he based his remarks on only two versions - leading to a serious misrepresentation of the material. Methodologically, Krappe's article exemplified the weaknesses of an older generation's attempts to use folklore to throw light on medieval literature without treating the folklore material with critical rigour. The only other article-length treatment of the legend is by Barbara Hillers herself: “The Man Who Never Slept (MLSIT 4082): A Survey of the Redactions and Their Relation to the Lai de Tydorel’, in Béaloideas: The Journal of the Folklore of Ireland Society 59 (1991), 91-105. [I want to slot in a couple of sentences here about how the proposed book goes beyond this; also creating more of a connection to the next section about complementary works].

Bo Almqvist in particular was a master of the tale-type study that was more than a tale-type study; some of his work is collected in Viking Ale (Aberystwyth: Boethius Press, 1991); of particular interest in this context are Almqvist's studies of supernatural water-beings in folklore and literature (‘Of Mermaids and Marriages: Seamus Heaney's "Maighdean Mara" and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill's "An Maighdean Mhara" in the light of folk tradition, Béaloideas 58 (1990), 75-139 and 'The Mélusine Legend in the Context of Irish Folk Tradition', Beáloideas 67, 13-69). Our approach thus extends an honored tradition in Irish folklore studies. The insomniac's merman father has obvious analogues in the female mermaid or seal-maiden, who is much better known in Irish and Scottish Gaelic folklore, and the theme of human relations with the supernatural is one that has attracted much interest in the context of fairylore studies, an especially vibrant field of study (see, e.g., Peter Narváez (ed.), The Good People: New Fairylore Essays [New York: Garland, 1991]; Islanders and Water-Dwellers, ed. Patricia Lysaght et al. [Blackrock: DBA, 1999]; and The Burning of Bridget Cleary: A True Story, Angela Bourke [Penguin, 1999]).

The Old French lays - short narrative poems that often deal with supernatural-human
encounters - are one of the most attractive `minor' genres of medieval literature and have generated an enormous body of scholarship. The *Lai de Tydorel* has received comparatively little attention, although a renewal of interest in the lay is to be expected given the new edition, English translation, and study of *Tydorel* and ten other anonymous lays by Glyn Burgess and Leslie Brook in *French Arthurian Literature IV: Eleven Old French Narrative Lays* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007). In so far that scholars of Old French literature are aware of the Irish merman legend at all, they have tended to follow Krappe in regarding it as indication of the *lai*'s Celtic source material, which we will argue misrepresents the direction of transfer.

The genre of the “Breton *lais*” itself has never been comprehensively examined from a folkloristics perspective, and since one of the defining ideas of the genre is that it derives from oral folklore, this would seem to be a natural step. At the same time, care must be taken to reconcile this perspective with the excellent work that has been done by philologists and literary scholars (summarized in the volume by Burgess and Brook); as the authors are experienced medievalists as well as folklore scholars, this is guaranteed.

The connection between Irish literature and folklore and medieval French literature is extremely topical and has been addressed in some successful recent books, such as John Carey’s *Ireland and the Grail* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, 2007) and K. Sarah-Jane Murray’s *From Plato to Lancelot: A Preface to Chrétien de Troyes* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008). *The Man Who Never Slept* will offer an important corrective to the prevailing focus on how Celtic sources may have influenced French texts: here the story has traveled from France to Ireland, from literature to folk tradition. Our demonstration of this will have important implications for any future study of Irish-French literary relations in the Middle Ages, or more recently.

We know of no other study in preparation that deals with the subject matter of *The Man Who Never Slept* or that treats the Old French “Breton *lais*” from a similar perspective.

**Market**

*The Man Who Never Slept* is written in an accessible style and is intended to reach a wide scholarly audience across the disciplines. Our approach is a powerful fusion of folkloristics with traditional philological and literary analysis. The book primarily addresses students and scholars of Irish folklore and of medieval French literature, two constituencies rarely addressed by the same piece of work. It will also be of interest to a wider Irish Studies audience and especially to scholars with an interest in the interaction between native Gaelic culture and its foreign elite. More generally, it will appeal to those who are interested in how oral folklore and learned literary culture interact.

**Scope**

The length of the book is estimated at 250 pages [Pt I has 34,000 words as is, & will probably end up at about 45,000 words]. It will make use of the following illustrations, maps,
and copyrighted materials:

- Photographs of storytellers (8-10), folklore collectors (2-3), and reproduction of manuscript (2) from the Department of Irish Folklore, The National University of Ireland, University College Dublin.
- Distribution map of Irish versions of The Man Who Never Slept.

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About the authors

Barbara Hillers is an Associate at the Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures at Harvard University. She has taught Celtic language, literature, and folklore at Tufts University, at Harvard, and at the University of Edinburgh, and holds degrees from the Queen’s University Belfast (B.A., 1987); the National University of Ireland, UCD (M.Phil., 1990); and Harvard University (Ph.D., 1997).
She is the author of *The Medieval Irish Odyssey* (Aberystwyth: Celtic Studies Publications, forthcoming), and (with Joseph Harris) of *Child’s Children: Ballad study and its legacies* (Trier: WVT, forthcoming). She has published widely on early Irish literature and modern Gaelic folklore. Research interests include the reception of classical literature in medieval Ireland; the relationship between oral and literary traditions in Scotland and Ireland; and form and function of modern Gaelic folklore. She is engaged in an edition and translation of the Irish Odyssey and other Middle Irish adaptations from classical literature.

**Matthieu Boyd** teaches medieval French, English, and Celtic languages and literatures at Fairleigh Dickinson University, Madison N.J. He holds degrees from Princeton University (A.B., French & Italian, 2003), the National University of Ireland (University College, Dublin) (Higher Diploma in Early Irish Language and Literature, 2005), and Harvard University (A.M., 2007; Ph.D., 2011), where he was a Presidential Scholar. He also holds special qualifications in Breton and Welsh. He is an Assistant Editor of the *Charrette Project 2* (http://lancelot.baylor.edu; formerly the Princeton *Charrette Project*) and an Associate Editor of the *Digby 23/Timaeus Project* (http://timaeus.baylor.edu), and has published on the Old French “Breton lais” and on Breton folklore and literary legends. His doctoral dissertation deals with Celtic influence on medieval French and Anglo-Norman literature in the period following Marie de France and Chrétien de Troyes, focusing on the thirteenth-century Arthurian romance set in Ireland, *Les Merveilles de Rigomer*. 