

## Foreword

The primary aim of the present book is to establish a relative chronology of the main sound changes that occurred on the way from Proto-Indo-European via Proto- and Insular Celtic to Old and Middle Irish. This inevitably entails examination of the relationships between the various members of the Celtic family, chapter three being chiefly devoted to this question. The role of the first chapter is the essentially introductory one of describing the idiosyncratic orthographical systems of the those Celtic languages that figure most prominently in the following five chapters. Chapters two to five follow a line some four millennia long from PIE to Early Medieval Irish. Since our knowledge of Continental Celtic remains rather inadequate despite dramatic and continuing improvements during the last four decades or so, a comprehensive relative chronology of Gaulish and Celtiberian does not yet seem practical. Instead various topics relevant to their phonological development are dealt with at suitable points in chapter three especially. Chapters four and five are mostly concerned with the relative chronology of the multitude of changes that affected Irish from about the beginning of the fourth to the end of the seventh century A.D. Chapter six offers a structurally motivated modification of Jackson's account of the evolution of the British Celtic vowel system in his seminal *Language and History in Early Britain (LHEB)*. The very existence of that monumental chronologically oriented work obviates the need for a general relative chronology of the British branch here. Aspects of Jackson's dating have come in for some revision from Patrick Sims-Williams (1990) and others of late, but this further advance would scarcely have been possible if *LHEB*'s treatment had not been there in the first place. Notwithstanding significant partial discussions such as those by David Greene (1973) and Frederik Kortlandt (1979 and 1982), nothing comparable has hitherto been on offer for Irish. Chapters four and five of this book are a modest attempt to fill that gap in the hope that they too will provide a basis for further progress in this notoriously tricky area.

Much of chapters two to five is a somewhat altered and considerably expanded English version of pages 66-92 of my contribution on Old Irish and its prehistory ('An tSean-Ghaeilge agus a Réamhstair', pp. 61-219) to the recently published *Stair na Gaeilge (SnaG)*. The discussion of the Celtic reflexes of the PIE syllabic nasals in chapter three is derived from an article in *Studia Celtica Japonica* (McCone, 1991) and chapter six represents the reworking of an unpublished lecture given to the Philological Society in London a couple of years ago. Citations from works in German, French or Spanish have been silently translated into English.

My thanks are due to Seán Ua Súilleabháin for kindly supplying a full reference I did not have access to. Drafts of this book have been read with

typical acuity by my graduate students David Stifter and Karin Stüber and by my friends and colleagues in the field Liam Breatnach, Damian McManus and Peter Schrijver, each of whom made a number of helpful corrections and suggestions. It is a pleasure to record my gratitude to them for the improvements they introduced. Needless to say, this generous assistance should not be taken to imply their agreement with all of the views contained in this book and remaining blemishes are my responsibility alone.

Kim McCone  
Department of Old Irish  
St. Patrick's College  
Maynooth  
June, 1996