

KATIE NÍ LOINGSIGH

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Mnemonic Structure and Style in Irish Proverbs by Marcas Mac Coinnigh represents a major contribution to modern paremiological and stylistic studies. This monograph is the fifth volume in the *Proverbium Online Supplement Series* and examines the structural and stylistic features that make Irish-language proverbs memorable. This study is long overdue and provides the first systematic linguistic and mnemonic analysis of Irish-language proverbs. As stated in the opening chapter, “proverbs and proverbial language occupy a distinctive and enduring place in the Irish linguistic tradition, with documented roots reaching back to Old Irish literature” (Mac Coinnigh 2025: 20). Despite this rich linguistic legacy, a comprehensive examination of the structural and stylistic features of Irish-language proverbs has never been undertaken. Drawing on both close qualitative reading and corpus-based description, the analysis identifies recurring patterns across the data and offers valuable insights for linguists, folklorists, paremiologists, and scholars of the Irish language. Irish-language material has remained peripheral to international paremiology, even as the field has broadened to include traditions as varied as Ancient Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Spanish, Russian, and Yiddish. Mac Coinnigh engages critically with foundational research by international scholars in the field and demonstrates the ways in which Irish-language proverbial material both conforms to and diverges from cross-linguistic norms.

The primary data set for analysis consists of over 18,000 proverbial entries from the three major dialectal collections of the twentieth century – Énrí Ó Muirghesea’s *Seanfhocla Uladh* (1907, 1936), Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha’s *Seanfhocail na Mui-mhneach* (1926), and Tomás S. Ó Máille’s *Sean-Fhocla Chonnacht* (1948, 1952). Chapter 1 examines the significance of these works to this study, outlining the methodological strengths and limitations of each collection. This material is contextualised through an examination of proverbial usage from the Old Irish period (8th–9th centuries) through to the bilingual lexicographic tradition of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, and into the major documentary initiatives of the twentieth century. The significant contribution of Robert Shipboy MacAdam (1808–1895) to Irish paremiology in the mid-nineteenth century is noted. His unique methodical approach to the collection and classification of proverbs is highlighted, as well as his foresight in grappling with questions that remain among the most contested and resistant to resolution in the field. MacAdam not only complemented each Irish proverb in his collection with an English translation, but, in many cases, provided comparative equivalents from a range of European linguistic traditions, leading Hughes (1998) to characterise him as an early example of a “good European” (Mac Coinnigh 2025: 24).

Chapter 2 is one of the most taxonomically focused sections of the monograph. This chapter follows on naturally from the discussion towards the end of the opening chapter on the challenges associated with defining proverbs, issues concerning terminology, and the cataloguing of proverbial subforms. Different kinds of expressions that exist alongside “so-called ‘true’ proverbs” (Mac Coinnigh 2025: 54) in the Irish dialectal collections are the primary focus of this chapter. Particular attention is given to proverbial expressions, proverbial comparisons, Wellerisms (including culturally specific references to the importance of the wren in the Irish-language material), enumerative proverbs and proverbial questions. This framework offers many useful examples, together with translations and, in instances where the literal meaning diverges from the lexicalised sense of the proverbial subform being examined, additional explanatory glosses.

- (1) (14) *Éisteacht na muice bradaí*. (M§220)
 ‘The hearing of a thieving pig.’ (= keen hearing)

A distinct subcategory within the Irish tradition is highlighted in section 2.6 of this chapter, which focuses on enumerative proverbs (Mac Coinnigh 2025: 93–108). The historical development of enumerative structures in Irish literature is outlined and their arrangement in groups of three (triads) or four (tetrads) serves as a means of organising knowledge, moral instruction, and social values into compact and memorable numerical sets (Mac Coinnigh 2025: 94).

- (2) **Triad:**
 (66) *Trí neithe ná múintear: guth, féile ná filidheacht*. (M§1857)
 ‘Three things that are not taught: voice, generosity, and poetry.’

- (3) **Tetrad:**
 (67) *Na ceithre nídh is féarr do’n bhuailteoir: lámhchrann cuilinn, buailtín coill, punann amháin, agus urlár glan*. (U§46)
 ‘The four best things for the thresher: a holly handle, a hazel striker, a single sheaf, and a clean floor.’

Such examples provide one of the clearest examples of the book’s central thesis: that Irish proverbs are shaped by mnemonic devices which make proverbs easier to remember and transmit orally. The rigorous classification detailed in this chapter provides an important guiding framework for any future scholarly research in the field.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine syntactic, semantic, and prosodic features as mnemonic devices. The analysis of Irish-specific structures may be seen to enrich comparative theory, given that international paremiology has been shaped, whether explicitly or implicitly, by the dominant Modern European language traditions. Chapter 3 provides evidence of this through a detailed analysis of emphatic word order, a grammatical feature that distinguishes proverbs as a discrete linguistic form. As Irish is a

VSO language and does not employ sentence stress for emphasis, the copular construction is often utilised as a means of focusing in Irish. It is argued that such marked word order enhances memorability (Mac Coinnigh 2025: 143) and various examples demonstrate how syntactic foregrounding is used for emphasis in Irish.

(14) (93) *Is é **an gad is giorra don scornaigh** is córa a réi-teach ar dtúis.* (M§1576)

‘It is **the noose closest to the throat** that should be loosened first.’

Chapter 4 turns from the syntactic structures examined in the previous chapter to the semantic and prosodic aspects of Irish proverbs. The argument that metaphor, personification, alliteration, and rhyme all serve to help make proverbs memorable and suitable for oral transmission is strongly made. The centrality of metaphor in defining proverbs is acknowledged, and the case of Irish is reassessed through a measured analysis that makes for noteworthy reading (Mac Coinnigh 2025: 160).

Chapter 5 examines the social function of proverbs and serves as an appropriate closing chapter to this study. This chapter examines the *blason populaire*, a genre of traditional verbal stereotype directed at a folk group or a particular region. As a concluding chapter that focuses not only on the formal devices that contribute to proverbial memorability but also on the social and ideological functions of proverbs, it is likely to be of considerable interest to a wider academic audience. The legacy of colonialism is reflected in the fact that the English are the most frequently targeted foreign nation in the examples in the Irish material (Mac Coinnigh 2025: 198). Interestingly, an inverse correlation between a region’s geographical size and the frequency of blasons populaires is reported in the findings. The smaller the geographical unit (townland vs. nation), the more abundant the blasons populaires. Such findings resonate with Kavanagh’s celebrated claim that ‘parochialism is universal; it deals with the fundamentals’, a perspective that the poet Seamus Heaney later developed in his influential reflections on the role

of place in shaping the Irish psyche and its imaginative structures (Heaney 1980: 139).

Marcas Mac Coinnigh offers a comprehensive overview of Irish-language paremiology to date and lays out a coherent framework for future research in *Mnemonic Structure and Style in Irish Proverbs*. The recommendations for future research are especially pertinent for contemporary scholars. Integration with developments in the digital humanities, including large-scale lexicographic and corpus-building initiatives such as *Foclóir Stairiúil na Nua-Ghaeilge* (Historical Dictionary of Irish)¹ and *Corpas Náisiúnta na Gaeilge* (National Corpus of Irish)² is especially noteworthy. Such suggestions contribute to corpus-based and computational approaches to paremiology. Similarly, the ongoing digitisation of the *National Folklore Collection*³ provides valuable ethnographic data which contributes to the interpretation and analysis of proverbial material. This database contains one of the largest online proverb repositories in any language (Mac Coinnigh 2025: 226) and provides a unique foundation for future research in this area. Such future interdisciplinary research would provide a greater understanding of usage, structural variation, dialectal analysis, and linguistic patterns in proverbs.

Overall, this work is a timely and significant publication. Not only does Mac Coinnigh break new ground in Irish-language paremiological research, but he also reorients the study of Irish proverbs from an antiquarian emphasis on collection towards approaches grounded in structural, linguistic, and cognitive analysis. In doing so, it situates Irish proverbial traditions within broader international paremiological scholarship. *Mnemonic Structure and Style in Irish Proverbs* clearly establishes Marcas Mac Coinnigh as the foremost scholar in Irish-language paremiology, and this work should be viewed as a core reference and guiding text for students and scholars of Irish-language paremiology alike.

¹ <https://www.ria.ie/research-programmes/focloir-stairiuil-na-gaeilge/>

² <https://www.corpas.ie/en/cng/>

³ <https://www.duchas.ie/en>

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