

PROFESSOR DR. HILDEGARD L. C. TRISTRAM (1941–2020)

*Séamus Mac Mathúna*



Professor Hildegard L. C. Tristram, who died on 29<sup>th</sup> October 2020 in Freiburg im Breisgau, was an inspirational and influential German-speaking Celtologist and Medievalist.

I first met her in the 1980s in Galway at an annual Erasmus network meeting about student/staff mobility between European institutions teaching Celtic Studies. The network was led by Professor Gearóid Mac Eoin and grew over the years to include more than twenty institutions. At first, however, there was but a handful of institutions involved and it was possible to get to know colleagues reasonably well. The University of Freiburg im Breisgau was one of those early institutions and was represented by Hildegard and Professor Herbert Pilch.

Tall and statuesque, Hildegard had a commanding presence and personality. She was also gentle, courteous and unpretentious by nature and enjoyed spirited conversation and debate, travelling to cultural and historic sights, walking tours, and different kinds of sports, especially cross-country skiing.

Endowed with a broad and enquiring mind, she received an excellent and wide-ranging University education which stood her in good stead in her future career. She studied English and Romance Languages at the Universities of Münster and Freiburg, the Royal Holloway College, University of London and Université Stendhal, Grenoble. Under the influence of Professor Pilch, she developed a special interest in the Celtic languages and later spent a period at Trinity College Dublin studying Old and Middle Irish in preparation for her *Habilitation Schrift*.

Her 1970 doctoral thesis, an edition of four Old English sermons belonging to the heterodox tradition, had laid the foundation for her *Habil on Sex Aetates Mundi* in the early English and Irish traditions and also for many scholarly contributions to Old and Middle English literature and versification, such as *Early Insular Preaching: Verbal Artistry and Method of Composition* (1995). The insights gained from her research into these written homiletic texts, which were to be orally delivered, also paved the way for a major study of orality and literacy in the early Irish tradition, with special reference to *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (*Mündlichkeit und Schriftlichkeit in der frühen irischen Literatur, mit besonderer Berücksichtigung auf des 'Rinderraubes von Cúailnge'*). This project ran for over ten years, between 1985 and 1996, and entailed the organisation of many international conferences and the publication under her direction and editorship of important volumes on topics such as orality and literacy in Early Irish literature, metrics and media, *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, text and time depth, reoralisation, and new methods in research of the epic. Most of the conferences were of an interdisciplinary nature and introduced innovative approaches to the study of early Irish literature. Her own work on the *Táin* was at an advanced stage of preparation when she became ill and it is hoped it will be published in the not too distant future.

Having taught and researched in the English Department at Freiburg since 1969, she was appointed in 1993 to a full professorship in English Historical Linguistics and Medieval English Literature at the University of Potsdam. In addition to lecturing on Old and Middle English language and literature and the history of the English language, she initiated and directed another major groundbreaking research project—'The Celtic Englishes'. Like the Freiburg project on orality and literacy, this one also entailed the investigation of an under-researched area and sought to provide a more comprehensive and panoptic view of the subject than had hitherto been attempted. She had the vision to include most of the main variants of the Celtic Englishes throughout the world and once again succeeded in attracting specialists and new recruits to the subject area. She organised four international conferences, in 1995, 1998, 2001, 2004, the proceedings of which were all published.

Potsdam's gain was Freiburg's loss. Although Celtic Studies continued when she left Freiburg, it was dismantled in 2001 as an independent subject. In 2006, following her *Emeritierung* at Potsdam, she returned to Freiburg as Honorary Professor

and began again lecturing on aspects of Celtic Studies, having succeeded in accessing funding from the Government of Ireland for the teaching of Irish abroad. The conference dinners organised by Professor Tristram in Freiburg and Potsdam, where they were held in the historic and impressive Cicilienhof Palace, were memorable occasions. In organising the dinners and conferences at both institutions, she was ably assisted by her excellent doctoral students, many of whom came from Ireland to study with her and later took up academic positions in their own right. She encouraged them greatly in their respective endeavours and generously passed on to them a lasting legacy of scholarship, organisational know-how, enthusiasm for the subject and, of course, many fond memories.

She was ably and lovingly assisted throughout her career by her husband Dr Konrad J. Tristram (Konni) without whose unflagging support it would not have been possible for her to achieve as much as she did. They often hosted parties at their home in Freiburg when students and visiting guests were wined, dined and entertained with stimulating conversation and singing sessions.

Hildegard supported Celtic learned associations and enthusiastically embraced new initiatives and challenges. By attending and participating in conferences, she kept abreast of developments and sought to broaden the base and appeal of the discipline. She had a particular interest in opening up scholarly contacts with Eastern Europe and contributed greatly to furthering those contacts in various ways, such as through her close association with *Societas Celto-Slavica*. In recognition of this work, and her contribution to Breton Studies, the 9<sup>th</sup> International Colloquium of the Societas, which was held at Quimper in Brittany in 2018 and hosted by Professor Gary German of Université de Bretagne Occidentale, Brest, was dedicated to her. She had previously been Visiting Professor at Brest. Unfortunately, she was ill at the time of the conference and was unable to attend in person.

The importance of her contribution to Celtic Studies in general was recognised by the award of the degree of Doctor of Letters *honoris causa* by the National University of Ireland in 2008. The conferral took place in Dublin Castle and was a wonderful celebratory occasion which was attended by her family and some close Irish friends. Two *Festschriften* in her honour were published, one in Berlin in 2009, and the other in Uppsala in 2011.

Hildegard Tristram was an excellent lecturer and communicator, a formidable organiser and editor, a generous and supportive leader to her many students and a staunch and loyal friend. Her death is a big loss to Celtic and Medieval Studies and she will be greatly missed. We send our sincerest condolences to her husband Konni and two sons, Engelbert J.R. Tristram and Dr. Konrad R. W. Tristram. *Suaimhneas síoraí dá banam uasal.*

