

# Welsh Poetics in the Indo-European Tradition

## *The Case of the Book of Aneirin*<sup>1</sup>

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No modern study of the metrics of older poetry in any Celtic language can neglect the masterful essay by Calvert Watkins on 'Indo-European Metrics and Archaic Irish Verse'.<sup>2</sup> Assimilation of the massive scholarly argument of that essay is daunting, still more any attempt to recapitulate it briefly. Its germ may be, however, that a Common Indo-European paroemiac line can be discerned in the metrics of some of the older daughter languages.<sup>3</sup> By 'reconstructing forward'—a favourite device of his—Watkins locates the realization of such a line in archaic Irish verse. The basic archaic Irish line, he decides, is a cadenced heptasyllabic.<sup>4</sup>

Only a few attempts have been made, to our knowledge, to apply Watkins's argument to the consideration of older Welsh verse. These include the doctoral dissertation of Marged Haycock, an essay by D. Ellis Evans, and—at greater length—the master's thesis of Patrick Donovan.<sup>5</sup> Mr Donovan concludes, rightly, that Welsh verse is not based on a seven-syllable cadenced line (and Dr Haycock implies the same thing), and concludes therefore that Watkins's analysis is irrelevant to the case of Welsh, since Mr Donovan finds Welsh *hengerdd* to be based largely on lines of nine or ten syllables, in which Watkins's cadences are metrically impossible.

Our analysis of archaic Old Irish verse, however, including analysis of Watkins's specific examples, makes us conclude that, though the derivation from an Indo-European paroemiac is almost certainly correct, the line was not originally realized in Archaic Irish as a cadenced heptasyllabic, but rather as a very much shorter line. The oldest Irish line seems to be a syllabically variable line constituted of two metrical stresses, with a catalectic single-stress variant.<sup>6</sup> Our comparable analysis of older Welsh metres—specifically as they are represented in the *Book of Aneirin*, although we have taken side glances at Taliesin—dissolves the nine-syllable lines just as radically as Watkins's seven-syllables, into precisely the same kind of very short lines. That is, we find the oldest discernible stratum of Welsh poetics to be constituted of syllabically variable lines with two metrical stresses and a single-stress catalectic variant, exactly the same, *mutatis mutandis*, as in Archaic Irish. Our genetic conclusion, therefore, is that what Watkins characterizes as the shorter Indo-European paroemiac, of eight syllables or fewer, realised in Common Celtic as precisely that line. With the development of stress—as in Italic, Slavonic, and Germanic—stress came to represent the *temps fort* in the line, and this feature is certainly present in the daughter languages, Welsh and Irish.<sup>7</sup> An effect in both languages of the syllable loss datable to somewhere around the fourth century was the reduction, on average, of any sequence of eight syllables to about five.<sup>8</sup> Syllable-loss was not, of course, symmetrical, and no hypothetical poetry