

What is a bard? - medieval edition (for Angus Folk Singer and [Corrie Bergeron](#))

By Kateryn Draper

The question as to whether or not there were actually bards in medieval Ireland came up in a previous thread. My answer is yes; first, that there were people in Western Europe between 600 - 1600 A.D. who used the term "bard;" and second, there was a professional class in Ireland during this time which practiced what could be termed "bardic arts" - poetry, storytelling, harp-playing, singing, knowledge of the law, and passing on genealogies and lore.

Scholarly books written about this subject will use the terms "bards," "filid," or "poets" to refer to this profession. As I understand it, during our time period in Ireland there was a bardic/file class whose members wrote poetry (praise and satire), memorized and told a set number of stories, played the harp, and/or settled legal disputes. "Bard" was actually a rank within this class, and a lower one at that. "Filid" ranked higher, and "Ollamh" higher than that. The word "filid" was more common than "bard," but both were used. And it's true that bards (as a designation of this class) had a lot more power during the time of the druids than during the SCA time period. In fact, in 575 A.D., the bards would have been kicked out of Ireland had it not been for the intercession of Columba. As it was, they were more or less demoted from noble to professional class, but they did exist in the Middle Ages.

So where am I getting all this? The following are the five books (all tertiary sources) that I would most recommend for people curious about bards/poets/filid in medieval Ireland:

"Early Irish Myths and Sagas," translated and introduced by Jeffrey Gantz - very informative introduction and great source of medieval Irish stories

"The Bardic Source Book," edited by John Matthews. Contains decent scholarly articles, but also essays by Iolo Morganwg, so use your own methods of discernment.

"Celtic Heritage: Ancient tradition in Ireland and Wales," by Alwyn and Brinley Rees. A bit dry, but well worth the read. It includes the lists of stories bards were expected to memorize as detailed in the "Book of Leinster."

"The Flowering of Ireland: Saints, Scholars & Kings," by Katharine Scherman. A wonderful section on education in medieval Ireland, including the education of bards. Also includes the tale of how St. Columba saved the bards in Ireland.

"Celtic Bards, Celtic Druids," by R.J. Stewart and Robin Williamson. A lot of the book covers the time period before the Middle Ages, but it's still a good source of stories.

Keep in mind that I am not an expert by any stretch of the imagination. I am certainly open to other sources and other opinions.

Finally, as a primary source, here is a poem by an Anglo-Scottish knight, Sir Richard Holland, in 1450 that mocks Irish bards ("Sennachy" in this poem means "storytelling," and "Clarschach" means "harp repertoire.") Note the use of the word "bard:"

"A bard owt of Irland with Bannachadee.
Said " Gluntow guk dynyd dach hala mischy doch ;
Raike her a rug of the rost, or scho sail ryiue the.
Mich macmory ach mach mometir moch loch,
Set hir dovne, gif hir drink : quhat Dele alis sche ?
O Deremyne, O Donnall, O Dochardy droch ;
Thir ar his Irlandis Kingis of the Irischerye,
O Knewlyn, O Conochor, O Gregre Makgrane ;
The Sennachy, the Clarschach,
The Ben schene, the Ballach,
The Crekery, the Corach,
Scho kennis thaim ilkane."