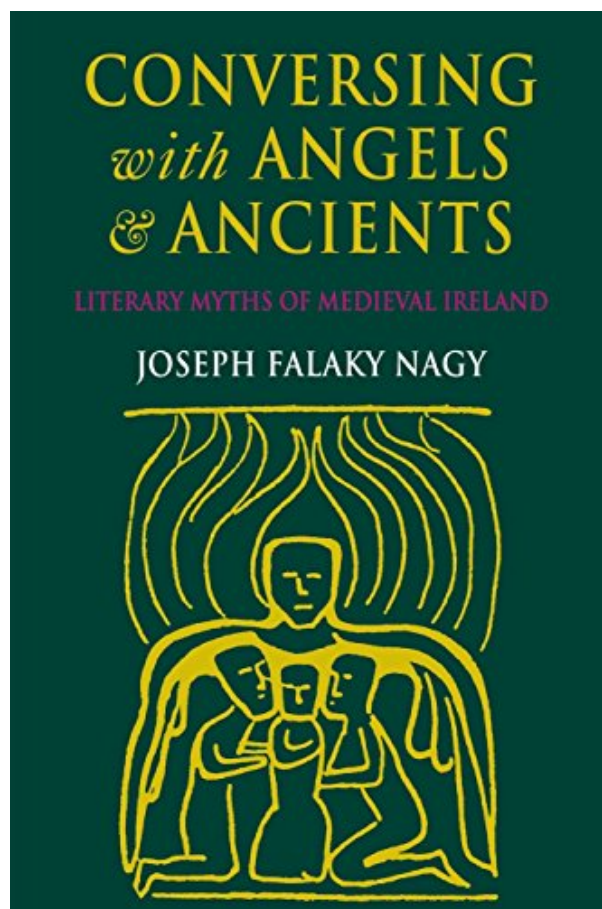


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How does a written literature come into being within an oral culture, and how does such a literature achieve and maintain its authority? Joseph Falaky Nagy addresses those issues in his wide-ranging reading of the medieval literature of Ireland, from the writings of St. Patrick to the epic tales about the warrior Cu Chulainn. These texts, written in both Latin and Irish, constitute an adventurous and productive experiment in staging confrontations between the written and the spoken, the Christian and the pagan.

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Today, scholars debate the question: what was the real source of the tales about pagan heroes and pre-Christian deities that Irish monks recorded in medieval times? Was the primary source the pre-Christian oral tradition with its Celtic culture and Indo-European roots? Or were the monastic scribes primarily influenced by the Latin sources they acquired from the Continent and Mideast, such as Biblical apocrypha and works of philosophy and nature by authors like Isidore of Seville? Professor Nagy brings to the controversy his careful study of the imagery and motifs used by the monks, showing how the same motifs and treatments were used to recount both saints' lives and hero tales. There are no final answers to the controversy here, but Nagy's insights and scholarship bring clarity to the discussion. NOTE: Readers should have at least some familiarity with the Irish stories.

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