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Review Article

Early Irish History, the State of the Art¹

At the beginning of the twentieth century early Irish scholars faced stiff institutional and academic opposition, for politics and art intermingled, sometimes explosively. Still, battles were won, reputations made and university positions filled and created. The generation of great pioneers, such as Whitley Stokes and Kuno Meyer, was followed by one of influential university professors like Eoin Mac Neill and Osborn Bergin. Specialists in the field, including linguists, literary critics, archaeologists and historians, expanded early Irish horizons; the *Dictionary of the Irish Language based mainly on Old and Middle Irish materials* was completed; research and controversy thrived in equal measure. It might seem then, at the beginning of a new millennium, that the field should be in full flower. The variety of books that this review will cover appears to support this interpretation. Yet, professors and print do not a discipline make and the state of play is muddled by academic imbalances within and without, by the wolf in the field and the wolf at the door.

A brief explanatory note is necessary. Although my main focus will be on history the other subjects within the area of early Irish must also be considered, especially as they share common concerns and defining controversies. Indeed, this has been the case relatively recently. Since the 1980s early Irish studies has been going through a transitional period marked by intellectual upheaval and scholarly debate. A large part of this has revolved around two mutually antagonistic interpretative models

¹ The following books are under review: *Spes Scotorum: Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland*. Edited by Dauvit Broun, Thomas Owen Clancy. Pp. 338. Edinburgh: T & T Clarke. 1999. £16.96; *Celtic and early Christian Wexford, AD 400-1166*. By Edward Culleton. Pp. 238. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 1999. €24.95; *Saint Moling Luachra: a pilgrimage from Sliabh Luachra to Rinn Ros Broic above the stream-pools of the Barrow*. By Máire B. de Paor PBVM. Pp. 267. Dublin: Columba Press. 2001. €18.99; *The Book of letters of Saint Patrick the bishop*. Edited by D. R. Howlett. Pp. 135. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 1994. €24.95; *Early Irish kingship and succession*. By Bart Jaski. Pp. 224. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2000. €50; *Molaise, Abbot of Leighlin and hermit of Holy Island: the life and legacy of Saint Laisren in Ireland and Scotland*. By Colum Kenny. Pp. 140. Killala: Morrigan. 1998. £6.75; *Church and polity in pre-Norman Ireland: The case of Glendalough*. Maynooth Monographs 7. By Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin. Pp. 274. Maynooth: An Sagart. 1996. IR£24; *Ireland and Europe in the early middle ages: texts and transmission*. Edited by Michael Richter, Próinséas Ní Chatháin. Pp. 400. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2002. €80; *Ogma: essays in Celtic studies in honour of Próinséas Ní Chatháin*. Edited by Michael Richter, Jean-Michel Picard. Pp. 329. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2001. €95; *Senchas: Studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne*. Edited by Alfred P. Smyth. Pp. 478. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2000. €50.

dubbed nativist, especially by its detractors, and revisionist, especially by its adherents. Very broadly, the former holds to a strong distinction between pagan traditions and what is seen as a mere christian overlay. The latter stresses Ireland's indebtedness to christian culture, sometimes at the expense of local experiences. The most positive aspect of this debate is that it has generated substantial research that has proved crucial to our understanding of the period. Its worst feature has been a tendency towards greater and greater obscurantism in search of minutiae, and this in a field that has always celebrated the micro-experience. Within the last decade, a new phase, popularly known as post-revisionism, has begun to predominate. In a classic example of the Hegelian triad of thesis, antithesis, synthesis, scholars have quietly settled down to work, taking with them the insights created by the great debate. At the same time, most have avoided completely buying in to either of its competing ideologies. The shift is as much generational as intellectual and as old foes gradually weary of the conflict this seems an apposite moment to analyse underlying trends.

Such analyses have been frequent enough; the tone has often been irate. Most infamously, the legal historian Daniel Binchy took up the intellectual cudgels against a host of opponents; only some of them were even remotely deserving of such severe verbal beatings.² More recently, an entire volume, *Progress in medieval Irish studies*, has been devoted to a comprehensive stock-taking.³ However, since its publication in 1996, the methodological antagonisms, which some of its contributors eagerly endorsed, have become less urgent. It now seems just as important to examine the relationship of early Irish studies to its fellow medieval disciplines, to look outwards as well as inwards.

One of the field's most noticeable features is the relative prominence of what might be termed local studies. This comes from at least two bases. Firstly, as stated above, early Irish scholarship in general has a tendency to be drawn to the minute, to the particular, to the telling gloss. This is not altogether surprising given the nature of the sources. Secondly and more specifically, local history has developed dynamically within and without academic institutions. This is one area where early Irish historians are trendsetters. A good example is Ailbhe Mac Shamhráin's *Church and polity in pre-Norman Ireland: The case of Glendalough*. By taking a single, albeit major, Irish

² D. A. Binchy, 'Irish history and Irish law I', in *Studia Hibernica*, 15 (1975), pp 7–36, idem, 'Irish history and Irish law II', in *Studia Hibernica*, 16 (1976), pp 7–45.

church, Mac Shamhráin illuminates the politics and intellectual life of his chosen monastery while simultaneously drawing conclusions about the role of the Church, particularly before the eleventh and twelfth century reform. One could argue that the author is too schematic in a political reading of hagiography (esp. pp. 4–10, 23–26). Here he is not alone: the distorting and over-arching equation of hagiography with political propaganda is common. Binchy is an early culprit,⁴ but he has had many followers. Unfortunately, it has seemed difficult for some to grasp that people really believed and that politics were leavened by faith. For many medieval christians, the saints lived simultaneously in Heaven and on Earth, joining the two through their relationship with the believer. Propaganda was not always the point or even of any relevance. This caveat aside, the study is valuable and is worth re-reading in the light of Colmán Etchingham's more recent exhaustive examination of the organisation of the early medieval Irish church.⁵

Sadly, the same cannot be said of Colum Kenny's *Molaise, abbot of Leighlin and hermit of Holy Island*. In fairness, the book is written by a non-specialist. Nevertheless, there can be no excuses for the author's unquestioning acceptance of the veracity of hagiography, his creation of a scholarly muddle and his condescending attitude towards some of the pioneers in the field. These factors combined with an overt and inappropriate political agenda make the book an unrewarding read. This is not to say that the contribution of non-specialists is to be decried. Edward Culleton's *Celtic and early Christian Wexford, AD 400–1166* is the work of a non-professional historian but it is clearly a labour of love that has been carefully researched and annotated. At all times Culleton keeps his primary sources to the fore and while one might quibble with his interpretations everything is above board. The general reader should appreciate his inclusion of translations of a Latin Life of St Ibar (pp 86–96) and a Life of St Munnu (pp 114–25). The appendices contain useful lists of archaeological sites, placenames and knights' fees (pp 197–224). The book is most reminiscent of the tradition of diocesan histories that were such a feature of history writing in the early decades of the twentieth century.

³ Kim McCone, Katharine Simms (eds), *Progress in medieval Irish studies* (Maynooth, 1996).

⁴ D. A. Binchy, 'Patrick and his biographers ancient and modern', in *Studia Hibernica*, 2 (1962), pp 7–173.

⁵ Colmán Etchingham, *Church organisation in Ireland, A.D. 650 to 1000* (Maynooth, 1999).

A new approach to old traditions is provided by David Howlett's ground-breaking *The Book of letters of St Patrick the bishop*. Over the last decade the author has raised fundamental questions concerning the earliest insular writers in Latin, prominent among them St Patrick. In this study Howlett challenges the received opinion of generations of scholars, one which stated that Patrick was holy but unlettered and simple (pp 11–24), a case of the saintly but stupid. Binchy, for example, in his influential but flawed article 'Patrick and his biographers' characterised the saint as an individual of but little learning, a man barely capable of writing 'indifferent Latin'.⁶ In place of this Howlett presents a learned Patrick, a man who is in sophisticated and sure command of what the author calls biblical style, a skilful writer *per cola et commata* (pp 17–24). The implications of this reassessment are immense and have been explored in the author's own works.⁷ Whether one accepts all of his arguments in their entirety or not, Howlett does create a compelling intellectual environment, an environment that is christian, cosmopolitan and learned. Yet, Howlett's work has had less impact on mainstream early Irish scholarship than one might expect, largely due to one of the oddities of the field. The perception that vernacular studies and linguistics are the touchstones of the entire discipline has meant that Hiberno-Latin has been treated as an add-on by some scholars whose main interest lies in vernacular sources. This is unfortunate because it is Latin that is the touchstone of the international medieval culture of which early Ireland was a part and to which Irish writers eagerly contributed. The island is too often perceived as *sui generis* rather than as a local example of early medieval christian civilisation.

On the other hand, Howlett's theories have to be considered case by case and are clearly best suited to an analysis of Latin rhetoric. Máire de Paor in her *Saint Moling Luachra: A pilgrimage from Sliabh Luachra to Rinn Ros Broic* bravely attempts to apply the biblical style *per cola et commata* to a vernacular saint's Life. Unfortunately, she does not take account of fundamental difficulties. Howlett's work depends to a large extent on the numerical value of individual words and word boundaries are crucial. In medieval Irish, unlike Latin, word boundaries are not always clear and the value to be assigned to proclitic and enclitic particles is similarly

⁶ Binchy, 'Patrick and his biographers', p 89. From Binchy this is as good as it gets.

⁷ There are many examples. Prominent among them are: D. R. Howlett, *The Celtic Latin tradition of Biblical style* (Dublin, 1996); idem, *British books in Biblical style: early Alfredian and after the Conquest* (Dublin, 1997).

unclear. De Paor does not engage with this at all; indeed she ignores the issue entirely. This casts a cloud over the entire enterprise and, ultimately, those interested in this text will be returning to the edition of Whitley Stokes.⁸

It would be unfair, however, to characterise the field as being completely inward looking and hostile to new approaches. Scholars have continued to engage with issues that have relevance outside of Ireland, issues including social organisation, the Church, kinship and kingship. The last of these has inspired generations of scholars. Bart Jaski's *Early Irish kingship and succession* is the latest major study of the institution. The author is careful to situate the reader historiographically and engages with the important work of Eoin Mac Neill, D. A. Binchy, Donnchadh Ó Corráin and Thomas Charles-Edwards, among others.⁹ He considers the thorny problems of the heir-apparent (pp 229–76), the relationship of kingship to clientship (pp 89–112) and the significance of dynastic considerations (pp. 191–228). This volume is undoubtedly useful and Jaski's conclusion that early medieval Ireland should not be considered apart from mainstream developments on the Continent (pp 283–84) is timely. It could be argued that some of the material is not entirely integrated and that Jaski travels through too long a *longue durée*. Certainly the use of much later medieval sources (pp 265–76) is questionable. But these are relatively unimportant criticisms when placed beside the value of the study.

Jaski's work is very much the product of a new generation. An older generation is now being celebrated by the appearance of *Festschriften*. Two recent volumes are *Seanchas*, edited by Alfred Smyth, and *Ogma*, edited by Michael Richter and Jean-Michel Picard. The former is dedicated to Francis John Byrne, retired professor of Early (including Medieval) Irish history in University College Dublin, and the latter to Próinséas Ní Chatháin, the retired professor of Early and Medieval Irish in the same institution. *Festschriften*, by their very nature, are mixed and this pair is mixed both in quality and in subject matter. Both suffer from the same flaw: an overly large number of very short papers. The effect is one of sequences of decontextualised notes that would make difficult reading for most audiences. Clearly the editors wished to include as many papers as possible within their respective

⁸ Whitley Stokes (ed.), *The birth and life of St Moling* (Paris, 1906).

⁹ For example, Eoin Mac Neill, *Celtic Ireland* (Dublin, 1921) 114–43; D. A. Binchy, *Celtic and Anglo-Saxon kingship*, O'Donnell Lectures for 1967–1968, (Oxford, 1970); Donnchadh Ó Corráin,

volumes, thereby showing respect for their distinguished *emeriti*. But here is a case where less would have been more; fewer and longer papers would have been far more effective. Nevertheless, contributions do stand out in the two volumes. In *Seanchas*, Anne Connon's article on the *Banshenchas* (pp 98–108) is a model of coherence; similarly Jean-Michel Picard's study of *princeps* and *principatus* (pp 146–60) is illuminating; Thomas Charles-Edwards suggests a novel interpretation for events in early British history (pp. 137–45) while Donnchadh Ó Corráin appraises an important and neglected piece of propaganda (pp 238–50); finally Proinsias Mac Cana's article on the motif of trivial causes is playful, scholarly and comments with gentle irony on the field itself (pp 205–11). *Ogma* has similarly worthwhile articles. Máire Herbert usefully examines the cult of St Martin of Tours in Ireland (pp 76–84); Marie-Therese Flanagan provides a scholarly addendum to her research on the Irish reformers (pp 94–104); Benjamin Hudson places the Irish literary hero in a new context (pp 151–64). Overall, both volumes, while worth trawling, are not easy reads.

The latest addition to the long-running *Irland und Europa* series, *Ireland and Europe in the early middle ages: texts and their transmission* which is edited by Michael Richter and Próinséas Ní Chatháin, is a different matter. The editors must be commended for keeping this publishing project afloat. Like previous volumes, this one ambitiously sets to place Ireland within her crucial European environment and, like them, the results are hit and miss. Sometimes history sits uneasily beside linguistics. An example is the opinion expressed by one of the contributors:

‘It is quite obvious that only a combination of linguistic, philological and palaeographical approaches allows for a proper understanding of the earliest texts in any vernacular language....’ (p 6)

Whatever happened to history? Once again the discipline takes up its role as poor relation within the broad area of Celtic studies. However, the *Irland und Europa* project has the right idea: Ireland is part of a larger medieval world. Several articles elucidate this, especially through dealing with issues of transmission. Examples include the papers of Jonathan Wooding (pp 14–26), Pádraig Ó Néill (pp 68–77) and

‘Irish regnal succession—a reappraisal’, *Studia Hibernica*, 11 (1971) 7–39; Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kingship* (Oxford, 1993) 89–111.

David Ganz (pp 186). Such concerns are not at the expense of studies of individual texts and instances of these are contributions by Aidan Breen (pp 78–94), Jean-Michel Picard (pp 95–102) and Patricia Kelly (pp 284–95). This is a worthwhile collection containing articles that will repay close attention. It is to be hoped that the *Irland und Europa* series will continue to flourish.

Early Scottish history is one branch of the field that is flourishing; in fact it is undergoing something of efflorescence. This is a real turn around for an area that has often been ignored or dismissed, mainly because of the relative difficulty and paucity of the sources. In the last decade these difficulties have been surmounted and the outlook for early medieval Scottish studies is bright. One of the main factors underlying this remarkable success story has been the unselfish collaborative efforts of a number of scholars. *Spes Scotorum: Saint Columba, Iona and Scotland*, edited by Dauvit Broun and Thomas Owen Clancy, is an excellent example of the quality of this effort. The volume is a fascinating collection of wide-ranging essays, using the cult of Columba as a focus. In a book of such high standard it may seem invidious to mention individual contributions, but as an early medievalist I would like to highlight the papers by Thomas Owen Clancy (pp 3–33), Tom O’Loughlin (pp 139–58) and Jennifer O’Reilly (pp 159–211). Clancy’s article cleverly positions Adomnán’s *Vita Columbae* and its miracle within insular hagiography, while O’Loughlin examines the same authors’ *De locis sanctis* in the context of biblical exegesis. O’Reilly’s paper, for me the outstanding piece in the volume, points up Adomnán’s depiction of Columba as a scribe, as a saint who generates wonders through the very act of writing. She carefully traces Adomnán’s influences and elucidates his response to christian debates concerning the importance of scholarship. Here is a paper that combines knowledge of Iona’s insular setting with an understanding of its place within the christian world. In a sense it is the type of understanding towards which early Irish studies should strive. The Scottish branch of insular research is leading the way.

This still leaves unanswered the wider question of whether Irish medieval scholarship, especially history, has lost its way, whether it is trapped in a cul-de-sac or stranded on a traffic island in the middle of a busy carriageway. Like many questions the answer depends on perspective. From the point of view of the close examination of individual sources the field is healthier than ever. There is now more research on the large and small-scale than at any time previously and much greater opportunities for publication.

Yet, there are large gaps; two of these yawn. The field places formidable obstacles in the way of both a general academic medievalist audience and a popular one. This was not always the case. In its early years as an academic discipline Eoin Mac Neill attempted to fill these lacks and, given the limitations with which he had to deal, his efforts met with qualified success.¹⁰ Decades later, Kathleen Hughes wrote a general introduction to the role of the church within early Irish society.¹¹ This is now out of date but was a model for its time. Since then a number of book-length studies have been written, many of them important. A recent magisterial example is Thomas Charles-Edwards' *Early Christian Ireland*,¹² an extremely significant contribution that probably deserves a review in its own right. But, these books, including *Early Christian Ireland*, are not introductions to the subject, nor are they meant as such. There have been few successors to Mac Neill and Hughes.

This presents problems, scholarly and pedagogical. British and Continental historians, lacking accessible and up-to-date introductions to the Irish material, often ignore it. Such an approach has been decried and is certainly shocking, for Irish Latin and vernacular sources are among the richest from any early medieval society. Yet, it is entirely understandable. Furthermore, pedagogically, it is now difficult to introduce students to the period and its sources. There is presently only one general textbook that could possibly be recommended to first year history university students, Dáibhí Ó Cróinín's *Early medieval Ireland 400–1200*,¹³ and even this has its difficulties. However, the overly and overtly hostile reception accorded to *Early medieval Ireland* in many academic circles within early Irish studies could act as a deterrent to further necessary efforts in this direction.

There are other difficulties. Some Irish scholars complain loudly about the poor quality of work provided by those authors who cater to popular consumption. The complaints are largely justified, but it could be said with equal justice that bad history flourishes because qualified historians refuse to do enough to address common misconceptions. Early Irish studies should be engaging with three distinct audiences: these are made up of scholars within the field, medievalists outside of it and the interested public. Only one of these audiences, the first, is receiving its due. For

¹⁰ A good example is the accessible if dated Eoin Mac Neill, *Phases of Irish history* (Dublin, 1919).

¹¹ Kathleen Hughes, *The church in early Irish society* (London, 1966).

¹² Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge 2000).

fellow medievalists in other disciplines as well as for the interested public early medieval Ireland often remains intangible, a shadow cast from another world. As scholars of early medieval Ireland we should be turning this shadow into a solid and accessible reality.

Elva Johnston

¹³ Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early medieval Ireland 400–1200* (London 1995).