

Review: *Clerics, Kings and Vikings: Essays on
Medieval Ireland in Honour of Donnchadh
Ó Corráin* (Purcell *et al.*)



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occasionally utilized by Doherty, however, whose use of medieval Irish textual sources raises some difficulties. For example, he suggests at one point that the appearance of a Roman emissary in the potentially early eighth-century tale about the death of Conchobar mac Nessa might reflect 'Armagh's ecclesiastical contact with Rome in the seventh century' (p. 131). This implicit recognition that vernacular tales were shaped by the contemporary concerns of their Christian authors and audiences stands in contrast to his willingness elsewhere to use medieval Irish texts as repositories of information about the ancient Celts, to be compared with Greek and Roman ethnographies and Gaulish coins. The justification for reading similar sources in such divergent ways is not made clear.

Similar issues emerge from some of Davies's conclusions regarding the different attitudes toward time reflected in the *Táin* and *Beowulf*. He suggests that the *Táin*'s 'temporal slackness' might be explained 'as a consequence of a more primitive, pre-reflective state of cultural or psychological development than we find depicted in *Beowulf*' (p. 286). While he is careful to state that this 'would not necessarily mean that the *Táin* itself is a more primitive work of literature than *Beowulf*' (p. 286), his assertion that 'it remains faithful to an ostensibly pre-Christian, pre-reflective perspective' (p. 286), in contrast to the 'alignment of Christian and heroic conceptions of time found in Old English poetry' (p. 307), seems to be underpinned by old stereotypes about the primitivism and conservatism of early Irish literature. The endurance of such attitudes among some scholars of early Ireland inhibits those outside the discipline from recognizing that medieval Irish scribes and scholars, including those responsible for writing the *Táin* in its surviving recensions, were participants in a vital, European, Christian, learned culture alongside their contemporaries in Anglo-Saxon England and beyond.

The distinctive ways in which Christian influence was enshrined in texts from the different regions of north-west Europe, and blended with older themes and concepts, will only become clear through continued collaboration and inter-disciplinary projects of the kind that led to the publication of this fine volume. Notwithstanding certain drawbacks, it makes a valuable addition to the scholarship on a variety of topics and will be an important addition to the library of researchers in a variety of fields.

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Clerics, Kings and Vikings: Essays on Medieval Ireland in Honour of Donnchadh Ó Corráin. Edited by Emer Purcell, Paul MacCotter, Julianne Nyhan and John Sheehan. Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2015. pp. xxvii + 537. €60.00. ISBN: 978-1-84682-279-7 (hardback).

The sheer size of this Festschrift, comprising forty-four academic contributions in addition to two personal prefatory tributes, is indicative of the vast number of individuals whose own work has been influenced, enriched and challenged

by that of the late Donnchadh Ó Corráin. It could have been twice the size and still would not have exhausted all those who owe an immense personal or professional debt to him. The volume is divided into three disciplinary strands: (1) history; (2) archaeology; and (3) language and literature, each representing a substantial quantity of scholarship. This review will focus on the first and last of these strands, as being of greatest interest to the readers of this journal. As with any *Festschrift*, the quality of the contributions is variable, ranging from some important and useful pieces through to what can politely be regarded as ephemera.

One particularly stimulating essay is that by Wendy Davies on 'Law and the learned in northern Iberia in the early Middle Ages: some comparisons with Ireland'. One of Professor Ó Corráin's great contributions to scholarship was to show that, far from being a stagnant, inherited relic from the pre-Christian past, the seventh- and eighth-century Irish legal tracts are the conscious compositions of a learned, ecclesiastically-trained juridical class, who borrowed from biblical and canon law in order to create a legal system which upheld strict social hierarchies and benefited clerics above all others. Professor Davies takes as her starting point the problem that, while the surviving legal tracts can tell us a huge amount about how all aspects of early Irish society were supposed to work, we have almost no records of legal proceedings or actual case law: so much so that some scholars have even cast doubt on the extent to which the laws relate to social realities. In the face of this lack of Irish evidence of court procedures and outcomes, Davies turns her attention to the substantial collection of court records surviving from northern Spain and Portugal from the ninth and tenth centuries. Her case studies are fascinating and the points of comparison that she draws out are highly suggestive. She concludes by noting that the Iberian records 'show how many provisions, comparable to those of early Irish law tracts, actually worked in an early medieval context . . . The fact that some parts of western Europe provide plenty of case material for comparable kinds of rule make the Irish corpus easier to understand, and eminently credible as part description of what did happen and part prescription for what should happen' (p. 54). Further comparative work of this sort can only help to shed more light on the pragmatics of the early Irish legal system.

Niamh Whitfield has a short but useful contribution on *lía lógmar* ('precious stone'), which adds to her important body of work on the materiality of medieval Irish culture, from clothing and bodily adornments to precious metals and gems. She concludes that *lía lógmar* was a formulaic phrase, 'ultimately borrowed from classical sources' and, in spite of the extensive knowledge of lapidary scholarship in early medieval Ireland, became a term with a very broad and vague semantic range, denoting 'any bright "gem", whether naturally occurring, man-made or imaginary' (p. 308). Elva Johnston offers a typically elegant and subtle analysis of the intriguing Old Irish narrative *Immacallam Choluim Chille*. Her close reading of the tale bristles with insights. Her elucidation of the tension within the narrative between 'seeing' and 'knowing' is utterly convincing, although her brief attempt to map the narrative onto forms

of scriptural exegesis is perhaps less so. In any case, her study will be an essential item of bibliography for any future studies of the corpus of tales concerning Mongán mac Fiáchnai.

David Dumville asks the provocative question, ‘Did Ireland exist in the twelfth century?’, but in laying out his answer (Ireland existed as *natio* but not a nation-state) he cites very little that has been published in the last fifteen years, relying for his conceptual framework on Benedict Anderson’s work on ‘imagined communities’ from the 1980s and Gerd Althoff’s on monarchy and statehood from the 1990s, which is unfortunate given the outpouring of challenging and paradigm-shifting work which has been produced since the turn of the millennium (particularly among Germanophone scholars) on the subjects of early medieval political theory, state-formation and identity. This hints at a long gestation period for his essay, and perhaps for the volume more generally. Similarly, Charles Doherty’s contribution on ‘The terminology of roads in early Ireland’ does not cite the far more careful and stimulating 2012 study by Thomas Charles-Edwards entitled ‘Some thoughts on early Irish roads and travel’, in Liam Mac Amhlaigh and Brian Ó Curnáin (eds), *Iltean-gach, Ilseiftiúil: Féilscribhinn in Ómós do Nicholas Williams* (Dublin, 2012), 71–95.

John Carey pieces together evidence pertaining to the life and work of the ninth-century poet Mael Muru Othna, author of the important historiographical poem *Can a mbunadus na nGoídel*. Professor Carey shores up the evidence for Mael Muru’s authorship of the corpus of poetry associated with him, and then fleshes out Mael Muru’s life and career, noting his ‘propagandising on behalf of Flann Sinna and his dynasty’ (p. 435) and the political context for Mael Muru’s poetry. In his opening remarks, Professor Carey offers a tantalising possibility of a future new edition of *Can a mbunadus na nGoídel*, which is certainly an exciting prospect. One can only hope that this appears before too long.

The volume does include some valuable new editions of medieval and early modern Irish and Latin texts: Joseph Flahive offers a useful edition, translation and analysis of the brief note on the status of the chief churches of Munster from Rawlinson B512; Peter J. Smith provides an edition and translation of Gilla Cóemáin’s poem *Tigernmas mac Follaig aird*; Emma Nic Cárthaigh offers an edition of *Mo cheithre rainn duit, a Dhonnchaidh* by Tadhg (mac Dáire) Mac Bruaideadha; and Marie Therese Flanagan presents diplomatic editions, and analysis, of eleven charters from a register of St Thomas’s Abbey, Dublin, transcribed by William Copinger in 1526.

The editors of *Clerics, Kings and Vikings* are to be congratulated for their handling of such a large and disparate number of contributions, as are Four Courts Press for the high production standards. This weighty tribute to the even weightier legacy of Professor Donnchadh Ó Corráin will be a useful addition to library shelves.

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