

Review: *Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium:
Medieval Irish Books and Texts*
(c. 400–c. 1600) (Ó Corráin)



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REVIEWS

Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium: Medieval Irish Books and Texts (c. 400–c. 1600), Corpus Christianorum Claves. Donnchadh Ó Corráin. Brepols, Turnhout, 2017. 3 vols, clx + 1910pp. €695 for subscribers to *Corpus Christianorum*, €875 for others. ISBN 978-2-503-54857-9.

The idea of a single scholar producing a three-volume companion to the entirety of medieval Irish textual culture seems like a concept from the nineteenth or early twentieth century, that is, the age when disciplines were first established and delineated, when taxonomy and classification ruled, and when humans were not yet so dizzyingly disorientated by overwhelming flows of information that the possibility of knowing everything about a particular subject could seem utterly out of reach. *Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium* is what medieval Irish studies should have had a century ago, but has only now been given. Indeed, it is perhaps ironic, in our current age of digital editions and online collaborative projects, that a single-authored, 2,000+ page, hardback monument to the printed page presents us with one of the greatest leaps forward that our discipline has ever achieved. Here, at long last, is our canon.

Professor Ó Corráin opens this work by describing it as:

... an attempt at a broad if necessarily incomplete and austere survey of writing in Ireland and by the Irish elsewhere in Europe, principally in Latin and Irish (Gaelic), from Late Antiquity to the end of the middle ages. The purpose is to provide, as far as possible, a panorama of the written work of the Irish in that long period and to form an opinion of the extent and quality of Irish literary achievements. This is a difficult undertaking. (p. vii)

This characterisation, while understated, gives some impression of the extent of Ó Corráin's scholarly undertaking. Later in his preface, he writes again of the sheer enormity of the task he faced in compiling and ordering the information:

It is difficult to put together a work of this kind because the necessary research has not been done, and essential reference works not compiled. There have been many brilliant individual studies by outstanding scholars in the past century and more but the large-scale surveys, lexicons, and collaborative works that delimit a discipline, survey its terrain, and make its materials available to workers in the field, and to students of comparative literature and non-specialist readers, are almost uniformly lacking, mainly for want of institutional and financial support. What follows is, in effect, a programme for Irish medieval studies. (p. xiii)

For all Ó Corráin's modesty – his admission of faults, limitations and omissions – this is a breathtakingly ambitious work, and there are few scholars with the intellectual means to have produced it. It is nothing less than an attempt to catalogue the entire literary and scholarly output of medieval Ireland. As such, it lays the foundations for our self-definition as a discipline and shows us how much there is still to be done and how much is yet to be understood at even the most basic level. There are some notable omissions, explained in the preface, such as administrative documents, charters, chancery records, ecclesiastical registers and Old Norse inscriptions. Notwithstanding this, it can fairly be said that these three volumes truly give an overview of medieval Irish textual culture: historical, literary, scientific, pedagogical, juridical and devotional texts, in prose and poetry, in Latin and Irish, and later in French. Each individual numbered item – and there are 1,366 in total – required an extraordinary amount of selection and judgement, of palaeographical, textual, bibliographical and/or historical research, and of analysis. This is truly a *magnum opus*. Ó Corráin's 'panorama' is constructed from thirty-two chapters:

1. Epigraphy, Writing, Form and Image
2. Early Codices in Ireland and Britain
3. *Biblica*
4. *Patristica*
5. Hagiography, Hagiology, Hymnology and Liturgy
6. Irish Books and Authors Abroad, I: Columbanus, Luxeuil and Bobbio
7. Irish Books and Authors Abroad II: Echternach, Fulda, St Gall, Würzburg
8. Irish Scholars Abroad, III: Works and Manuscripts
9. Irish Scholars and Greek in the West
10. Latin Grammatical Tracts
11. Computus
12. Hiberno-Latin Writers and Texts
13. Penitentials
14. Canon Law
15. Synodal Legislation and Monastic Rules
16. Irish Latin Manuscripts, Principally Tenth to Twelfth Century
17. Tenth- to Twelfth-Century Latin Texts and Authors
18. The Vernacular Laws
19. Annals
20. Genealogies
21. Early Irish Manuscripts: Glosses and Texts
22. Major Vernacular Codices, Literary and Historical
23. Earliest Vernacular Literary Texts
24. The Poet-Scholars, I: Early-Medieval Poetics and Poetry
25. The Poet-Scholars, II: Learning, Wisdom and Prophecy
26. The Poet-Scholars, III: Irish Classical Poetry
27. Medieval Vernacular Narrative Prose
28. Historicist and Historical Vernacular Texts: Verse, Prose, and Prosimetrum

29. *Classica*

30. Foreign Medieval Literature: Translations and Adaptations

31. Medicine and Science

32. Books and Texts Mainly of the Anglo-Irish

These are followed by an index of manuscripts; an index of texts, authors and scribes; an index of incipits; and concordances with the major pre-existing reference works, such as Kenney's *Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical*, Lapidge and Sharpe's *Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature*, and Migne's *Patrologia Latina*.

As the categories above suggest, the ordering of information is not necessarily consistent: in some cases sources are ordered by genre, in others by date and in others still by language. But any consistent system would create as many problems as it resolved, and so the onus must be on users to learn to navigate these volumes and in this the various indices will be of the greatest assistance. Chapter 22 ('Major Vernacular Codices') offers manuscript context which is separate from, but cross-referenced to, the discussions of the texts themselves which are preserved within each particular manuscript; of course it is not ideal that text is in many cases separated from context, but the thorough cross-referencing is enormously helpful. Needless to say, within the thirty-two broad chapters are many more sub-divisions, and each individual source is listed as a numbered item; it is worth discussing a few examples in order to understand how Ó Corráin has constructed his guide and what it has to offer the researcher. I begin with the largest chapter of volume three, that is, Chapter 27 'Medieval Vernacular Narrative Prose', which alone comprises more than 260 pages. As Ó Corráin notes in his preface,

Medieval Irish vernacular literature is very large, the most extensive and the earliest in medieval Europe. It is the least known. It is not yet fully mapped: many texts await an *editio princeps*, most are not satisfactorily edited, many are untranslated, and nearly all are too little studied. (p. xi)

This state of affairs is all too clearly obvious as one peruses here item after item of prose or prosimetric narrative literature for which there is little or no secondary literature, or no edition or translation published in the last hundred years, occasionally punctuated by a well-known text like *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (§1103) or *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (§1120), for which the secondary literature stretches over many pages. Regarding all of these narratives, whether oft-studied or entirely neglected, Ó Corráin in his preface highlights just some of the fundamental questions that remain to be answered:

Who wrote these texts and why, who read them, how were they received, who were the arbiters of taste, what were their purposes and their status within the lives of the cultural and political

elite – these are questions that may lead the next generation of scholars to a better understanding. Meanwhile, I have simply and practically arranged the texts alphabetically. (p. xii)

And so he has, from *Acallam na Senórach* (§955) to *Verba Scáthaige* (§1127), in each case offering a verdict on the date of the narrative; an incisive synopsis of the plot; the incipit; details of the manuscript(s) in which the text survives; a list of editions and translations; key references from library catalogues, survey works, etc.; and a bibliography of secondary literature. This alphabetical arrangement of prose and prosimetric narrative literature rejects the anachronistic and often unhelpful division by modern scholars into arbitrary ‘cycles’, while avoiding any premature conclusions about how the literature might be arranged alternatively, whether by date or by genre. Closer examination of the bibliographies of secondary literature, in which works are cited in chronological order, allows us to follow scholarly fashions. There are notable gaps as well as occasional flurries of interest in particular texts: clearly *Acallam na Senórach* is having its moment in the spotlight – in spite of the lack of satisfactory editions of the various recensions of the text – and on the whole it would appear (perhaps worryingly, perhaps inevitably) that the greatest factor in spurring scholarly interest in any given text is the publication of an English translation.

By contrast, Chapter 7 ‘Irish Books and Authors Abroad II’ orders its information by manuscript provenance, beginning with Echternach, and proceeding to Fulda, St Gall and Würzburg. Within the section pertaining to each of those centres, a selection of key manuscripts with Irish connections is discussed, with references again to editions, translations, library catalogues and secondary literature. At the end of each sub-section, cross-references are given to any other manuscripts from the same centre that are discussed elsewhere in the book. Again, the cross-referencing and indices facilitate navigation. However, for a major source such as the St Gall Priscian, the listing for the manuscript itself (§380) in the section on St Gall manuscripts gives only a few lines of information, before referring the reader to the listing for the text of the St Gall Priscian (§805), which can be found in Chapter 21 ‘Early Irish Manuscripts: Glosses and Texts’, in between the ninth-century Milan Priscian (§804) and the eleventh-century Dublin Priscian (§806). Faced with these sorts of editorial choices, the reader simply has to dive into the textual landscape of Ó Corráin’s mind and be thankful for the clear maps and signposts which are provided.

In light of my own research interests, I was immediately drawn to Chapter 3 ‘*Biblica*’, which consists of 149 rich and meaty pages. It begins with a list of extant Irish manuscripts of Old and New Testament biblical texts, before moving on to exegesis and biblical commentaries, largely ordered by the biblical book with which the study or commentary is concerned. Interestingly, this brings Latin and vernacular exegetical texts side by side in an illuminating way and, in terms of the volume of surviving material, provides a reminder of the centrality of the Psalms to early Irish culture. Ó Corráin then moves

onto biblical apocrypha, again dealing with sources in both Latin and Irish. However, it is unclear how the term 'apocrypha' is here defined, and a rather miscellaneous collection of texts are gathered together, some of which are not apocrypha in the standard biblical sense but would perhaps be more accurately defined as vernacular translations or adaptations of biblical stories (for example, the 'David and Goliath' and 'Death of Absalom' stories which are gathered with other Davidic items in §117). The apocryphal texts on the Apostles, which comprise §§148–166, would have benefited from references to Aideen O'Leary's 2013 book, *Trials and Translations: The Latin Origins of the Irish Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (Aberdeen, 2013), which has something to add to almost every item. The eschatological texts which comprise §§169–79 show the positive impact of the recent interest in medieval Irish eschatology, centring on the *De Finibus* project at University College Cork. By contrast, the spare bibliographical entries for much of the rest of the chapter show the sheer volume of work which needs to be done on exegetical texts, commentaries, biblical homilies and related sources. This chapter alone offers hundreds of possibilities for potential research projects for postgraduate and postdoctoral scholars. However, this is contingent upon universities producing students who are sufficiently well-trained in languages, textual criticism and palaeography to be able to undertake such important but difficult endeavours.

By its very nature, this book was out of date before it appeared in print. The stream of scholarly publication flows unceasingly on, and already books and articles from the past year render some of the entries outdated. But does this matter? There will no doubt be much discussion of how this book could have been presented differently: it could have been an updateable online database, it could have been an open access resource rather than three bulky printed volumes that are prohibitively expensive for all except wealthy individuals and well-resourced libraries. But there are already open-access, online bibliographical resources for medieval Irish, such as the DIAS Bibliography of Irish Linguistics and Literature, or the CODECS site of the Van Hamel Institute in Utrecht. This work is something different, and it is, I think, something highly symbolic. Celtic Studies is very much a discipline under threat, as is the study of medieval Latin and particularly Hiberno-Latin. Medieval Ireland exists on the fringes of the discourse on medieval European history, if it receives any notice at all. For a discipline to be taken seriously, it needs to be able to define itself. For a discipline to progress, it need to know what needs to be done. For a discipline to justify itself to the powers-that-be, and ensure its own continuation, it needs to have a sense of its own value and importance. Thus, the publication of Ó Corráin's work under the auspices of the monumental *Corpus Christianorum* series is significant on a number of levels. First and foremost, it says that medieval Ireland's literary output counts amongst the great works of western literature from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: it stands alongside the likes of Augustine of Hippo and Gregory the Great, Paschasius Radbertus and Peter Abelard, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor. It says that works in Irish can and should be read alongside those in Latin and Greek. Furthermore, it reflects Ó Corráin's view,

expressed most stridently on p. xii of his preface, that generations of scholars of medieval Irish literature have been distracted by misguided notions of Indo-European mythology and Dumézilian essentialism, rather than studying medieval Irish literature as the European literature that it is and as the product of a thoroughly Christian intellectual élite. The format of this publication places medieval Irish literature firmly within the European canon.

Donnchadh Ó Corráin often signs off emails with the phrase ‘prospere procede’, from Psalm 44:4–5, which reads:

*Accingere gladio tuo super femur tuum, potentissime.
Specie tua et pulchritudine tua intende, prospere procede,
et regna, propter veritatem, et mansuetudinem, et justitiam;
et deducet te mirabiliter dextera tua.*

Gird thy sword upon thy thigh, O thou most mighty.
With thy comeliness and thy beauty set out, proceed prosperously,
and reign, because of truth and meekness and justice: and
thy right hand shall conduct thee wonderfully.

With *Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium*, Professor Ó Corráin has provided us with a weapon which future generations can use in order that our discipline can proceed prosperously. He has given us a mighty gift indeed. For the next generation of scholars, it remains for us to pursue truth, armed with the wisdom and knowledge that Ó Corráin has encapsulated in this work. This is scholarship at its best, but it is also a powerful symbol and a call to arms. There is much for us to do.

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Studies in Irish Mythology. Grigory Bondarenko. Curach Bhán Publications, Berlin, 2014. ix + 287 pp. €35. ISBN 978-3-942002-15-8.

Grigory Bondarenko's *Studies in Irish Mythology* is a collection of sixteen essays discussing matters of Irish mythology as well as Slavic and Indic mythology in comparison to the Irish material. While there is no overarching theme other than that suggested by the title, the following Irish texts receive the greatest amount of attention: *Airne Fíngéin*, *Dindsenchas Érenn*, and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*. Furthermore, there is an emphasis on kingship and the treatment of space and time in medieval Irish literature, as well as on aspects of cosmology and numerology. The book also has a philological component in that it provides editions and translations of several poems and prose pieces. Bondarenko is well-placed for this type of comparative work: he gives insights into the scholarship of Russian medievalists and Celticists whose work has informed his own, and makes available their scholarship, in distilled form, to a non-Russian-speaking readership.