

Review: *A Dictionary of Irish Saints* (Ó Riain)



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Celtica 29 (2017), 303–308

DOI: 10.58480/SCS-srpcu-2mugw

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Institiúid Ard-Léinn | Dublin Institute for
Bhaile Átha Cliath | Advanced Studies



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A Dictionary of Irish Saints. Pádraig Ó Riain. Four Courts, Dublin and Portland, 2011. 660 pp. €58.50. ISBN 978-1-84682-318-3.

This wonderful publication is the first of its kind in the modern era. One has to journey back to John O'Hanlon's *Lives of the Irish Saints*, a multi-volume work published during the 1870s, and incomplete to boot, to find a predecessor. Needless to say, the present volume is vastly superior to that earlier publication. In the preface the author makes clear that this project is the work of many, albeit intermittent, years of labour. As readers we may rejoice in this publication in the sense 'better late than never'. Many such ambitious projects have been cruelly cut short by the unfortunate demise of their author. Thankfully, this is not the case with Professor Ó Riain.

In his introduction the author lists the main sources he has used, primarily saints' lives, martyrologies, calendars, and saints' genealogies. Under the heading 'Modern Sources' the author presents a highly illuminating assessment of the value of the contribution of the great John O'Donovan when working for the Ordnance Survey. O'Donovan, it appears, was greatly interested in the subject of local devotion to the saints and a keen recorder of ecclesiastical traditions.

The reader should note the author's editorial policy. Only saints whose devotion was well-established in Ireland are included, omitting, to take one example, the great Columbanus of Bobbio. Only saints who flourished before the year 1200 are included, thus excluding those well-known Catholic martyrs of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The reader is advised to pay particular attention to the author's policy on language, especially in relation to his keywords, rendered not in Early or Middle Irish nor Modern Irish, but in Classical Irish.

The author follows a general pattern in his treatment of each *sanctus*. Name, associated church or parish, feastday, Lives if available, genealogy, association with other saints, pattern of cult diffusion, date and day of death, survival of associated relics, associated miracles: this is the pattern followed. The study of Irish hagiology features very many saints, many of whom have left little or nothing by way of history or traditions. Often only the saint's feastday and church will be known, and so they will be of limited value to a project such as this. Yet Professor Ó Riain has still managed to fill 660 pages with accounts of very many saints, and this work is a credit to his labours.

Something of the complexity of such a project may be uncovered in its treatment of the Colmán's. Somewhere it has been stated that there were 212 Irish saints bearing this name, 'little dove'. Among the various pet forms generated, so Ó Riain tells us, are *Colla*, *Comma*, *Conna*, *Canna*, *Camma*, all of which could be further extended by use of various prefixes and suffixes such as *mo-*, *do-*, *-óg*, *-ín*, *-án*, and so on. The author manages to have something of interest to say regarding no less than fifty-seven of these saints. The first and last of these will give some flavour of the work. The first is Colmán of Achadh Í, perhaps Fahy in Co. Galway. He is known only from the saints' genealogies, where he is linked to the Ciarraighe, a trans-provincial people who gave their name to Co. Kerry but who also had branches in mid Connacht. (The local diocesan patron, Brendan of Clonfert, is also stated to have been of the Ciarraighe, but Ó Riain shows this to be incorrect. Brendan was a member of the Altraighe people, traditional enemies of the Ciarraighe). The final Colmán is Colmán Uamhach 'of the cave'. He is not to be confused with Colmán son of Leinín, patron of Cloyne 'of the caves'; rather he appears to have been an historical personage, a scribe of Armagh who died in 725. His hypocoristic or 'pet' name was Mochonóg Uamhach 'my Conóg of the cave'.

As one would expect, all the main saints feature. Patrick gets six pages while Brigit of Kildare gets three. All diocesan patrons feature, from Finbarr of Cork (a particular favourite of the author) to Mel of Ardagh (from whom the actor Mel Gibson is named; his father had local roots). Length of treatment varies according to the surviving source material. Fionán Cam of Offaly and Kerry gets three pages while his namesake, Fionán Lobhar 'the leper' of Swords and Carlow gets just half a page. Many female saints are included, a refreshing feature in light of the misogyny of so much of Irish historiography. One such is Attracta or Athracht of Killaraght, Co. Sligo, who merits more than a full page. Several foreign saints who laboured in Ireland are noted. Ródán 'of the Franks' founded Shankill, Co. Roscommon, while there are

several Saxon or English saints, such as Gerald of Mayo and Beirheart of Tullylease, Co. Cork. The missionary bishop and rival to Patrick, Palladius, also receives expert treatment, reflecting the almost total lack of any trace of devotion to him in Ireland, unlike in neighbouring Scotland, where he is remembered in sources such as the Breviary of Aberdeen (which gives him an Egyptian origin!). The geographical coverage of this dictionary does indeed extend over all of Ireland. Note for example the various Seanachs who occur. These hail from Aghagower, Co. Mayo, Coolcor, Co. Longford, Monasterevin, Co. Kildare, Clonfad, Co. Westmeath, Kilshannig, Co. Cork, and Derrybrusk, Co. Fermanagh.

A particularly valuable element of the dictionary are the indices. An index of civil parishes whose church appears in the text locates them within their relevant barony and county. The civil parish system is, essentially, the descendant of the Anglo-Norman parish system. Recent scholarship, including my own, leans more and more to the conclusion that many churches of this colonial parish system were in fact 'inherited' from a pre-existing 'proto-parish' system, and one is struck, reading this index, by just how many of these medieval parish churches had native Irish patrons. The following index is that of 'Other Places', that is, non-parish locations associated with saints. The next index is headed 'Index of Alternative (mainly Anglicized) Names'. This index is of great value in that it records modern forms of saints' names as used colloquially or traditionally in local veneration in modern times, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Note for example the usage of Canice for Cainneach of Aghaboe and Kilkenny, and of Barry for Finbarr or Fionnbharr of Cork. Then we have an index of subjects. In this we note such entries as 'Blessing. *Passim*' and 'Brewing. See Meascán.' In the text on this saint (in which the name is written without the *fada* on the *a*) we learn that he was Saint Patrick's brewer and is associated with a church in Derry called, suitably enough, 'Donnybrewer'. Finally we have an index of feastdays, a virtual modern martyrology most fitting for the scholar who has given us our only history of the Irish martyrology. These various indices emphasize the breadth of this work and the great scholarship of its author. Its value as a reference work cannot be overstated.

This volume should be of particular interest to those who might consider themselves to be 'parish historians'. It is to be regretted that many such today are mere pedlars in folklore with neither the understanding nor training required to grasp the complex issues involved in the study of the saints. This book is essentially a scientific reference work, and should merit the respect such works are due. If one were to advise the 'parish historian' as to the chief merits of this work one could mention two elements of the dictionary among several: the summaries of saints' lives and the genealogical filiations of the various saints. These elements, once properly understood and contextualised, provide valuable information for parish historians. In general one gets a sense from this work that the author has achieved the delicate balance needed to write a reference work of value both to the scholar and the educated layman.

The author does not shy away from describing episodes of euhemerization, that is, the controversial belief which sees pre-Christian divinities ‘recreated’ as Christian saints by the early Church. Ó Riain describes two dozen examples of this process, most significantly in the case of Brigit of Kildare, ‘probably the pre-Christian cult of the Celtic divinity Brigantia’. The author is clearly aware of the controversial nature of such views, at least among non-scholars, and deals with the subject sensitively. Note for example the case of Gobnait of Ballyvourney, Co. Cork. Here Ó Riain hints at, rather than states outright, his view that she is ultimately a pagan divinity. In my recently published *A History of the Medieval Diocese of Cloyne* (Dublin, 2013) I have gone further, and advanced the position that Gobnait never existed as a person, and is in fact a female version of the cult of the Celtic divinity Gobniu, god of metalworking and healing. That this opinion was subsequently denounced (politely) from the altar reminds me of the controversy surrounding the reception of Professor Ó Riain’s work on Finbarr forty years ago, as described below. (Have I therefore ‘finally arrived’ as a scholar?)

Professor Ó Riain is the author of many books and articles on the subject of the saints of Ireland over a career spanning several decades. He has never shied away from controversy, and has been brave in pioneering new interpretations and concepts of his subject, and the present work contains many examples of three of these in particular. One has only to recall his difficulties in Cork during the 1970s, when his fresh interpretation of the life of Fionnbharr or Finbarr, Cork’s patron saint, met with some resistance, both lay and ecclesiastical. His conclusion here was that Finbarr of Cork was merely a double, or offshoot of the *Wanderkult* of Finnian of Moville, Co. Down. He has widely interpreted hagiography by this theory of cult diffusion, and has often presented it in a manner which is hard to dispute. In some cases, however, I would not share his conclusions, as for example in his identification of Canice or Cainneach of Kilkenny with Columba of Iona.

The author in all dealings with saints’ Lives has held to the position that these in general are of late date, usually post-Norman, as for example is his position on the so-called ‘O’Donoghue collection of Lives’, dated by Kenny, Sharpe, and Sperber to the eighth century but by the author to no earlier than the twelfth century. It seems clear that these lives contain certain archaisms but in their final form are indeed as late as the author claims. The issue of course is the question of whether these lives are entirely of late date or if they are rewritings partly based on older texts or incorporating older material. Professor Ó Riain’s position is at once both very cautious and a challenge to historians to be very careful when dealing with hagiography. No doubt this debate will run and run.

A third position adopted by the author in more recent years is the suggestion that many of our saints’ lives were composed in priories of Augustinian canons during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This seems to be largely based on the proximity of the main church foundations as recorded in hagiography to such canonries. These Augustinian foundations are widely scattered throughout Ireland and it is not hard to find one near most churches mentioned

in hagiography, suggesting that this position may be too facile. Yet my own continuing researches into the lands of the medieval Irish Church have revealed a phenomenon whereby one finds the bulk of these canonries established on a portion of the chief termon lands of the pre-Invasion Church, sometimes comprising half, sometimes less. It seems clear that these 'new' or 'reformed' canons were largely men of the 'Old Church' who would certainly have been well-versed in their local hagiography. Once again this area has great potential for debate and further research.

The author is himself well-aware of 'the imperfections that attend all such endeavours' in compiling this dictionary. This, of course, is good news for the researcher and scholar in this area, for the dictionary is of great direct value to the scholar not merely for what it contains, but also indirectly for what it omits, since complete comprehensiveness in an endeavour such as this is well-nigh impossible. My own researches in this area are essentially an adjunct to my primary area of interest, the structures and lands of the Early Irish Church, and I would not compare my forays into the author's area of expertise with his own major corpus of work in this area. The following examples do however suggest the existence of other avenues and other methodologies for adding saints to the author's collection.

One of the difficulties facing the author here was those single references to patron saints in those parts of Ireland, especially in South Munster, where the main sources fail us by providing little or no coverage. Such references cry out for further investigation. While we meet with many Ronáns in the dictionary we find no reference to Ronán, the patron saint of the parish of Skull, Co. Cork, as described in 1381.²

Sometimes saints occur in the dictionary in situations where one can add further detail or query reputed cases of cult diffusion. Take for example Acobhrán son of Bóchra, of Achadh Rathain, an obsolete place-name near Cloyne, Co. Cork. Prof. Ó Riain indicates that he is a double for another Acobhrán of Kilrush in either Clare or Kildare, yet no evidence is given for this. An obsolete place-name on Great Island (near Cloyne), Kilvokery, appears to commemorate the saint's mother, Bóchra, while the saint is also, under the form Keverne, found in Cornwall in a dedication first recorded in the tenth century.³

This Cornish connection leads on to another saint of interest to me, Iath or Ia of Killeagh in east Cork, whom one will not find in the dictionary. This omission is, of course, in keeping with the author's own methodology and is here offered as an example of how one may continue to make a contribution outside of such self-imposed limitations. This placename first occurs as early as the 1180s.⁴ Breton hagiography of the late thirteenth century tells of an Irish saint, Fingar or Gwinear, who settles in Brittany, then returns to Ireland, before finally going to Cornwall with a group of companions, including Ia and

²Genealogical Office MS 192, p. 221.

³Paul MacCotter, *A History of the Medieval Diocese of Cloyne* (Dublin, 2013), 10.

⁴*Ibid.*, 9, 219.

her brothers, Erc and Euny. Contemporary Cornish material records the name of the patron of Fowey parish as *Barriani* or *Fimbarri*, and it is clear that these references are to Finbarr of Cork. Fingar/Fimbarr/Gwinear is patron of the parishes of Fowey and Gwinear, the latter, significantly, lying centrally on the Land's End peninsula among a group of churches dedicated to Iath and her brothers (and thus in the nearest part of Cornwall to Cork). The life of Fingar tells how Iath arrived late for the departure to Cornwall and how an ivy leaf enlarged itself miraculously and ferried her across the sea to her companions. Details from a lost Cornish life of Iath herself also survive. These tell of how she was a nobleman's daughter from Ireland who landed at Hayle in pursuit of 'Barry', and got the local lord to found a church at Pendinas. That we are dealing here with Finbarr of Cork and Iath of Killeagh is confirmed by a reference in the thirteenth-century *Betha Bharra* to one Bishop Libur of Cill Iath as one of Finbarr's followers, and the implicit claim on the church of Cill Iath by that of Cork. Nennius's *Historia Brittonum*, which can be dated to around AD 800, as well as the Irish *Cormac's Glossary* of a century later, both indicate the belief that centuries earlier the Uí Liatháin (in whose territory Imokilly lay) had settled in western Britain, particularly in Cornwall and Devon. In this pattern of ecclesiastical dedications and hagiography we must therefore have a memory, however garbled, of a remarkable nexus of connections between Cork, Imokilly, Cornwall and perhaps even Brittany. Iath's chief church, of which she was the eponym, was St. Ives, where her tomb could once be seen, and her feastday was February 3. She was also patron of the chapel of Troon in Camborne and near both churches are found holy wells dedicated to the saint. Recent excavations have dated the oldest level at Troon to the tenth century. The large parish of Plouyé (= 'parish of Yé' or Iath) in Brittany must also be named from Iath, although this dedication is now forgotten there. Her memory lives on in Cornwall today, where the Anglican parish of Lanivet and the Catholic parish of St. Ives bear her name. The rich irony here is that Iath is completely unknown in the parish of Killeagh, surely her oldest foundation.

Professor Ó Riain's *Dictionary of Irish Saints* is to be welcomed as a wonderful addition to the published corpus on this subject, and one wishes him many further years of scholarly productivity. *Ad multos annos*.

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Sacred Histories: A Festschrift for Máire Herbert. Edited by John Carey, Kevin Murray and Caitriona Ó Dochartaigh. Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2015. xxv + 423 pp. €55. ISBN: 978-1-84682-564-4 (hardback).

A review of Máire Herbert's seminal work, *Iona, Kells and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Oxford, 1988), stated both that it was an 'exemplary' study of hagiography and that it would be required reading for students of early Irish history (Ó Cathasaigh 1990: 192, 195). The title of the volume under review and much of its contents reflect this broad reach of