

Review: *The Life of Saint Enda, Abbot of Aran: A Translation of Vita Endei with an Essay on Landscape and Labour in the Life* (Egeler and Ruhland)



Barry J. Lewis

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The Life of Saint Enda, Abbot of Aran: A Translation of Vita Endei with an Essay on Landscape and Labour in the Life. Matthias Egeler and Susanne Ruhland. Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures 8. Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures, Cork, 2023. iii + 68 pp. €12. ISBN 978-0-9955469-4-3.

The latest volume in the productive new series, Cork Studies in Celtic Literatures, is a study of the Latin Life of St Enda of Aran, including a very useful English translation of the Life. In their preface, the authors explain that they worked jointly on the translation, whereas the introduction was the work of Egeler alone.

Like many other Irish saints' Lives, the *Vita S. Endei* lacks a known author, date or context of production, and this makes it very difficult to handle from a historicist perspective. It is extant only in the fourteenth-century Oxford collection of Hiberno-Latin hagiography, which provides at least a *terminus ante quem*, and Pádraig Ó Riain has made a case that it was composed at Clonmacnoise (*Dictionary of Irish Saints* (Dublin, 2011), 281). Egeler is very brief on this issue, merely directing the reader to the relevant scholarship, and instead sets a quite different agenda: to read the Life 'as place-lore and folklore, with a particular focus on the connection of its storytelling to place-names and practices of labour' (pp. 2–3). The downplaying of the 'medieval literary context' is seen again in Egeler's reluctance to deal with an issue that is commonly seen as central to Irish hagiography, namely any claims made in the Life to control over economic resources and the status of Enda's churches relative to others, especially Clonmacnoise (p. 6 n. 22).

The absence of these topics, which in another publication might easily have taken up most if not all of the discussion, is not a disadvantage if something valuable is offered in their place. And Egeler does provide a different perspective and a strong argument for why that perspective is valid and valuable. His case is that the Life should be read in conjunction with the geography of Aran, and with a sensitivity to the landscape as a space in which real human beings had to survive. The argument is directed not just against textually focused readings that neglect the real geography within which medieval narratives were composed, but also against certain types of modern nature writing which, in Egeler's view, lack empathy with the perspective of premodern people who had to extract a living from the land, and which instead privilege (perhaps unconsciously) a leisured point of view and underestimate the deep, pervasive fear of hardship and hunger from which our ancestors suffered. Egeler gives us an important reminder of the sheer harshness of medieval life and is right to insist that fear is an emotion that cannot be excluded from our understanding of medieval views of landscape. I found his discussion (p. 26ff.) quite powerful, especially his evocation of the modern Irish Blasket Islands literature as a point of comparison.

One consequence of this perspective is that the discussion has to be very selective. Most of it focuses in fact on a small number of miracles that have to do with shaping the Aran landscape and facilitating food production: the provision of seed corn, the creation of a safe channel for navigation, and the opening of a

safe harbour near Enda's church. These are important events in the narrative, but they form only a small part of the Life. Many other events take place away from Aran, and though Egeler does cover some of this material in his introduction, neither this nor the notes to the translation gives much assistance wherever the hagiographer is talking about the wider world, as he is for a considerable part of the time.

This selectivity points to difficulties for the approach. The *Vita S. Endei*, being a medieval Latin hagiographical text, is not a straightforward repository for the kind of interests for which Egeler searches. Egeler is aware of this, and notes several ways in which the perspective of the hagiographer 'threaten[s] to get out of touch with the religious needs of the population' (p. 32). Nevertheless, he sees hagiography as more closely reflecting popular beliefs and showing a 'much more down-to-earth way of engaging with the land' than, for example, the fully elite *Dindshenchas* material (p. 32 n. 88), because a hagiographer would tend to draw on local cult as much as literary models. Thus, the closeness of the *Vita S. Endei* to real landscape features in Aran guarantees that it is offering us genuine island folklore rather than adaptations from other texts.

The close match between the stories in the *Vita* and visible Aran landmarks is reassuring, and Egeler provides a very useful map and set of photographs, taken by himself, that allow the reader to follow his identifications. However, while it is highly probable that the *Vita S. Endei* does reflect stories that had an oral currency on the island at the time of its composition, we do not know whether such stories emerged among the lay population of Aran or were first devised in the clerical milieu, and therefore in contact with the literary tradition that conditioned the kinds of things that saints did. Indeed, it seems impossible to disentangle the role of clerics from that of the rest of the local population in creating these stories, or to trace their inspiration. Furthermore, it is necessary to guard against making too great a distinction between the clerical 'elite' and the rest of the population by implying that these miracles relating to food supply and safety at sea would be more relevant to the population at large (p. 32). To judge from the activities of Enda in the Life, the religious too would have sailed around a great deal, and the section on Ciarán's threshing-floor (Chapter xxv) suggests that the hagiographer's view of the monastic ideal included hard agricultural labour (though Chapter xxix equally suggests that the monks were entitled to regular 'alms' from everyone else). The stories in the *Vita S. Endei* about the miraculous transport of grain and the creation of safe channels and harbours are simultaneously specific to local places on Aran and meaningful within the universal discourse of hagiography.

The miracles upon which Egeler focuses form only a small part of the text, and even there the hagiographer's perspective is problematized: he does not show 'any evidence of understanding their significance' for the 'needs of the labouring population' (p. 32). A broader reading of the whole Life serves to situate these nature miracles in a wider theological context. The hagiographer's overwhelming focus is on the miraculous overcoming of nature by divine intervention. It need not imply that he felt any detachment from the bodily need for survival, but the this-world consequences of the miracles are taken as read

whereas the hagiographical perspective demanded a focus on the event as miracle and as immediate spectacle, revealing divine intervention in the imperfect fallen world. *Vita S. Endei* projects a monastic, ascetic ideal, denying the value of the present world. The opening chapters set an utterly uncompromising tone: Enda's sister Fainche states quite bluntly that their father is in hell for the crime of being a secular lord, Enda is reproached even for defending himself against physical attack, while St Fainche's pupil lies down and dies rather than submit to marriage. The hagiographer has also superimposed the model of the holy monastic island on Aran, as if the island were one huge monastery rather than a secular community of farmers and fisherfolk with some clerics sharing it. As a result, the population that is Egeler's focus vanishes from the narrative (cf. Chapter xviii in particular), and it is this move that constitutes the elite occlusion of popular, i.e. lay, life that Egeler detects in places in the *vita*. What the hagiographer thinks of the lay population is left unclear. Perhaps it is implied that they became tenants of the monastic churches. As there were no less than ten of these on Aran according to the Life, it is difficult to see how anyone could have been left as an independent proprietor. But if that is the case, it is left unsaid. Indeed, it could even be understood that the whole existing population was expelled along with the pagan ruler Corbanus and his men, who are driven out when Enda arrives. Not even Corbanus' livestock was permitted to stay behind. At the very end of the Life, when Enda prophesies the future, he foretells sadly that 'lay and irreligious men' will some day supplant his monks on Aran. It seems that the hagiographer was so determined to make Aran a desert in the sea that he portrays Enda's lifetime as a complete hiatus during which no lay people lived there.

The dominance of this perspective throughout the *vita* means that tracing the interests for which Egeler is seeking requires a reading of the text against the grain, notwithstanding his argument that the *vita* drew on genuine folklore of the island (which is surely true). But such material has to be extracted from a narrative that has very different priorities. This is not an argument to reject the perspective, but rather to acknowledge its difficulties. Reading against the grain is a vital tool in the investigation of other important issues in premodern texts, such as gender, race and social inequalities. Provided that this is duly acknowledged, Egeler's call to take seriously the place of food production, labour, and fear of the natural world in hagiographical texts, and indeed other medieval genres, is salutary. It is well worth remembering that we are alive today only because countless generations of people before us mastered the skills needed to wrest a living from environments such as Aran. Egeler is right to insist that we can and should interrogate medieval texts for their response to the challenges of physical existence, even if their authors had their eye on other matters.

The translation of *Vita S. Endei*, which was done jointly by Egeler and Ruhland, is generally very accurate and reliable. There are only a few places where another view is possible or preferable, which I list below.

Ch. ii: *in ducatus popularis sublimatus honore*. This means ‘elevated to the honour of the leadership of the people’. The preposition *in* goes with *honore*, and *ducatus* is a preposed genitive. There is no need to emend to *ducatum*.

Ch. vi: *retrahens manum a conatu uoluntatis proprie*. Here Enda grabs a stick to ward off marauders, even though he has taken monastic vows, and has to be reminded that his head is tonsured. I would translate, ‘drawing back his hand from the attempting of his own will’, not ‘drawing back his hand by the effort of his own will’. It is Enda’s attempt to follow his own will – *conatus uoluntatis proprie* – by fighting off the marauders that is the problem here, and not the resolution, which is patiently to accept persecution as the will of God. Moreover, if *conatus* were grammatically the instrument it should not have the preposition *a*.

Ch. viii: *qui mire est sanctitatis*. This refers to Enda, not his monastery, and should be translated ‘who is ...’.

Ch. xi: *Midenses* is twice translated ‘Munstermen’ rather than ‘men of Meath’.

Ch. xix: *set nunc solo metallo eris uestitur*. ‘For the masters’ (dat. pl. of *erus*) is unlikely here. *eris* is probably a spelling of *heres*, i.e. the abbot or coarb of Enda. The gold- and silver-encrusted chasuble of Enda has decayed with age, but the metal parts survive, so that the coarb is now invested only in these. For parallels to this spelling, see Peter Stotz, *Handbuch zur lateinischen Sprache des Mittelalters*, iv (München, 1998), 77.

Ch. xxxiii: *ante consummacionem seculi*. This is much more likely to mean ‘before the end of the world’ than ‘before a century is completed’, and this is confirmed by the next sentence (*postquam ... de fine mundi prophetauit*). Cf. Matthew 28:20.

It is to be stressed, however, that the translation is generally excellent. The authors have provided a very useful resource which will be drawn on by all who wish to study the neglected hagiography of St Enda, and the introduction argues for a stimulatingly different way of reading medieval Irish hagiography from the ways that are currently dominant, either in Celtic studies or history.

BARRY J. LEWIS

Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies

Tintúd–Aistriú: Papers on Translation in Irish Tradition. In eagar ag/edited by Ken Ó Donnchú. Cló Torna, University College Cork, Cork, 2022. xi + 240 pp. €15. ISBN 978-1-9996859-2-8.

In a wide-ranging and thoughtful introductory chapter entitled ‘Conceptualising “translation” in the early medieval Latin/Irish linguacultural context’, Caitríona Ó Dochartaigh sets the scene for the other contributions to *Tintúd–Aistriú: Papers on Translation in Irish Tradition*, edited by Ken Ó Donnchú. Stressing the value of the Latin/Irish code-mixing textual sources