

Review: *The Correspondence of Thomas Stephens: Revolutionising Welsh Scholarship in the Mid-Nineteenth Century through Knowledge Exchange* (Coward)



Ciaran McDonough

Celtica 33 (2021), 374–378

DOI: 10.58480/SCS-djat9-gmnp

DIAS

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



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sections of text, complemented by well-informed discussion of the historical context. Following the work of others, including Goedheer and Hudson, the poem *Darraðarljóð* is seen to reflect a Norse perception that the Dubliners had the victory at Clontarf. This idea was explored previously by this review author in 'Clontarf in the Wider World', *History Ireland*, Clontarf issue, in 2014. Relevant texts to consider here would have been *Gesta Herewardi* and a poem composed by Cináed ua hArtacáin which claims that the *Gaill* were the victors at Clontarf. The discussion of a hypothetical *Brjáns saga* which underlay Icelandic accounts of Clontarf includes detailed analysis of the work done by Donnchadh Ó Corráin. However, such a text may not have existed, as Rosemary Power argued in *Sagabook* in 2018; *Cogad Gáedel re Gallaib*, or a lost written translation, or oral dissemination of its contents may have influenced the later Icelandic saga narratives of Clontarf.

The fifth chapter discusses tales of Gaelic ancestry in Iceland, focused on *Landnámabók*. This forms an excellent final case study for the book. It demonstrates that Irish links mattered to the redactors of *Landnámabók* working in the later decades of the thirteenth century and the first decade of the fourteenth century. A useful study is provided of the transmission of Gaelic names analysed on a case-by-case basis. A special study is made of Kjarvalr Írakonungr. Kjarvalr's association with Cerball mac Dúnlainge (king of Osraige, d. 888) is challenged and Cerball mac Muirecáin (king of Leinster, d. 909) is put forward as a more likely contender.

The authors of the book conclude with an evaluation of the wider implications of this case-study-based approach to Norse-Gaelic literary contacts. Emphasis is placed on the interpretation of the texts as 'political documents' and it is proposed that the text-based, historically grounded approach be applied to a wider range of sources. It will be interesting to see what fruits this rallying call bears in future.

CLARE DOWNHAM

University of Liverpool

The Correspondence of Thomas Stephens: Revolutionising Welsh Scholarship in the Mid-Nineteenth Century through Knowledge Exchange. Edited by Adam Coward. Celtic Studies Publications XXIII. Celtic Studies Publications, Aberystwyth, 2020, xxxii + 287 pp. £19.95. ISBN 978-1-891271-30-4.

This volume, the twenty-third in the Celtic Studies Publications series, is an edited selection of the correspondence of Thomas Stephens (1821–75). Stephens, a pharmacist from Merthyr Tydfil, was an amateur scholar of Welsh literature and history. He is, perhaps, best known for his *Literature of the Kymry* (1849), though he was also renowned for his contributions to local and national eisteddfodau. As this publication demonstrates, Stephens's reputation was not limited to Wales, and he contributed greatly to nineteenth-century European scholarly networks. The correspondence included in this volume has been carefully selected to fulfil two aims. The first is to promote Stephens's

reputation as 'Wales's first modern, scientific, as opposed to romantic, historian' (p. ix). The second aim is for the selection of letters to be 'read as a coherent account of his [Stephens's] thought and participation in the wider development of Welsh studies both inside Wales and internationally' (p. xxxi). Adam Coward's selection of Stephens's letters to various scholars, based in ten different nations, demonstrates the breadth of this knowledge exchange, which he claims transcends numerous boundaries: national and linguistic; between the 'amateur' and the 'professional'; and across various academic disciplines (p. xxx).

The collection is broken up into six chapters which focus on various thematic strands. The 'introduction' gives a biographical account of Stephens, his activities in Merthyr Tydfil, and scholarly activity in the town in the nineteenth century. The 'Welsh republic of letters' is also examined giving information about the state of Welsh literary scholarship during Stephens's lifetime, as well as indicating how he revolutionised Welsh literary study in his essay demonstrating that Prince Madoc did not 'discover' North America. The introduction ends with a brief overview of some of the authors and recipients of the letters to and from Stephens reproduced in this volume. Finally, the letter manuscripts themselves are discussed, including how they are grouped in the National Library of Wales. The 'introduction' is followed by 'a note on the text', which covers Coward's editorial practices and his re-arrangement of the letters from how they are ordered in the National Library of Wales, which is by sender's surname, then chronologically. Coward's ordering is designed to 'reconstruct conversations' and to allow 'the reader to see how the letters interact, correspond to or even inspire one another' (p. xxxi).

Chapter one is centred on Stephens's early correspondence between the years 1845 and 1853. While other chapters in this volume also cover some of this period, Coward has selected the letters for inclusion in this one, as he explains in the introduction to this chapter, in order to demonstrate the almost immediate recognition of the calibre of Stephens's work by more established Welsh scholars (or 'yr hen bersoniaid llengar' [the learned clergy] — Anglican clergymen holding official titles who were prominent in the study of Welsh literature and history) and to show his willingness to criticise them when he felt they erred. Stephens's correspondence with Thomas Price (Carnhuanawc) and Walter Davies (Gwallter Mechain) is reproduced here, along with his letters to and from, *inter alia*, the German scholar Carl Meyer, Charlotte Guest, and Augusta Hall.

Chapter two focuses on the further development of Stephens's reputation as a central figure in scholarly circles in Wales. As Coward argues in the general introduction and reiterates here in the chapter introduction, one of his aims in reproducing Stephens's correspondence was to highlight the role Stephens played in the knowledge transfer and exchange as enacted in letters (p. 35). The correspondence presented in this chapter covers 1850 to 1864 and illustrates 'the diverse avenues and methods by which research was conducted and knowledge acquired in nineteenth-century Wales' (p. 35). This includes requests for manuscript transcriptions, as well as discussions of new research

in the field of Celtic studies, both at home and abroad. A letter from Thomas Wakeman in 1854, for example, discusses his views on Zeuss's *Grammatica Celtica*, in which Wakeman objects to the modern Celtic languages being referred to as 'Celtic' as 'no-one knows what language the Celts of Gaul spoke' (p. 49). Alongside Wakeman, Stephens's correspondents in this chapter include George T. Clarke, W. Basil Jones, and Ebenezer Thomas (Eben Fardd).

The third chapter covers Stephens's correspondence with Irish scholars, which began in 1849 after the debate about the origin of cromlechs arose at the third annual meeting of the Cambrian Archaeological Association that year (p. 70). The clergyman and antiquarian James Henthorn Todd was in attendance at that meeting and began corresponding with Stephens afterwards. He also made introductions on Stephens's behalf to William Wilde, who in turn introduced Stephens to John O'Donovan and Eugene O'Curry. All of their letters are included in this chapter and cover such topics as: the ridiculous notions of Charles Vallancey; whether a disease referred to as 'blefed', which appears in the *Annals of Tigernach*, derives its name from Welsh; and whether the age of Cú Chulainn could be dated. Stephens also corresponded with the Cork-based antiquarian Richard R. Brash, who consulted Stephens on matters such as the Irish colonisation of Wales and on ogham. The Irish correspondence extends until 1871.

Covering the period 1853 to 1874, the fourth chapter reproduces Stephens's continental correspondence. As Coward points out in the 'introduction' to the volume, and re-iterates in the chapter introduction, there were close ties between Welsh and continental scholars, especially when it came to the Abergavenny Cymreigyddion society, which had admitted the Breton scholar Théodore Hersart de la Villemarqué and the German scholar Albert Schulz as members (p. 107). Vicomte Hersart de la Villemarqué and Schulz both wrote to Stephens about his *Literature of the Kymry*, as well as on matters pertaining to Welsh literature more generally. There are also letters from Adolphe Pictet on Welsh saints and Welsh toponymy, as well as correspondence from the philologist Friedrich Max Müller on Welsh mystic poetry.

Chapter five focuses on the portrayal of Stephens as a revolutionary scholar in Welsh studies. Coward has selected correspondence for this chapter which demonstrates Stephens to have been a more scientific researcher who did not include in his histories of Wales and Welsh literature that which he could not find manuscript evidence for (pp. 151–4). The letters in this chapter also demonstrate Stephens's frustration with older Welsh historians and literature scholars, who, he felt, were more inclined to have a more rosy-tinted view of Welsh history. This chapter seems to develop naturally out of the previous two: in chapter three we saw Stephens seeking the advice and guidance of the most prominent Irish scholars after Todd remarked that cromlechs were not in fact altars to Crom, nor were they Druidic in nature, at the Cambrian Archaeological Association meeting mentioned above. In chapter four, Stephens began corresponding with continental scholars, interested in his findings, and chapter five brings together Stephens's rigorous scholarship with support from fellow researchers on the continent. This can be seen in one of the letters in this chapter from

Stephens to Vicomte Hersart de la Villemarqué in which Stephens mentions his recent tour to Ireland (in 1856) and notes that his research there into the origins of round towers led him to believe that Vallancey's and O'Brien's claims that they were fire worshipping temples to be 'pure moonshine' (p. 157). Much of the letters in this chapter concern the mythological figure of Hu Gadarn. His correspondents here include Henri Martin, William Forbes Skene, and the aforementioned Vicomte Hersart de la Villemarqué.

The final chapter is concerned with Stephens's work on the Madoc myth or controversy. As Coward outlines in the chapter introduction, the theme of the essay prize of the 1858 Llangollen eisteddfod was 'the discovery of America by Prince Madoc ap Owen Gwynedd' (p. 189). Stephens's entry argued that Madoc had in fact never made it across the Atlantic, which caused arguments to break out as to whether or not it was eligible to be judged. He later turned this essay into a monograph and Coward argues that the correspondence in this chapter shows Stephens's development of thought on this subject between his essay and his book (p. 191). In his quest for knowledge, Stephens sought sources from across Wales, and eventually began seeking references from the United States, where he sought information from the founder of the American Ethnological Society, John Russel Bartlett. Other correspondents include James Hadley of Yale College, Daniel Silvan Evans, and W. Walker Wilkins.

A 'retrospective' serves as a conclusion, which highlights Stephens's attention to detail and scientific approach to Welsh historiography — both recognised by his immediate successors, such as John Morris-Jones, as well as by more recent commentators, such as Marion Löffler. Again, Coward reiterates his aim in reproducing Stephens's correspondence in this volume: to demonstrate the development of Stephens's career and to show that the republic of letters enacted throughout this volume both had influence on Stephens's work and also showed that 'Stephens was not a lone voice of reason in the face of romantic credulity' (p. 226). There are two appendices following this. Appendix A contains short biographies of some of Stephens's notable correspondents. Appendix B is a compilation of some of the notable people mentioned in the correspondence and includes the likes of Jakob Grimm, Leopold von Ranke, Johann Kaspar Zeuss, and Charles Vallancey. These are followed by a bibliography of manuscript and printed sources relevant to the people and topics mentioned in the correspondence.

The volume has been carefully assembled and while Coward admits that the manuscript sources of Stephens's letters in the National Library of Wales have already been compiled to reflect his scholarship rather than being a collection of all his correspondence, there is also a sense that Coward's selection provides his own view of Stephens's significance. There is no sense of repetition across the volume, even where there are numerous letters on the same theme. In addition to this careful curation, for all letters which are not in English (correspondence is also presented in Welsh, French, and German), translations are provided. Some were made by Stephens; others were made by later hands; and the rest were carried out by Coward and Nely van Seventer. Where there is overlap of themes between chapters, Coward provides careful references back

to previous mentions in correspondence, and the whole volume is footnoted with relevant information throughout. In his biography of Stephens prefixed to the second edition of *The Literature of the Kymry*, B. T. Williams wrote that 'the correspondence of [Stephens's] correspondence, if it could be got together [...] would be welcomed by all Celtic Scholars' (Williams, 1876, p. xxvii). This volume has made this a welcome reality.

REFERENCE

WILLIAMS, B. T. 1876: 'The Life of Thomas Stephens' in Thomas Stephens, *The Literature of the Kymry: Being a Critical Essay on the History of the Language and Literature of Wales during the Twelfth and Succeeding Centuries* (London, second edition, ed. D. Silvan Evans), xix–xlvi.

CIARAN McDONOUGH

University College Dublin