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R. Andrew McDonald. *Manx Kingship in Its Irish Sea Setting, 1187-1229: King Rognvaldr and the Crovan Dynasty.* Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007. 254 pp. Plates. $65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84682-047-2.

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New British History Focusing on the Isle of Man

R. Andrew McDonald's book belongs to the relatively recent and growing field of "New British History." Decidedly non-anglocentric, these publications not only focus on what used to be labeled the periphery, but they also frequently set out to overcome the limitations of modern national historiographical writing. Although the Kingdom of Man and the Isles as ruled by the Guðrøðarsons from 1079 to 1265 is a prime candidate for New British History, surprisingly, it has been rather overlooked even within this field. McDonald is, therefore, to be congratulated for his analysis of Manx politics within their wider geographical context during the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Taking the reign of King Rǫgnvaldr Guðrøðarson as a starting point, McDonald intends to give us "a case study that illuminates important themes in medieval British history, including the dynamic interplay of English, Scottish and Norwegian power in the western seaways in the century after 1160, as well as the receptivity of the marginal regions of the British Isles to contemporary trends in kinship structures, marriage, inheritance, kingship, government, administration, and even architecture" (p. 18).

The structure of the book reflects these aims. Chapter 1, discussing the run-up to Rǫgnvaldr's reign, rightly stresses the importance of maritime power and the need to secure areas with timber for shipbuilding, especially for the warlord-turned-founding-father of the new dynasty, Guðrøðr I Crob-bán (1079-95–but why does McDonald only here anglicize, using "Crovan"?). McDonald is also correct in his evaluation of the ensuing period of consolidation under Guðrøðr I's son Óláfr I (1103x1453) as "the real foundation of Manx kingship in many regards" (p. 66). The author then ends this introductory analysis regarding the relative role of military and diplomatic means in Manx politics with Rǫgnvaldr's father, Guðrøðr II (1153-87).

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 focus on the great themes that can be distilled from Rǫgnvaldr's reign. Chapter 2 discusses internal politics–"Family, Succession and Kin-strife"–while chapters 3 and 4 analyze Rǫgnvaldr's foreign relations, with a sensible division around 1200. Lastly, chapter 5 examines the type of kingship Rǫgnvaldr and his dynasty exercised. It is in these four chapters that the strengths and weaknesses of the book become apparent.

To praise the book's strengths first, McDonald presents us with a detailed yet clearly written discussion of convoluted and interconnected historical developments that crisscross the British Isles. The eventually fratricidal war between Rǫgnvaldr and his brother Óláfr II in the early thirteenth century is the starting point for an analysis of all internal Guðrøðarsons' quarrels during the whole 286 years of their kingdom. In his examination of Rǫgnvaldr's foreign relations, McDonald offers a welcome and rare discussion of Manx-Welsh affairs, a traditional one of Manx-Irish and Manx-Gallovidian affairs, and a partly new one of Manx-Orcadian/Scottish affairs. All this is convincingly placed into the context of Rǫgnvaldr's maneuvers between England, Norway, Scotland, and the papal curia. Also, the evaluation of Manx kingship with its focus on the implications of the "rex dei gratia" formula, of the change from "King of Man" to "King of Man and the Isles," of the attempted changes to succession-practice in 1187, and of the relations between kings and the church is thorough and well argued.

McDonald bases this very accessible historical narrative on a wide range of sources, including previously unquoted texts, and he offers interesting new thoughts on the main source, the *Cronica Regum Mannie et Insularum*. Rǫgnvaldr and Óláfr's quarrels ended with Rǫgnvaldr's killing in 1229, but after Óláfr's reign (1229-37), warfare flared up again in the next generation. The main part of

the *Cronica* was finished in 1257, during the reign of Oláfr II's son and eventual successor Magnús (1252-65), and it is assumed that he commissioned the work.[1] McDonald's conclusions, therefore, that the *Cronica* "played a role in legitimizing the kingship of Magnús and his line, perhaps in the face of ongoing opposition," and that it "may be regarded as a product as well as a narrative of kin-strife within the Crovan dynasty" are very convincing (p. 100).

Yet it is also with regard to sources that weaknesses appear. On the one hand, McDonald is rather generous in what he admits as evidence for twelfth- and thirteenth-century Man. For example, in his discussion of kingship, McDonald correctly notes that no contemporary sources exist to show us how the Manx kings were inaugurated. McDonald, as a result, draws on the fifteenth-century Manx statutes and the rather questionable seventeenth-century *History of the McDonalds* as a basis for a long discussion of inauguration practices, arguing that "it is possible–indeed probable–that these [Manx] documents in fact reflect much older practice," and that the Hebridean "ceremonies may have been derived, at least in part, from Manx procedure" (pp. 174, 181).

On the other hand, when McDonald points out that the regal status of the Manx kings was universally accepted, he overlooks vital evidence in the Scandinavian material. He is correct with his claim that the Icelandic sources consistently refer to the Manx rulers as kings, but he seems unaware that the contemporary Norwegian *Historia Norwegie* does to the Manx rulers precisely what McDonald only discerns for the descendants of Sumarliði: relegate them to the status of *reguli*.[2] Whether the Manx kings enjoyed "unquestionably sovereign status" in the eyes of their Norwegian overlords–as opposed to those of their English, Irish, and Scottish neighbors, and Icelandic sympathizers–is therefore far more doubtful than McDonald thinks (p. 164).

In fact, McDonald seems generally less than well informed about Scandinavian sources and literature (the Fornmanna Sögur edition of Bǫglinga sǫgur that he uses, for example, is not a reliable diplomatic edition). In a book entitled *Manx Kingship in its Irish Sea Setting*, this might be excusable, but as quoted, in the beginning McDonald announces his intention to include Norwegian aspects in his analysis. Unfortunately, his judgment there is frequently erroneous. To give another example: citing accepted scholarship, McDonald rightly explains that medieval Irish society knew multiple marriages and had rather vague notions of illegitimacy. However, he is wrong when he concludes that the equally relaxed attitudes of the Manx kings "provide significant evidence for the adoption of Gaelic practice within the Crovan dynasty"; and that "the assimilation of Manx rulers into patterns of Gaelic matrimony adds strength to the observation that in dealing with the Crovan kings we are dealing not with purely 'Norse' or 'Scandinavian' rulers but rather with Gaelic- or Hiberno-Norse kings who are representative of a mixed cultural and ethnic milieu in Dublin and the Isles" (p. 77). While there is no doubt that the Manx kings ruled in a culturally mixed milieu, matrimonial practices and concepts of legitimacy cannot be taken as indicators, because in this field a distinction between Irish and Scandinavian practices is all but impossible. A look at twelfth-century Norwegian royal succession yields exactly the same "'galaxy of sons, born of women of varying origin and status,"' succeeding to and quarrelling over the kingship there as in Ireland or Man (p. 74).[3] In short, McDonald appropriately discusses the Irish Sea setting. The problem is that he then draws wider conclusions, which are based on uninformed assumptions regarding Scandinavia.

In addition to these sources and Scandinavian issues, the book shows a number of inconsistencies, and they sometimes prevent a discussion of the critical points. For example, McDonald accepts Archibald Duncan's new reading of the original manuscript of Roger of Howden's *Chronica*. With this, the vexed problem of which Rǫgnvaldr–the son of Sumarliði of Argyll or the son of Guðrøðr of Man–intermittently ruled Caithness in alliance with King William of Scotland in the 1190s is solved in favor of the latter. But the implications of Rǫgnvaldr of Man's takeover of Caithness are lost to McDonald, due to a somewhat careless consideration of the evidence. McDonald accepts *Orkneyinga Saga's* clearly wrong claim that Rǫgnvaldr's mother was a daughter of an earl of Orkney, although he earlier is aware that, if anything, Rǫgnvaldr's grandmother might have been Orcadian, and even earlier presents the most likely scenario of Rǫgnvaldr having a Gallovidian rather than an Orcadian grandmother. The issue is important because to curb the power of the Orkney earls, Scottish kings had frequently given Caithness to their own candidates with a dynastic claim to Orkney. McDonald is familiar with this background, but his inconsistencies rob him of the chance to discuss the significance of Rǫgnvaldr of Man's rule: the first Scottish-backed ruler of Caithness without any dynastic connection to the Orkney earls. McDonald, therefore, merely ends with a rather weak statement of the obvious: "yet there is nothing in the saga to suggest that Rǫgnvaldr was actually installed as jarl" (p. 111).

Lastly, sometimes McDonald's penchant to define clear camps leads him astray. He has, for example, in previous publications (including his two monographs, T*he Kingdom of the Isles: Scotland's Western Seaboard, c.1100-c.1336* [1997] and *Outlaws of Medieval Scotland: Challenges to the Canmore Kings, 1058-1266* [2003]) presented Sumarliði of Argyll and his descendants as steadfast opponents of the Scottish crown, and he now fits "Rǫgnvaldr's cooperation with King William into a broader framework of interactions between Manx and Scottish rulers, who may have recognized the spirit of the old axiom that 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend"' (p. 113). To support this view, McDonald argues that already Rǫgnvaldr's father Guðrøðr II must have received "a sympathetic ear from the Scottish king" Malcolm IV, when Guðrøðr was looking for help against Sumarliði in 1159 (p. 113). McDonald ignores here that Guðrøðr II remained an exiled fugitive for another five years, eventually seeking aid in Norway, while Sumarliði and Malcolm shortly afterward agreed on a *concordia*.[4] More examples of Manx-Scottish frictions (see the warfare between the Manx Bishop Wimund and King David I) and Argyll-Scottish cooperation (see Dubgall son of Sumarliði accompanying King William to Durham) should have been considered here, all of which foil any attempt to paint an orderly picture of alliances and enmities.

Despite these weaknesses, McDonald distinguishes clearly enough between his primary and secondary sources, and his own interpretations, for careful readers to benefit from the detailed discussions on British and Irish late Scandinavian and medieval history, while not necessarily following all of the author's conclusions. There is no doubt that the book succeeds to a large extent in what it mainly sets out to do: analyzing twelfth- and thirteenth-century Manx kingship in an Irish Sea setting. It also remains one of the very few books to examine this kingship, is a highly readable introduction to late Scandinavian Manx history, and is a welcome contribution to our understanding of medieval kingship for undergraduates and specialists alike.

Notes

[1]. George Broderick, ed. and trans., *Cronica Regum Mannie et Insularum: Chronicles of the Kings of Man and the Isles. BL Cotton Julius Avii* (Douglas: Manx National Heritage, 1995), vii.

[2]. Inger Ekrem and Lars Boje Mortensen, eds., *Historia Norwegie*,trans. Peter Fisher (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2003), 64-65. An anonymous ideological work in favor of a secular greater Norway, it was probably written in eastern Norway, and it has been dated to c.1150-c.1220, most recently to c.1160-75.

[3]. Robin Frame, *The Political Development of the British Isles, 1100-1400* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 112.

[4]. Geoffrey Wallace Stuart Barrow, ed., *Regesta Regum Scottorum vol. I: The Acts of Malcolm IV, King of Scots 1153-1165* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960), 175.

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