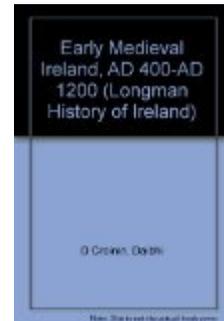


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Daibhi O Croinin. *Early Medieval Ireland, 400-1200*. London and New York: Longman, 1995. xvi + 379 pp. \$57.50 (textbook), ISBN 978-0-582-01565-4; \$62.35 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-01566-1.

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Illuminating the Golden Age

In every field of academic endeavor there are pivotal events, some noticed at the time, others not. Such a moment occurred in Celtic Studies in 1962 when Daniel Binchy stormed onto the beach of the Patrician debate, kicked over every sand castle in sight, and stomped off to edit the law texts ("Patrick and his Biographers: ancient and modern," *Studia Hibernica* 2 [1962]: 7-173). The fascinating wreckage strewn along that beach has attracted a whole generation of young scholars who have taken up and re-examined not only the problems of the Patrician mission to Ireland, but also every aspect of early Irish culture, language, and politics. Unfortunately for those outside the field, much of this recent work has been debated and published largely in a restricted arena not readily accessible to other medievalists, historians, and the interested public, especially those in North America, whose libraries often do not subscribe to the specialized literature and periodicals of small academic disciplines such as Celtic Studies despite the wide appeal they may have.

Happily for all, that was then and this is now. With the appearance of Daibhi O Croinin's book, there is at last a readily available broad overview of early Ireland, by one of Ireland's most capable young scholars, which takes into account these recent developments and debates in the field on a wide range of issues. This is the first volume in a new series from Longman dealing with Irish history, but this book is more of a cultural profile than a traditional history. Old-style, hard-line historians (kings and battle dates) will still find the work of such scholars as Francis John Byrne, Donnchad O Corrain, and Gearoid

Mac Niocaill (all cited in the book's bibliography) more to their taste. But, if their region of expertise is not Ireland, the work of these scholars will be difficult for such readers to appreciate unless they have read O Croinin's book first. Though he writes primarily for the intelligent reader rather than for the Celtic specialist, O Croinin grounds his discussions on a solid historical framework using annalist and genealogical sources to track political and social developments throughout the early medieval period.

O Croinin is himself known best for his work on computational texts, at least among English speakers, so it is hardly surprising that much of the book deals with the analysis of texts or passages. These texts have a considerable range, however, from the strictly literary—poems and epics—to the evidence of law codes, annal entries, and marginalia. Likewise, O Croinin draws upon evidence from a variety of disciplines: linguistics, archaeology, paleo-botany, anthropology, paleography, and classics. While earlier scholarship sought to characterize medieval Ireland as an archaic Indo-European society distinct from the rest of Europe, the more recent generation of scholars has reintegrated Ireland into the whole picture of the emerging cultures of medieval western Europe, and O Croinin has nicely caught the balance between the two. It is particularly to his credit that O Croinin writes with wit, elegance, and candor. He offers an honest assessment, an occasional theory, but he never forces ambiguous evidence to produce a definitive conclusion or falsely simplifies a complex question to pro-

duce a facile answer. His aversion to some aspects of ecclesiastical writing, most obvious in his characterizations of hagiography and the penitentials, is frankly expressed. One may or may not agree with his judgement, but there is a great deal in the record of early medieval Ireland that the modern mind will scarcely find cute and cuddly.

The book is arranged in ten chapters, which cover the period 400-1200 AD in a chronological literary development interrupted, in chapters three, four, and five, by a discussion of the social institutions and structures, economy, and law of early Ireland. Appended to the main text are several useful ancillary sections: a glossary of terms, largely Irish and Latin but including some Norse and English; a group of maps depicting political divisions, ecclesiastical sites, and topography; some Leinster genealogical diagrams; and an annotated guide for further reading arranged according to topic and often including a brief description of the current *status questionis*. Following all this comes an extensive bibliography and a useful (as opposed to the often merely cursory) index.

The first chapter sets the old questions of the conversion of northern and western Europe to Christianity and the Patrician mission into a wider context of cultural changes. For O Croinin history is primarily a study of the written record; hence the emergence of literacy has as great, if not greater, significance as new modes of religious thought in the impact on Irish culture of Christianization. This perspective is somewhat weakened by the pervasive silence O Croinin maintains toward what may be called, for want of better terms, Irish non-Christian literature and learning.

Non-Christian does not mean that an Irish Christian could not find value in, or contribute to, such materials, only that in content such materials are not grounded in Christian values or motivations. The study of Ireland's non-Christian medieval legacy—the epic and heroic tales, mythology, native poetry, and the like—is referred to, and cited in, the course of the book numerous times, but receives no special attention. The relationship of this secular literature to ecclesiastical writing, and the identity of the creators, is a deeply vexed and hotly debated subject among Celticists at present, much as the Patrician question was a generation ago. O Croinin comes down squarely in favor of the argument that learning, in Latin and Irish, was a unified enterprise in medieval Ireland, and that it took place under the aegis of the church. Though this is indeed the majority opinion these days, the breadth of this learning, and the debt that breadth

owed to pre-Christian patterns of thought, deserves more attention that it gets. Unfortunately, this aspect of Irish learning is taken for granted by those familiar with the material, and ruthlessly pillaged by others, such as fantasy and science fiction writers, whose work bears witness to the continuing allure of this Irish legacy.

Chapters six to eight chart the development of Ireland's ecclesiastical centers and the vigorous literary culture nurtured in them. The scholarly analysis of the rich intellectual exchange of the period among the scholars of Ireland, England, and the Continent has often been marred by pointless bickering over which group knew a particular classical text, deserves credit for some innovation, or was "first" in some widely shared activity, and O Croinin is generally successful in avoiding this trap in his discussion of literary evidence and its context. Chapters nine and ten survey the impact of the Vikings and the Normans. Both groups are often presented as the executioners of the Golden Age. Of late there has been some academic argument as to the extent of the destruction that Viking raids visited on Irish society. Devastating as the raids were to the monasteries and to the homesteads subject to them, the Viking coastal settlements and the Irish hinterlands reached a *modus vivendi* fairly quickly.

The Normans, on the other hand, have been purveyors of civilization to those inclined to regard the rise of the nation state as the advance of humankind and have remained villains to devotees of native Irish culture, real or imagined. In discussions of the native Irish ecclesiastical reform movement, commencing in the eleventh century and continuing in the twelfth, the dark line of the Norman arrival on the horizon has tended to cast a sort of Maxfield Parrish glow of golden fragility upon the foreground. To some scholars of the past century interested in this period, the destruction of a fragmented, tribal Ireland was a necessary preparation for the importation of civil order and modern social structures. O Croinin shows himself a bit defensive toward this stance, but he avoids the pitfall of romanticizing the prominent Irish leaders of the day into doomed heroes. If he concludes his volume on a slightly wistful note, therefore, pondering the might-have-beens of an un-Norman Ireland, we should be inclined to indulge him.

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