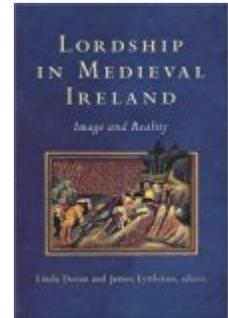




Linda Doran, James Lyttleton, eds. *Lordship in Medieval Ireland: Image and Reality*.
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Reviewed by Brendan Smith

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Many essays in this volume make a valuable contribution to understanding the ways in which those who held power at a local level in medieval Ireland, whether of Irish/Gaelic stock or of English/settler origin, exercised their authority. It is particularly useful to have the strategies and ambitions of natives and newcomers examined together under the umbrella term "lordship," a concept that may be sufficiently permissive to embrace the nature of elite control as practiced by two cultures, which were, in many important ways, quite distinct from each other.

One of these distinctions, the different evidence we have for Gaelic as opposed to English lordship, is the subject of numerous essays in *Lordship in Medieval Ireland*. Edel Bhreathnach seeks to deploy Gaelic literary sources, and in particular vernacular poetry, to assess changing ideas about Irish kingship in the same manner that students of Anglo-Saxon England and continental Europe make use of the charters and outpourings of royal chanceries so notably absent from Gaelic Ireland. Her conclusion that there was less of a gulf between Gaelic and other models of kingly

rule than the different types of evidence suggests is persuasive, at least for eleventh-century Leinster, but she is wise to refrain from pushing her case further either chronologically or geographically at this point. If Irish kings did not produce many charters, they also did not make much use of visual imagery to broadcast the nature of their authority. The few surviving stone effigies, seals, and seal-matrices are subjected to intense and imaginative scrutiny by Freya Verstraten, who argues that Gaelic lords in the thirteenth century presented a more regal image of their authority to their own people than they did to their English overlords. Whether Gaelic lords in thirteenth-century Connacht cared in the slightest what their subjects thought of them or whether these same subjects would have been sufficiently familiar with the messages conveyed in the tomb effigies to be impressed with the kingliness of their late overlord are issues that are sensibly excluded from the discussion. Perhaps the intended audience comprised the potential successors of the ruler thus commemorated.

Gaelic lords certainly used stone as an expression of their power, and several essays deal with the castles or tower houses they built or occupied in the late Middle Ages. The contributions of Connie Kelleher on the O'Driscolls of west Cork and Paul Naessens on the O'Flaherty's of Connemara draw attention to the growing importance in the late medieval period of the sea in the economy of Gaelic lordships, and demonstrate the willingness of maritime lords to invest the profits garnered from the lucrative fishing industry in the construction of substantial coastal residences. Further inland, James Lyttleton uses the architectural remains of the MacCoghlan lordship in Offaly to present an original and intriguing account of the transition from medieval to early modern as displayed in the changes made to the layout of existing structures in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries both by native and newly arrived English lords. In architectural terms, there was little to separate Gaelic and English tower houses, and, in one of the strongest essays in the collection, John Malcolm examines the fortifications built in north Mayo by the conquerors of Connacht after 1235. He might have made clearer that the English families he mentions--the d'Exeters, Stauntons, Cusacks, Cogans, and Barrets--had already been in eastern Ireland for several generations by the time they established themselves in Connacht, and that this perhaps also influenced their intelligent approach to the terrain now at their disposal. Yet, the author's sensitive use of recent thinking on elite landscapes and sure grasp of historical developments combine to enable him to offer a convincing explanation of why English families not only survived but also thrived in this distant part of the island.

If Gaelic lordship in this volume is approached for the most part through analysis of literary, artistic, or architectural sources, there is also room for a more narrative, document-based approach, as represented by Emmet O'Byrne's fine essay on the MacMurrough lordship from the late twelfth to the early fourteenth centuries.

Some of the human tragedy of relentless border warfare is brought home by the author's vivid style, but his argument is sober and simple: compliant as such dynasties as the MacMurroughs were in the thirteenth century, their worsening legal position in face of encroaching and increasingly exclusive conceptions about English common law, combined with the onset of famine, led to violent disorder, which, once commenced, could subsequently only be manipulated but never eradicated. Awareness of such nuances is less obvious in Linda Doran's account of the fortunes of one area hit hard by Irish raids from the end of the thirteenth century, identified by her as "the Carlow Corridor" (p. 99). Historical geography has much to offer to our understanding of medieval Irish history, and the author "reads" the landscape of the valleys of the rivers Barrow and Nore in revealing ways, but her account is hampered by an out-of-date approach to late medieval Irish history. Tellingly, the footnotes make no reference to the work of Robin Frame, leaving us with a picture of a "failure of lordship," which is hard to square with the enduring nature of English power at the local level in medieval Ireland (p. 126).[1] At least equally questionable is her suggestion that Gaelic communities on English manors preserved their own distinguishing social structures and benefited from English retreat. Rather, the betagh communities (unfree tenants of Gaelic origin) of manors overrun by the Irish faced disaster as their new lords settled their own families and hangers-on on estates now given over to pastoral rather than arable farming.

Such communities, however, were already feeling the pinch in this area in the late thirteenth century for other reasons. Margaret Murphy's stimulating analysis of the financial organization of the Bigod lordship of Carlow, based on an exhaustive mining of Ministers' and Receivers' Accounts (TNA:PRO SC6), reveals that virgin soil was being brought under the plough as late as the 1280s, to be abandoned again within thirty years. This suggests that the limits of the arable econo-

my had been reached and passed by this time, with obvious consequences for the most vulnerable elements of peasant society. It is no coincidence that the boundaries of lands farmed by be-tagh communities were coming under closer scrutiny in the same period. It is unfortunate that the author does not include in her analysis the financial information contained in the 1307 inquisition postmortem for the liberty, as well as in receipt rolls and pipe rolls, information that would have further strengthened her important observations on the interrelationship between lordly power and income generation.

In a perceptive but all-too-brief foreword to this excellent collection, Bernadette Cunningham points to the obvious distinction that existed in medieval Ireland between lordship based on exploitation of land, on the one hand, and tributary lordship or lordship over men, on the other hand, and argues that the commonalities between the two were greater than the differences. Certainly English lords borrowed aspects of tributary lordship--most obviously, the notion of compulsory hospitality--from their Gaelic neighbors, while in some Gaelic lordships communal tributes, in time, came to have a territorial aspect. Whether the concept of lordship is stretched too thin when it tries to incorporate both Gaelic and English models, however, remains an issue. (It is unfortunate in this regard that the contemporary Scottish situation is referred to in so few of the essays in this volume.) It should be pointed out that in a large-scale study of late medieval lordship in the British Isles, to be published posthumously in 2009, Rees Davies excludes consideration of Gaelic lordship on the grounds that "the patterns and dynamics of power (compounded by the very different and very inadequate range of sources) do not lend themselves to meaningful comparison with 'English-style' aristocratic lordship or its terminology." [2] This volume of essays may not have changed Davies's mind, but it serves as an excellent stimulus to thinking about how we conceptu-

alize the use of power in a divided island in the Middle Ages.

Notes

[1]. Robin Frame, "Power and Society in the Lordship of Ireland," *Past and Present* 76 (1977): 3-33.

[2]. Rees Davies, *Lords and Lordship in the British Isles in the Late Middle Ages*, ed. Brendan Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

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