The tendency for historians and archaeologists to carry out their research independent of one another is a longstanding feature of scholarship devoted to the history of Ireland. Historians, as I can attest, rarely stray far from the variegated corpus of written sources generated over the course of Ireland’s long history. Archaeologists, by contrast, place less emphasis on the written word, searching instead for the historical meaning of material things from the past in the physical places that dot and lurk beneath the Irish landscape. Perhaps the only common ground that the two disciplines share is an inclination to explore Ireland’s history in insular terms. The book under review, written by a leading archaeologist, is concerned with medieval “castellology” and so falls squarely within the latter discipline. It occasionally draws on documentary sources in its analysis of castle building but is not bound by the written record. The author is prepared to use indirect, circumstantial, and, above all, comparative material as evidence in support of his argument that Ireland’s encastellated landscape may best be understood in terms of European developments beyond Britain. To help the reader visualize the many castles referred to in the book, a wealth of illustrations are provided. These include: three maps of sites in Ireland, Britain, and France and a whopping ninety-six “figures,” consisting of modern photographs, or sketches, of structures and plans of (principally Irish) fortresses compiled from a range of secondary sources.

Castles, the author explains, served as manifestations of medieval ideas of power, administration, and status as much as agents of defense and military coercion. The act of constructing these enduring physical spaces—encastellation—is the book’s overarching concern. Its analysis unfolds over six chapters covering six centuries of Irish history from the mid-tenth to the mid-sixteenth. The author’s decision to begin his analysis in the tenth century is important. The received wisdom is that, apart from a few (less than a dozen) isolated examples, castle building in Ireland proliferated only following the English conquest (ca. 1169). Such an interpretation carries the implication that the native population was so far outside European norms that they lacked the know-how, or the resources, or the vision, to erect such structures. But here it is shown that a stretch of walling, which once belonged to an elaborate stone-built fortress dating to circa 1000, survives at the later medieval site of Lotteragh Upper Castle in Limerick. The original structure was erected at the behest of Brian Bóruma (Boru) king of Munster, the first regional king from Ireland’s southern half to claim the kingship of all Ireland. King Brian clearly had the manpower and the audacity
to see such a building constructed, and his builders were possessed of the aptitude to see their master’s vision realized. Even more striking, however, is the author’s assertion that this fortress bears a greater similarity to a castle of similar date in Capetian France than to earlier examples of Irish stone forts. Indeed, he concludes: “The key here might indeed be France: too often, perhaps, Irish scholars think that the island of Britain is the more relevant place, but tenth- and eleventh-century Ireland had more in common with Capetian France than with Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Scandinavian England in the late first millennium” (p. 57).

On the face of it, looking for external influences on castle building in Ireland beyond England becomes more difficult after 1169: the English conquest—the “Anglo-Norman invasion,” as the author terms it—was transformative. The vast preponderance of the great “Irish” castles built in the late Middle Ages were constructed by subjects of the king of England. These structures were made to dominate the landscape and to protect English subjects both from the king’s Irish enemies and, often, from one another. But in considering the emergence and development in Ireland of the tower house after circa 1400 the author suggests that similar structures common in southwest France may have served as a model and that it was in the fifteenth century when “Ireland’s encastellated landscape most resembled that of contemporary Europe” (p. 208). It was, the author speculates, the English of Ireland, particularly those living in the South, who maintained connections with France and who may have introduced the tower house into Ireland. Certainly, it was this population who constructed the majority of these very numerous fortified dwellings. This point left me wondering how encastellation figured into the relationship between Irishmen and Englishmen in the later Middle Ages and the debate among historians over how to interpret that relationship. Irish lords, the descendants of those Irish kings who had built castles before the conquest, generally did not build fortifications made of stone. Why was this? Was it a lack of know-how, or a lack of a sufficient labor force? In a treatise written for Henry VIII, a Tudor official native to the four English counties around Dublin—the “English Pale”—pointed to the great advantage Englishmen in the sixteenth century had over Englishmen at the time of the conquest: there were now five hundred castles and towers where in the twelfth century there were but five. Castles and towers, he argued, would help the king of England to subject the Irish once and for all.

This is a thought-provoking and erudite work in which the author’s expert knowledge of castellology is everywhere on display. His regular engagement with the scholarly literature on castle building is a necessary academic endeavor, though it may prove hard going for the general reader. In sum, Encastellated Ireland demonstrates what the author sets out to show, that Ireland’s encastellated landscape was not an example of insular exceptionalism but part of the wider European experience of medieval encastellation.