

Review article: A ‘pioneer of nations’: Ireland’s earliest writers*

This book is a landmark publication in the field of Early Irish History. Working from the fact that Ireland, in the period *c.*AD 400 to *c.*AD 1000, produced a massive body of literature, in a wide variety of genres and in two languages, Irish and Latin, that was far more extensive than in any other country in Europe, the author offers a context for the ‘communities of learning’ that produced such literature. Previous writers have struggled to explain how a society situated at the very edge of the known world could have done such a thing. Not the least of Elva Johnston’s achievements is to force a rethink of such underlying perceptions. Rather than viewing Ireland as an isolated and backward intellectual desert, for her ‘it is useful to see the island as a frontier-zone, comparable to other Roman frontiers’ (p. 11), and to see the evolution of Irish literacy and literate elites against the backdrop of Roman Frontier Studies. Though Ireland never suffered the traumatic consequences of barbarian invasion and the fall of Empire, Johnston argues nevertheless that there was much more than trading and raiding, or colonizing and slaving involved; she would see a much more profound influence at work: ‘the culture of early Christian Ireland is incomprehensible outside of the Late Antique context’ (p. 25).

How, then, did Christianity succeed in Ireland? Not by ‘flattery and battery’, as Ramsay MacMullen so memorably characterized the process in the Later Empire.¹ For Johnston the answer is clear: ‘the religion’s organisation proved crucial. Monasticism, as a communal, intellectual and highly literate strand of Christianity, found fertile ground in Ireland’ (p. 19). This, it must be said, runs directly against the trend in recent scholarship, that has tended to play down the notion of an all-pervasive monastic model of organisation in the Irish church. But Johnston is adamant: ‘the rural nature of the Irish experience was crucial and forced Christianity, which was a strongly urban religion [in the Roman world], to adapt in significant ways’ (p. 26).

The relations between vernacular and Latin literacy became clear, she says, in the seventh and eighth centuries; this is the subject of chapter 2 (‘Irish responses to literacy, *c.*600–850’, pp 27–58). Where hitherto Latin (ecclesiastical) culture had been the dominant one, the relative status of the two languages comes more into equilibrium; by the end of her period (*c.*850), the two had come to function more-or-less side-by-side. Thankfully, she avoids the trap that others before her have fallen into, in thinking that the rise of Irish was matched by a corresponding decline in knowledge of Latin: ‘The study of Latin continued and the language

*LITERACY AND IDENTITY IN EARLY MEDIEVAL IRELAND. STUDIES IN CELTIC HISTORY 33. By Elva Johnston. Pp vi, 238. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press. 2013. £60.

¹ Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100–400)* (New Haven: Conn, 1984). p.119.

retained its status as one of the pillars of Irish literacy down to the year 1000 and beyond' (p. 130). In explanation of this phenomenon she discusses at length that archetypal legend of Irish learning and literacy, the story of Cenn Fáelad of Tuaim Dreccain (pp 57–8, 102–4) – elegantly described as 'a man who could row about islands of Irish and Latin, and across the waves of exegesis and literature' (p. 111) – who supposedly studied simultaneously at that monastery's schools of *léigend* (Latin learning), *fénechas* (ancient brehon law), and *filidecht* (poetry), and sought to integrate the knowledge acquired at all three. As she rightly remarks (p. 57), 'Cenn Fáelad's tale has exercised a fascination on both the Gaelic and modern scholarly worlds'. On the other hand, she does not mention that other – equally fascinating – tale of how the (mythic?) seventh-century Irish scholar, Senchán Torpéist, was instrumental in recovering the full text of *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, the most prestigious of all the native Irish saga-texts, after it had been recklessly bartered by other Irish scholars in return for the text of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*. There is surely a case to be made for seeing the Senchán story as a native riposte to the view that the fashionable imported (Latin) learning was preferable to the native brand.

These deliberations are set against a survey of 'Community and identity, c.750–950' (chap. 3, pp 59 ff). In this Johnston rightly rejects the notion that the eighth-/ninth-century *Céli Dé* so-called 'reform movement' had any real role to play, either in church reform or in the development of literacy, particularly in Irish. 'They resemble more a loose association of ecclesiastics with common devotional interests than a movement, at least initially' (p. 63). That said, she maintains that they did feed into 'a centralization of monastic resources, which in turn ... influenced the distribution of literacy in an ecclesiastical context' (p. 65); that case is further argued on pp 114 ff. It is remarkable, in this context, how the contemporary reform then under way in continental Europe (and even in England) appears to have had no effect whatever on the institutional church in Ireland, despite the regular traffic of Irishmen to Europe in the period between AD 700 and AD 1100. 'International best practice' was not so prevalent back then!

Perhaps the most insightful part of the book is that section (pp 69 ff.) dealing with genealogies. Johnston recognises that genealogy was 'a form of politics and often a tool of ideology rather than biology' (p. 82), and links social and political changes with the 'evolution of a genealogical community', a learned elite who were not averse to manipulating the record where it suited them (a twelfth-century author, Gilla in Choimded Ua Cormaic, lists six ways in which genealogies could be 'fiddled!'). However, the very scale of the Irish genealogical record (c.30,000 surviving names; many more thousands lost to history) presents its own unique problems. She is not convinced by the suggestion that the Irish predilection for genealogy and tribal history owes its origins to Old Testament influence (the rejection is unspoken). On the contrary, she acknowledges that the 'shadowy associations' between widely dispersed – but clearly related – population-groups such as the Corcu Óchae and Fothairt, Fir Maige Féine and Loígse (and others even more obscure) speaks for an origin as far back as the seventh, perhaps even the sixth century (p. 83).

Interwoven throughout this section are case-studies of individuals and families, dynasties and smaller population-groups, e.g. of the Uí Dúnlainge in Kildare, which she rightly sees as 'a classic demonstration of the way in which secular and ecclesiastical interests were so often mutually supportive' (p. 82).

She might have pointed out, in passing, that the cocktail of church and state could sometimes be a lethal one; the annals record that Lóchéne Mend (described as *dune ecnaidh*, *abb Cille Dara* and *optimus scriba Scottorum*) was murdered in 695. Given the careful way in which she traces other genres of text through the personal profiles of named individuals, it is surprising that there is no mention in this context of the statement in one of the largest genealogical collections, the *Book of Leinster* (f. 336 marg. infra; facs. vol. 6, p. 1470): '[Co]lmán mac Duach, mac ríge Connacht, ollam 7 fáid 7 saí senchassa Gáedel 7 suí ecnai, isé ro-thinóil genealaige ... [Érenn?]' ('C. son of D., son of the king of Connacht, chief poet and sage and scholar of history of the Irish and a learned biblical scholar: he it was who collected the genealogies ... [of the Irish?]'). Here is an individual who embodies everything that is discussed throughout the book, and who would have merited a study in his own right.

Johnston sees significance in the (apparent?) change-over from the tribal-history format of collections such as Oxford, Bodl. Libr., MS. Laud 610 to the one that 'privileged the enumeration of patriline[sic] over the incorporation of narratives concerning broader group origins' (p. 89); whether this transition really took place is a moot point, but the idea is certainly one worth exploring. The more significant change, surely, is the one that saw the effective abandonment of the archaic genealogical scheme in favour of a wholly fictitious pseudo-history represented in the story of Míl of Spain and his sons; 'it became one of the most persistent forms of communal identity in Irish history and even survived the destruction of Gaelic culture' (p. 85); we are all 'Milesians' now! It is equally curious that this 'New history of Ireland' appears first amongst learned Irishmen on the continent – though Johnston remarks (p. 85, n. 140) on its appearance also in the ninth-century Welsh *Historia Britonum*; the phenomenon is one that might have been worked out in greater detail.

The most challenging part of the book is its treatment of 'literacy, orality and identity' in what Johnston's calls a 'secondary-oral context' (chapter 6, pp 157–76). Although derived from the theories associated with Walter Ong² and his school, the discussion is mercifully free of the kind of vacuous verbiage beloved of the theoreticians. Against the backdrop of the broader debate concerning oral versus literary activity in the writings of Albert Lord and Milman Parry and their search for the earliest Greek epic traditions,³ she sets the narrower debate concerning 'The oldest Irish tradition' (*Táin Bó Cuailnge* and its related saga-texts). This is at the very core of the controversy that has divided Irish scholars for the best part of fifty years, fought out by 'two opposing orthodoxies' ('nativists' and 'anti-nativists') that she tartly dismisses as an 'intellectual cul-de-sac' (p. 23). The 'anti-nativists' would see only the early triumph of Christianity and the complete extirpation of all native beliefs. Johnston questions this reductionist view that implies that 'Christianity in Ireland, amazingly for a pre-modern society, managed to entirely expunge meaningful native tradition' (p. 17), and contrasts it with the experience of Christianity and conversion elsewhere in the West. She suggests (p. 18) that a more appropriate analogy for the supposed 'Conflict

² Walter Ong, *Orality and literacy: the technologizing of the word* (London/New York, 1982).

³ Albert Lord, *The singer of tales* (Cambridge, Mass, 1960); *The making of Homeric verse: the collected papers of Milman Parry*, ed. Adam Parry (Oxford, 1971).

between Paganism and Christianity' approach would be the view of Roman Late Antiquity advanced by Robert Markus (and more recently, by Alan Cameron), that posits a seamless transition from a secular and literate Late Imperial ('pagan') aristocracy to an alternative literacy of the Christian Empire after c. AD 400.⁴ Although Ireland was nothing like as centralised as the Later Empire in terms of government and administration, the parallel is an attractive one.

The most substantial section of the book (chapter 4, pp 92–130) is a comprehensive study of the terminology of learning from the seventh century up to c. 1000. The survey covers the terms doctor, ecnaid (cenn ecnai), fer léigind, fili, léigthóir, sapiens, scriba, scríbnid, suí (the list could have been added to, e.g. with auctor fáid and magister), and is given added value by being matched to the named individuals in the Annals of Ulster that carry such titles. She attempts to plot the changes in meaning of such terms that occurred over time, and how some even disappeared, to be replaced by others. (The full details are listed in the very valuable Appendix, pp 178–96.) That said, there is still need for a serious study of surviving Irish manuscripts from the medieval centuries, and a parallel attempt (it can only be very tentative) to piece together a picture of Irish monastic libraries. Louis Gougaud's pioneering effort⁵ in the 1940 Festschrift for Eoin Mac Neill (who described Ireland as 'A pioneer of nations')⁶ is now sadly out of date. We are still a good way short of producing an Irish equivalent of Michael Lapidge's work on the Anglo-Saxons.⁷

It is perhaps worth pointing out, in relation to the terminology, that the word anchorita – which does not seem to appear in the annals before 812 (to judge from Johnston's Appendix) – occurs as solitarius in the epithet of Beccanus, co-recipient (with Ségéne, abbot of Iona) of the famous Paschal Letter authored by Cumian in 632/3. It may be likewise significant that Mo-Sinu maccu Min (described in a Würzburg manuscript as scriba et abbas Bennchuir, and who very likely was a teacher of Columbanus) seems also to have maintained a solitary existence (at the island monastery called Crannach Dún Lethglaise, Cranny Isl., on Strangford Lough, near Downpatrick) before he took up the office of abbot at Bangor. There are such references scattered throughout the genealogies; e.g. Crónán sapiens, who apparently was among the first to research the Patrick Problem and who lived in Éoinis. Physical separation from the rest of the community may very well have been the lot (perhaps also the wish!) of the anchorita; one is reminded also of Marianus Scottus of Mainz, who achieved that separation by having himself walled up as an inclusus at Mainz. A different question altogether is why the Irish (alone?) seemed happy to use the biblical term scriba, notwithstanding all its negative connotations (i.e., the gospel Scribes and Pharisees).

What distinguished Ireland from its nearest neighbours (including those parts where Celtic languages were still being spoken), however, was precisely the existence of a native learned class, the filid (poets). But these very filid are a

⁴ R. A. Markus, *Christianity in the Roman world* (London, 1974); idem, *The end of ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990); Alan Cameron, *The last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford, 2011).

⁵ Louis Gougaud, 'The remains of ancient Irish monastic libraries' in John Ryan (ed.) *Essays and studies presented to Professor Eoin Macneill D.Litt. on the occasion of his seventieth birthday, May 15th 1938* (Dublin, 1940), pp 319–34.

⁶ Eoin MacNeill, 'A pioneer of nations' in *Studies*, xi, no. 41 (Mar. 1922), pp 13–28.

⁷ Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon library* (Oxford, 2006).

conundrum; as Johnston puts it: ‘They are certainly a symptom of the situation, but are they part of the cause as well?’ (pp 155–6). Johnston herself admits (p. 21) that ‘filid and clerics were not necessarily always one and the same’. She is in no doubt about it: ‘the traditional knowledge of filid was a secular knowledge’ (p. 156); for all the assimilation of native and Christian cultures, ‘the communities of learning were interlocked but distinct’ (p. 21). She does toy momentarily (p. 156) with the idea that the filid ‘may even have first come into being as a separate group during this era as the accepted and Christian representatives of traditional knowledge’, but does not linger on it. There is perhaps an analogy with what has been termed ‘the rise of the later schools of filidheacht’, in the emergence (out of monastic schools?) of autonomous, non-clerical, schools of poetry and law (the so-called bardic schools of the centuries after c.1300), as associated with ‘learned families’ such as the O’Davorens and the O’Duigenans. But that is a later period, and while Johnston is aware of the analogy (p. 154), she does not pursue it. In specific terms, one would have liked to see a discussion of the encounter between Colm Cille and the poet Crónán (*Vita Columbae* I 42), and more generally, the subject would have benefited from a discussion of Paul Grosjean’s 1955 article ‘Sur quelques exégètes irlandais du VII^e siècle’.⁸ She might also have taken account of Franz Brunhölzl’s 1988 contribution,⁹ and of the remarkable career of Marcus/Móengal, a bishop’s son, ‘very learned in sacred as well as profane knowledge’, who was made head of the monastic school at St Gallen, and among whose pupils was Notker (inventor of neumed music notation).¹⁰ Is he the Maonghal ailithir who is mentioned in A.F.M. s.a. 844?

Johnston identifies three possible methodologies that might help us to understand how literacy functioned in the secondary-oral culture that she sees as being so crucial in the early Irish world: (1) the identification of individual members of the literary classes ‘in order to appreciate more fully the social constraints within which they operated’; (2) the study of what she describes as ‘professional learned groupings concerned with the tools, dissemination and products of literacy’ (the most influential of which comprised both churchmen and filid); (3) discussion of Irish literacy among the non-literate, and particularly the secular aristocracy (p. 161). From this perspective, her approach may be said to have succeeded admirably, and her discussion represents a marked advance on what has come before. If it still leaves lots of room for discussion and debate, that is so much more to the credit of the book, which will whet the appetite of scholars to revisit the topics that she has so ably discussed.

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⁸ Paul Grosjean, ‘Sur quelques exégètes irlandais du VII^e siècle’, *Sacris Erudiri*, 7 (1955), pp 67–98.

⁹ Franz Brunhölzl, ‘Die Gesänge des fili’ in Sigrid Krämer and Michael Bernhard (eds), *Scire litteras. Forschungen zum mittelalterlichen Geistesleben*, (Munich 1988) pp 87–94

¹⁰ See Ludwig Bieler, *Ireland: harbinger of the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1963), pp 93–4.