

and localities. It is unlikely that such future research will offer fundamental challenges to the ideas contained in *Plantagenet Ireland*.

doi:10.1017/ihs.2022.27

BRENDAN SMITH
Department of History, University of Bristol
Brendan.Smith@bristol.ac.uk

GAELIC ULSTER IN THE MIDDLE AGES: HISTORY, CULTURE AND SOCIETY. By Katharine Simms. Pp 568. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2020. €65.

This is a superb study of medieval Gaelic Ulster by the foremost living authority on the subject. The author, who has retired in recent years from Trinity College Dublin, mentions that the work began with her B.A. dissertation in 1969 on ‘The O’Neills in the later middle ages’ and that this was followed by her Ph.D. thesis (T.C.D., 1976) on ‘Gaelic lordships in Ulster in the later Middle Ages’. While the book under review may be seen as a development of the latter, it represents and incorporates the fruits of several decades of further work in the field, which has resulted in a number of books and dozens of high-quality articles. More than fifty titles are listed in the bibliography (the first appearing in 1974 — in *Irish Historical Studies* — and the last described as ‘forthcoming’).

The book distils material from an astonishingly wide range of sources. The aforementioned bibliography, running to more than forty pages, lists over a thousand separate items. This reflects just how widely and deeply the author has ranged through the body of relevant scholarship, citing works by almost five hundred authors — about three-quarters of whom have been active during her lifetime (quite a large cohort are, happily, still alive and active). The contributions of those authors are cited and suitably acknowledged in more than two thousand meticulously detailed footnotes.

It will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the work of Katharine Simms that the book is wonderfully readable, as well as being mercifully free from any kind of petty point-scoring. The work is laid out with admirable logic and clarity, being divided into two sections of almost equal length. The first (pp 21–229), entitled ‘Political history’, has a brief ‘Introduction’, followed by six chapters, while the second (pp 233–494), entitled ‘Culture and society’, has seven chapters, followed by a brief fourteenth chapter, the ‘Epilogue’. All but that final chapter are subdivided, with from two to eight sub-headed segments per chapter. Each chapter may be read as an essay in its own right, but all fit neatly together to give the work an admirable overall coherence.

The introduction explains the reason why a ‘focus on Ulster’ is called for and then discusses aspects of the supposedly archaic nature of early Gaelic society, including the topics of kingship, law and the learned classes. Chapter 1 treats of early Ulster, from the Iron Age down to the high middle ages, covering the best part of a millennium in just over thirty pages, while chapter 2 covers the eleventh and twelfth centuries in about fourteen pages. This latter chapter’s title refers to ‘Ulster’s growing isolation’, echoing a statement (perhaps debatable) that ‘Ulster was becoming a backwater’ (p. 70) and a suggestion that ‘The expulsion of nascent Viking settlements in Ulster ... in the late ninth century may have been [a] factor contributing to Ulster’s growing isolation’ (p. 82). The author continues:

The northern location of the MacLaughlin homeland [in Inishowen] ... served to distance Ulster under this dynasty’s rule from the mainstream of Irish politics. Geographical considerations made it virtually impossible for them to exercise any meaningful control over Munster.

Chapters 3 to 6 treat, respectively, of each of the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries. In section 2, the seven chapters (7 to 13 inclusive) cover, respectively, the following topics: ‘Kings and kingship’, the church; poets; other ‘men of art/learning’; warriors and warfare; court ladies and the place of women; and, finally, the life of the people (namely, those outside the upper echelons of society).

Having noted what is often deemed to be ‘the province’s distinct character’ — a view that would appear to ignore the distinctiveness of each of the other provinces — the author makes the following acute observation:

[F]rom earliest recorded history into the high Middle Ages, Ulster’s political structure, church hierarchy and mythical literature actually served to integrate it closely with the rest of Ireland, through Uí Néill claims to high-kingship of Tara, through the primacy that the church of Armagh asserted over all Ireland, and through the nationwide adoption of the Ulster cycle as Ireland’s foremost literary treasure (p. 33).

This is but one of several examples — some touched on below — of the impossibility of dealing with Ulster in isolation from the rest of Ireland. Dr Simms has numerous interesting comments on the period from the so-called ‘Anglo-Norman conquest’ of the later twelfth century down to the early decades of the seventeenth. Within the confines of such a brief review as this, it is quite impossible to do more than touch briefly on a small number of aspects of this period of approximately four and a half centuries.

Probably the main feature of this period was the perennial conflict between the English colony settled unevenly throughout the island (almost non-existent in western Ulster but fairly numerous in parts of the east) and the indigenous population to whose lands the colonists laid claim. All too often, historians of the period have tended to rely heavily on documents from the English side — whether derived from the seat of colonial power in London or from so-called ‘Old English’ families in Ireland. In the present work, however, the author makes extensive and intelligent use of a wide range of native Irish texts — including law tracts, saints’ lives, annals, genealogical texts and bardic poetry. These enable us to appreciate what the Irish who were at the receiving end of colonial incursions had to endure, or, in some cases, gain an appreciation of the mindset of those who thought it best to come to an accommodation with the conquerors. On the other hand, the aforementioned English documents allow us to read the observations of those who were intent on subduing and ‘pacifying’ a country they never really got to understand. One thing the book makes clear is that the supposed Gaelicisation of many of the ‘Old English’ families would appear to have been greatly exaggerated. While there was indeed extensive intermarriage between the two peoples, the idea of the colonists reputedly becoming *Hiberniores ipsis Hibernis* was obviously a rather late canard — apparently dating from the later eighteenth century. Only towards the end of the traumatic seventeenth century — after the Cromwellian era and the War of the Two Kings — did barriers between the two (largely Catholic) communities break down.

In chapter 3 we are told (p. 101) how, in the early thirteenth century, Walter de Burgh, lord of Connacht, was granted the earldom of Ulster, whereupon he ‘immediately formed an alliance with his principal Irish vassal-chief, Áed Buide O’Neill’. This reflected a change of policy on the part of the English crown to ensure peace in its Irish colony ‘at the cheapest possible price’, whereupon reliance was shifted on to ‘the major frontier barons’; these, in turn, would rely ‘on “trustworthy” Irish chieftains as instruments of local government’. The latter part of this chapter treats of the internal power-struggles in Tír Conaill and Tír Eógain — mainly involving, respectively, the families of O’Donnell and O’Neill — and those families’ relationship with the de Burgh earls of Ulster. It also notes (p. 106) the arrival on the scene of the Hebridean mercenary troops, the *gallóglaig* (or galloglasses). This would facilitate ‘a levelling of the balance of power which was to bring dramatic changes in the next century’ (p. 109).

Chapter 4 tells of the beginning of what is termed the ‘Gaelic Recovery’ (or ‘Resurgence’) and includes a synopsis of the ‘Bruce Invasion’, 1315–18, which culminated in the death of

the recently crowned king of Ireland, Edward Bruce, in the battle of Faughart, October 1318. The fiasco of the Bruce campaign was exacerbated by its coinciding with ‘the north European famine, brought about by constant rain’. In relation to this Katharine Simms makes an interesting observation (p. 111):

The rain itself was a public relations disaster, since the learned classes of Gaelic Ireland habitually associated sun, warmth and good harvests with Heaven’s judgement in favour of a just and legitimate king, and declared the disastrous weather and resulting famine to be a supernatural condemnation of Edward Bruce’s tyrannical usurpation.

A particularly significant offshoot of the Bruce campaign was the ‘Remonstrance of the Irish Princes’ which Domnall O’Neill, *rex Ultoniae*, sent to Pope John XXII at Avignon in 1317. Its ‘proud summary of Ireland’s long history as an independent nation is’, according to our author (p. 111), ‘reminiscent of the later Scottish “Declaration of Arbroath”’. As a foremost authority on Bardic poetry — also known as classical Irish poetry — Dr Simms, unsurprisingly, draws on this substantial body of material; for example, a poem addressed to the east Galway chieftain Tadc O’Kelly, some time before the latter’s death in the battle of Athenry in 1316. (She makes the interesting suggestion in relation to this poem that it is ‘probably a youthful work of Seán Mór Ó Dubagáin’, a celebrated poet who died almost six decades later than the poem: in 1372.) Also impressive are the author’s use of the mid-fourteenth-century text *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh* and of a text that has generated some controversy, the so-called ‘O’Neill-MacCarthy letter of 1317’ (in Latin).

For anyone not too familiar with political developments in late medieval Ulster, it must be conceded that the minutiae of the period — especially details of internecine squabbles between various branches of families such as the O’Neills and O’Donnells, or their relationships with the Butler earls of Ormond or FitzGerald earls of Kildare — may sometimes be quite difficult to follow. The author does her best to provide a clear and coherent narrative, but the reader should be warned that some passages may require close reading or even rereading.

The seven chapters in section 2 contain a wealth of information on many interesting aspects of life in early Ireland. These include kings and kingship, the church in medieval Ulster — particularly in the pre-Reformation period — the Gaelic poets and other men of learning (historians, judges, physicians, musicians and artisans or craftsmen), warriors and warfare — in prehistoric and early-to-late medieval Ireland — the place of women in Brehon and canon law, the role of queens, of court ladies, and of women in general; and, in the penultimate chapter, the life of the people, treating of popular assemblies, farming, houses, clothing and food, patterns of settlement and everyday living conditions.

The body of material just outlined is deftly handled, with many valuable insights. But, in as brief a review as this it is impossible to do justice to such a detailed and thoughtful work, the fruit of a lifetime’s careful research, analysis and consideration. It is a book that merits careful reading and rereading — but doing so is not a chore: the invariably felicitous style makes it a pleasure to read. There are also various aspects of the book’s design that are worthy of commendation: in particular, the series of well-designed genealogical tables, several useful maps and a number of striking photographs and other illustrations that are spread throughout the volume, together with sixteen full-colour plates.

As mentioned already, the author sometimes has, inevitably, to stray outside the boundaries of Ulster — be it the historic ‘fifth’ or the much-reduced ‘kingdom of Ulaid’, east of the Bann — when treating of the relationship of Ulster chieftains with, say, the earls of Ormond and Kildare, or, at an earlier period, of the role of the high-kings of Tara, or of various churches, monasteries and dioceses outside of Ulster. In addition, we have seen how the term ‘medieval’ in the book’s title has been interpreted rather flexibly — with, for example, chapters 1, 7–12 having references to pre-Christian times and the Iron Age, among other periods, while on p. 382 there is a citation of a poem dating from *circa* 1680.

The publishers, Four Courts Press, deserve our warm congratulations on the truly magnificent design of the volume. In terms of print, layout and especially binding, it is indeed a most

elegant production. In the entire work, apart from a couple of (very minor) misprints, I have noticed only two errors of fact — both of which relate to place-names: p. 269, Castledermot, said to be situated in County Carlow, is actually in (nearby) County Kildare; and p. 409, Lough Ramor, said to be in County Meath, is in (nearby) County Cavan.

There is, however, one shortcoming that deserves mention. Despite running to ten pages, the index is quite inadequate for a book of this calibre. To take just three omissions — from many that could be cited — a search for ‘Bruce’ will prove fruitless, but at least one may expect to find it at the beginning of chapter 4 (albeit with no indication that ‘Bruce invasion’ occurs on p. 125); likewise with the ‘Remonstrance of the Irish Princes’, referred to on pp 111–12; likewise, too, with the notorious Lord Lieutenant Tiptoft, earl of Worcester (mentioned on pp 190–93). A rather less significant irritant is the occurrence of three extensive quotations from the *State Papers* — given on pp 217–18 — surely a rendering in modern orthography, rather than that of the time of Henry VIII, would be more user-friendly?.

doi:10.1017/ihs.2022.28

NOLLAIG Ó MURAÍLE
University of Galway
 nollaig.omuraille@nuigalway.ie

THE FIRST IRISH CITIES. AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY TRANSFORMATION. By David Dickson.
 Pp xiv, 336. London/New Haven: Yale University Press. 2021. £25.00.

The first Irish cities vividly delineates the eighteenth century as a unique era in Irish urban history. It begins with a deeply fortified urban landscape, built to withstand the cruelties of siege warfare, in which political and economic instability were decidedly unpropitious for urban growth. It ends in the 1820s, when new tariff arrangements proved the death knell for much of Irish manufacturing and sent urban economies spiralling into decline. The period between was one of demographic growth and physical expansion with a thriving urban culture in which the ideals of the enlightenment were widely shared. Yet, this is a phenomenon that the emphasis upon Ireland’s rural past in the emergence of the modern Irish nation, a narrative in which towns and cities are often seen as loci of British imperial power, has often overshadowed. It is Dickson’s achievement to bring these back into focus.

In the last forty years or so, the historiography of eighteenth-century urban England has evolved from a focus upon London to acknowledgement of the vitality and variety of provincial English towns. A similar process may be seen in Scotland, where the long shadow cast by Edinburgh is beginning to recede as attention turns towards provincial studies, most notably in the recent volume by Bob Harris and Charles McKean (*The Scottish town in the age of the Enlightenment*). Dickson’s volume, based upon case studies of what were then the ten largest cities and following upon the heels of his magisterial study of Dublin, now means that the long-standing Anglo-centricity of much of our eighteenth-century urban historical scholarship can be replaced by an approach that acknowledges the commonalities, connections and interdependency that existed between urban communities across Britain and Ireland, while also highlighting the disparities and contrasts engendered by the contrasting economic, political and religious contexts. It is salutary for British readers to be reminded, therefore, not only of the size, wealth and influence of Dublin — larger than any of the other provincial cities of England — but that cities such as Cork, Limerick, Galway and Belfast would have ranked alongside the larger provincial cities of England for much of the eighteenth century.

With the onset of peace, after the turmoil of the 1690s, and greater economic stability, Irish towns and cities started to grow in population, expanding beyond their city walls and repurposing their fortifications, and Dickson draws on the full potential of the work of the Irish Historic Towns Atlas in documenting these changes. Demographic data for most cities, however, is not abundant — significantly the table of population estimates includes only two