

Review and short notices

ARCHAEOLOGY AND CELTIC MYTH. By John Waddell. Pp xv, 232, illus. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2014. €45 hardback; €22.45 paperback.

This book derives from the 2014 Rhind Lectures delivered to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland by John Waddell, emeritus professor of Archaeology in N.U.I. Galway, and ‘its central premise is that elements of pre-Christian Celtic myth preserved in medieval Irish literature shed light on older traditions, not just in Ireland but elsewhere in Europe as well’ (p. xi); in particular, aspects of medieval Irish texts are used to interpret the landscapes of Newgrange and the Boyne Valley, Rathcroghan, Navan Fort and Tara (p. xii). The author states that his aim to reconcile prehistoric archaeology and medieval myth ‘might justifiably be seen as a foolhardy if not a futile exercise’ (p. 1), and unfortunately it is difficult to disagree with this assessment.

Throughout this book, Waddell engages in mythological and nativist readings of the texts he uses to interpret the archaeological evidence, and while he often acknowledges that alternative interpretations exist, he never engages with them, resulting in a skewed presentation of the material. Indeed, a reader who is not a literary scholar or historian familiar with medieval Ireland would be forgiven for believing that T. F. O’Rahilly’s solar mythology ideas (from the 1940s) hold a strong position in studies of medieval Irish literature. To treat medieval Irish texts as repositories of pre-Christian belief without adequately explaining why this position should be justifiable is a fatal flaw in the author’s approach. Medieval scribes – when they are considered – come across as clumsy or failed censors, confusedly transmitting prehistoric lore (see, for example, the claim that Navan Fort was reimagined as a royal settlement in order ‘to obscure its association with pagan ceremonial’, p. 83). There is little or no consideration of scribes’ literary efforts, nor the possibility that they were capable of generating new myths that can be confused for older beliefs.

An example of the problems that such approaches can cause may be seen in Waddell’s tendency to deem female literary figures to be prehistoric goddesses, without adequately exploring why they should be considered so, and then to use these assumptions as the basis for further speculation. For example, we are casually told, with reference to the Iron-Age Brigantes of Britain, that ‘the tribal goddess was **Brigantī*, “the exalted one”, a name that corresponds to the Irish goddess (subsequently saint) Brigit, and their leaders may have dubbed themselves consort of the goddess’ (pp 113–14). The notion that a pagan goddess named Brigit was transformed into a Christian saint is far from universally accepted in medieval Irish studies, while another female figure that receives sustained discussion (and is subject to similar treatment) is Medb of the Ulster Cycle; anyone who has read Doris Edel’s work on Medb (which is not referenced in this book) would have serious reservations about labelling Medb as a goddess. A third female figure (or rather set of four figures who share the same name) is Macha, who is associated with Emain Macha (Navan Fort, County Armagh). Waddell (following on from scholars like Georges Dumézil) suggests that three of these are goddesses, and Gregory Toner’s important discussion – which all but demolishes the notion that three of the four Machas are goddesses – is characteristically acknowledged and simultaneously ignored (p. 88). Interestingly, the one Macha whose divinity is left standing in Toner’s analysis (Macha, daughter of

Ernmas) is only mentioned in passing by Waddell (p. 85), while he focuses on two of the others in conjunction with his discussion of Navan Fort.

In addition, on occasion Waddell appears somewhat to misrepresent the texts he uses, for example his judicious quoting from the text *Baile in Scáil* excises its Christian context, by implying that the character Lug identifies himself as a god: ‘The man declares he is no mere spectral apparition but the god Lug: “My name is Lug, son of Ethliu, son of Tigernmas.”’ (p. 112). However, in *Baile in Scáil* the figure in question clearly does not claim divinity and disavows any otherworldly nature, claiming rather to be a (deceased) member of the human race. To quote Máire Herbert’s translation, which Waddell uses: ‘I am not a phantom, nor an Otherworldly apparition. I have been revealed to you as one who has come back from the dead, and I am of the race of Adam. My name is Lug, son of Ethliu, son of Tigernmas.’ Notwithstanding that an argument can be made that this Lug is a euhemerised deity, it is nonetheless surely misleading to present this material as if it possesses no Christian context.

In conclusion, although John Waddell is one of the foremost archaeologists of prehistoric Ireland – and in light of his enormous contribution to the study of Ireland’s prehistory – it is regrettable to say that this is not a book that I can recommend.

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COIRE SOIS: THE CAULDRON OF KNOWLEDGE. A COMPANION TO EARLY IRISH SAGA. By Tomás Ó Cathasaigh; edited by Matthieu Boyd. Pp xxx, 618. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. 2014. Paperback \$72.

CLASSICAL LITERATURE AND LEARNING IN MEDIEVAL IRISH NARRATIVE. Edited by Ralph O’Connor. Pp viii, 244. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer. 2014. £60 (Studies in Celtic History, 34).

The first volume is a collection of essays by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh (Henry L. Shattuck professor of Irish Studies in the department of Celtic Languages and Literatures at Harvard University), consisting mainly of studies previously published in a variety of outlets over the last forty years. Professor Ó Cathasaigh is one of the most eminent figures in medieval Irish studies to have devoted his attention to the study of medieval Irish literature *as literature*, and his published work has appeared almost entirely in essay form (with the exception of his 1977 book *The heroic biography of Cormac mac Airt*). As with any collection of essays, this volume has the merit of assembling together in one place some publications otherwise scattered among difficult-to-obtain journals and volumes, such as the moribund Japanese journal *Studia Celtica Japonica* and the limited-edition festschrift *Folia Gadelica*; consequently *Coire Sois* will be of particular benefit for the North American audience at which it seems to be aimed primarily (p. xix). In this brief review three features of *Coire Sois* have been considered worth highlighting.

Firstly, there are no new contributions in this volume, with the exception of a translation into English (by the author) of an essay entitled ‘*Tóralocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*’ (‘The pursuit of Diarmaid and Gráinne’), originally published in *Léachtaí Cholm Cille* 25 (1995), nor have the individual articles been substantially revised. Editorial intervention is minimal, confined mainly to correcting misprints and standardising names and referencing systems across the essays, while more invasive corrections ‘have been made only with the author’s knowledge and approval’ (p. xix).

Secondly, the title is somewhat misleading, for while the sum of Ó Cathasaigh’s contributions to the study of medieval Irish literature could indeed be termed a ‘cauldron of