Navigatio, one can consider three points. First, 'ostensibly, Brendan's interpretation of the biblical passage "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:29)' (p. 204), was a powerful incentive to depart his own lands. Secondly, his voyage was also an exploration of 'the periphery of the human self, an enigmatic expanse symbolised by the Atlantic Ocean' (p. 204). This required the hero to return from his adventure to become a mentor to others with his new enlightened message. Thirdly, Brendan needed to conform to social expectations since the quest had to display all the expectations of its audience. He had to 'accomplish a sort of thaumaturgy: to denature the story's pagan essence' (p. 205). Thus, from the medieval perspective, the story's verisimilitude did not depend on how well it described a material reality, but its description of the expected mental landscape. 'Free from the demands of plausibility', medieval Christian *Immrama* accounts like Brendan's *Navigatio* had the power to transform the stories and characters of Irish mythology to help understand basic Christian beliefs: '*Realistic* portrayals would only serve to conceal what *really* counts for the writer and reader behind a complicating, vast volume of extraneous information' (p. 206). García-Osuna has concluded that in contrast to the continental Christian doctrine of Augustine, where faith seeks understanding, for the medieval Irish Christian the formula would have been altered to 'men in boats seeking understanding' (p. 228).

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Using concepts in medieval history: perspectives on Britain and Ireland, 1100–1500. Edited by Jackson W. Armstrong, Peter Crooks & Andrea Ruddick. Pp 201. Cham: Springer. 2022. £22.99.

A characteristic aversion to pretentiousness, rather than intellectual inadequacy, explains the reluctance of medieval historians to resort with much frequency to the word 'concept' in their writings. Whether we acknowledge the fact or not, of course, we employ concepts all the time in our work, and this volume is a welcome prompt to think more deeply about how we go about doing this. The word 'Using' in the title is reassuring and important: 'These essays', the introduction (pp 13–14) states, 'are not an exercise in "conceptual history" … The chapters provide a set of working examples of how particular concepts can be fruitfully put to work by medieval historians … We would claim that conceptual work by historians must … remain firmly grounded in real examples if it is to be in any sense meaningful.' In other words, 'the defeat of narrative by vision', bemoaned by Edward Said forty-five years ago as he scrutinised the ways in which observation had yielded so often to preconceived ideas (*Orientalism*, p. 239), is here consciously and profitably avoided.

The avoidance of arcane terminology is important in encouraging medieval historians to engage with concepts, and it must be said that the editors and contributors to this volume do not always succeed in this regard. The use of the inexplicably fashionable but vacuous word 'valence' (pp 6, 160) is a minor lapse; more off-putting is the appearance of *etics* and *emics* (pp 8, 141). Andrea Ruddick is right when she says (p. 113) 'Public engagement also needs to be borne in mind here; it is possible to produce such specialised vocabulary that it becomes unintelligible to anyone outside our immediate field of expertise.' However, she somewhat undermines her case by referring, without apparent irony, to 'an onomasiological as opposed to a semasiological approach' to her topic elsewhere in her contribution (p. 111, n. 17).

There is also a deeper and unexplored tension in the volume between the ideas of 'concept' and 'theory'. Elizabeth Brown is careful to distinguish between the two and has little time for those 'devoted to theories, principles and simplicity' (p. 48, and n. 126). Peter Crooks, on the other hand, treats the words as synonyms, arguing that 'the very idea that we can eschew abstractions and understand past societies solely on their own terms seems

likely to encourage an unfortunate state of theoretical or conceptual innocence' (p. 60). (I must declare an interest: Dr Crooks, in reviewing a volume of essays I edited, described its 'historiographical mode' as 'one of traditional empiricism and theoretical innocence.' ['Review: Medieval Ireland and the Wider World' in *Studia Hibernica*, xxxv (2008–09), pp 167–86, quotation at p. 182.]) In a fine essay on the topic of 'crisis', Carl Watkins discusses how Marxist historians approached this concept through the prism of theory. The result, he argues, was that 'the commitment to the existence of a crisis was a stimulus to finding one, disparate examples being assimilated to the central explanation' (p. 80). Medieval historians should be theoretically aware and conceptually aware but will benefit by being prepared to distinguish between the two.

This is a volume of great richness and imaginative power. It deserves to be read carefully by anyone interested in the history of the middle ages in Britain and Ireland (and, indeed, beyond). To quote John Watts, who provides a review of the volume in its final essay, the contributors were asked to 'consider what might be learned from scrutinising key critical concepts in dialogue with the medieval concepts to which they most obviously relate. The experiment works.' Indeed, it does. There are no weak essays in the volume, which addresses concepts as remote from each other as 'Magic' (Sophie Page) and 'Frontiers' (Jackson W. Armstrong). From the medieval Irish perspective, Peter Crooks's contribution on 'Colony' is particularly important. By peeling back the term to its classical etymon, and then considering how the word was subsequently deployed in both medieval and more recent writings, he significantly advances our understanding of what remains a key concept in our historiography. 'By listening to our sources', he concludes, we can move beyond asking questions such as 'What is a colony?', to asking how colonies 'were imagined in the Middle Ages' (p. 71). Medieval historians, Watts remarks (p. 195), 'suffer from a particular kind of cultural cringe. We worry about our influence.' Publication of this excellent volume should encourage us to worry less.

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Irish women in religious orders, 1530–1700: suppression, migration and reintegration. By Bronagh Ann McShane. Pp 301. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press. 2022. £75.

Irish women in religious orders is a much welcomed addition to the growing corpus of studies concerning the history of female religious. In a largely neglected area of historical inquiry, McShane explores the history of Irish women religious who endeavoured to negotiate a space for survival during a period of sustained suppression of Catholicism in Ireland. The publication charts the lives of Irish female religious on the island of Ireland and across Europe from the Henrician suppression of the 1530s through to the Cromwellian campaigns of the mid-seventeenth century, and in so doing highlights the 'remarkable resilience' of these women during the early modern period (p. 248).

The women surveyed as part of this study were decidedly privileged, being primarily of 'Old English' or 'Anglo-Norman' descent. Where possible, lineage and familial kinships are thoroughly mapped and clearly suggestive of the notable social standing of these women and their extended family networks. The importance of parentage and strong political and religious affiliations plays a significant role in how these women experienced and responded to the challenges of the time. Some women, for example Mary Cusack (abbess of the Augustinian priory in Lismullen and sister of Sir Thomas Cusask, lord chancellor) and Elicia Butler (former superior of the abbey at Kilculliheen and sister to the earl of Ormond), received favourable pensions, following the dissolutions of their convents, due to their 'elite family background(s)' and the 'politically influential' positions held by their respective brothers (pp 42–3, 52). The elite family backgrounds of these women not only afforded them some financial security but also protection. Post-dissolution, many women continued their religious devotion, 'albeit in less formalised, structured, and visible