

The second section of this fascinating book deals with Gaelic society in Ulster; chapters cover kingship, the church, the poetic and learned classes, warriors, women and the life of ordinary people. There is much to be learned from these chapters that are rich in detail and replete with Simms's penetrating insights. In ways, the bardic world, according to Simms, spanned the entire island, as both trainee and established poets alike were expected to travel to other schools to gain greater expertise. That Ulster remained unconquered, however, facilitated the greater proliferation of the Ulster bardic and learned classes particularly in the sixteenth century. In turn, this allowed for the creation of the significant archival record they left behind; some of these families became central to the Irish 'diaspora' in Europe after the Flight of the Earls from Ulster (1607). Throughout this section, it becomes clear that Gaelic Ulster was connected to England and Scotland, and the Continent. It also shows, however, that Ulster adapted to the emerging early modern world on its own terms in a way that suited its economy, society and topography. Simms's lament that the mantle was shortsightedly outlawed by sixteenth-century English colonists reminds us that Gaelic Ulster understood the land and how to live off it. This large shaggy cloak, after all, kept people both warm and dry – an important item of clothing in a wet climate. It is no surprise, therefore, that the mantle captured the imaginations of contemporary Europeans.

Book reviews are notoriously brief, in that if they are not brief, then, usually, they are notorious; consequently, it is difficult to give the book's breadth and depth due justice. *Gaelic Ulster in the Middle Ages* offers a comprehensive survey of Ulster's politics and society across all social strata. It highlights the rich evidence available in Irish-language sources and illustrates the value of research that integrates perspectives from both within Gaelic Ulster and from outside it. Undoubtedly, it will be the starting point for future generations of researchers, be they professional or amateur historians or casual readers. Simms's attention to detail and nuanced analysis helps us to understand Ulster's uniqueness in the medieval period and its centrality to the story of the wider Irish past. Simms subjects the province to an unrivalled and unparalleled treatment that greatly enhances our understanding of Gaelic Ulster's culture, politics and society, while encouraging readers to view the province's history within its own parameters.

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Matthew Stout, *Early Medieval Ireland, 431–1169* (Dublin: Wordwell, 2017, xiv, 330 pp., €35 hardback)

The story of early medieval Ireland is a fascinating one, preserved in part in a uniquely rich array of primary source material – archaeological, architectural, documentary, topographical and more. Indeed, the author of the book under review claims that 'Ireland has the oldest, richest, most diverse and extensive treasury of vernacular writing in medieval Europe' (p. 115). In addition to the remarkable annals, genealogies, martyrologies, law texts and literature, the display cabinets and storage vaults of the island's museums are

packed with thousand-year-old material culture rivalled, well, nowhere. Combine with this the tens of thousands of ringforts, hundreds of crannogs and dozens of round towers and high crosses, not to mention the immense corpus of Celtic-Tiger-era archaeology excavated across the country in the decade spanning the new millennium, and you have a veritable pandora's box of evidence from which to piece together the story of Ireland and its people between the arrival of two history-defining boats from western Britain – one in the fifth century carrying a Romano-British Christian slave boy and the other almost seven-and-a-half centuries later with the second earl of Pembroke on board.

With such an embarrassment of information available, the uninitiated could be forgiven for assuming that writing a history of early medieval Ireland would be a walk in the park. In truth, it is even more challenging than it might be with far *fewer* sources, given that the diverse strands of evidence often do not neatly dovetail with one another. Far from simplifying the story of early medieval Ireland, the array of evidence reveals the complexity of society – and, perhaps ironically, makes understanding it (and even more so, explaining it) all the more difficult.

And so, Matthew Stout's undertaking is a brave one, especially considering the notorious propensity of scholars of early medieval Ireland to take aim at any head appearing above the parapet. For the past quarter of a century, Dáibhí Ó Cróinín's *Early Medieval Ireland* has endured as one of the standard texts on the subject. Amongst those who greeted its publication in 1995 with some scepticism was Stout himself (see his review in *History Ireland*, 4.3 (1996)). In his new book, the latter has clearly endeavoured to address some of the shortcomings and oversights he flagged in Ó Cróinín's volume – an exploration of land, settlement and economy, discussion of the Golden Age of Irish art, engagement with material culture and historical geography, and interdisciplinarity generally. One gets the impression that Stout's new book has been in the works since before the ink dried on this 1996 review.

This interdisciplinary book is the result of a vast amount of painstaking work. It is richly illustrated, not only with stunningly beautiful photographs of artefacts, monuments and landscapes but with images of manuscripts (both text and illuminations), maps, tables, charts and graphs. Patrick's *Confessio* is reproduced in full, while excerpts from other important primary texts appear throughout. Shaded text boxes contain additional information that can be read – or skipped, or returned to – accordingly. There are lists and very useful guides to pronunciation of place names and personal names in Irish (but why is *Ua Ruairc* given as OOH-a ROO-arc on p. 212 and OOH-a RORK on p. 231?). Amongst the more amusing transliterations is Áth Goan (AAH GO-aun) on p. 279, and the author must similarly have known what he was doing when repeatedly referring to the 'Laigin king' (pp. 105, 203, 211, 232)! Oddly, there is no page 1.

Almost inevitably, with so much information being presented in so many ways, some pages have become a little busy with multiple colours, fonts, text boxes, lists and marginal addenda. Stout will be applauded and derided in equal measure for having the confidence to show tuatha and territorial boundaries on maps in places where most others have followed the customary (and unsatisfactory) practice of draping names over mountain ranges and plains or vaguely curving around peninsulas.

The book comprises thirteen chapters arranged in chronological order. They deal variously with agriculture, art, economy, law, politics, religion and warfare. Stout does well at placing early medieval Ireland within the context of developments in contemporary Europe. The style is unfussy and engaging, and the quotations are chosen judiciously. Some of the interesting discussions in the endnotes might have been more profitably incorporated in the main text. There are several surprising absences from the bibliography, and the author engages little with matters of debate, controversy and conjecture in the various fields through which he strides (other than in a few endnotes) – the development of towns in early medieval Ireland, the authenticity of *Laudabiliter*, the place of manufacture of the Book of Kells, the extent of the influence and authority of the Crúithní, the role of gender, the practice of early Irish law, the evolution of kingship, and the degree to which the Irish ‘saved civilisation’. As the book is aimed at third-level students, it would be appropriate at least to brief them on such matters of contention, revision and novel interpretation. There should perhaps be a spoiler alert for anyone who does not know what happens in *Táin bó Cuailnge*!

There are some errors in translation as well as inconsistencies in abbreviation, accents (fadas), capitalisation, hyphenation, italicisation, punctuation, spacing, tense and type-face. Spelling mistakes include the names of scholars Katharina Becker (p. 271), Robert Chapple (p. xii), Georgina Scally (p. 307) and Katharine Simms (pp 275, 277, 282, 283). John Scotus Eriugena (d. c.877) and John Duns Scotus (d. 1308) appear to have been conflated in chapter 7 (p. 152). Dún Cuair (p. 135) is surely Rathcore, near Enfield, Co. Meath, not Rathmore (p. 287 n 16). Muiredach of Monasterboice seems to have died once in 924 (p. 148) and again three years later (p. 149).

Stout's experience as a field archaeologist (as well as Wordwell's as a publisher of archaeological monographs) is evident throughout, and the book is especially strong on landscape, settlement and society. There may be as many as 50,000 ringforts in Ireland and most of them seem to be referenced at one point or another in the book. If one was in any doubt about Stout's penchant for archaeology, he lets the cat out of the bag on p. 168 when he exclaims that ‘organic material was preserved to an *exquisite* extent’! Drawing on his great range and depth of archaeological knowledge enables the author to paint a vivid picture of certain aspects of early medieval Ireland.

One of Stout's criticisms of Ó Cróinín's text was that ‘the huge scope of the book [400–1200] is clearly too vast to be covered’; it is not evident that pruning thirty-one years off each end of the eight centuries has made the task any more manageable for Stout, but he has certainly come close. Seven-hundred and thirty-eight years of early Irish history is an awful lot of abductions, assassinations, battles, blindings, hostage-takings, invasions and religious reform to get through! Even still, this book is a significant contribution to scholarship, a fine entry point for third-level students and general readers, a feast for the eyes, and generally a highly commendable achievement. It is also exceptionally good value.

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