*Irish Historical Studies*, xxxvi, no. 143 (May 2009)

# Reviews and short notices

WEXFORD: A TOWN AND ITS LANDSCAPE. By Billy Colfer. Pp 256, illus. Cork: Cork University Press. 2008. €49.

This is the third volume of Cork University Press's (CUP) series on Irish landscapes, which was launched in 1997, with its hugely popular *Atlas of the Irish rural landscape*. Billy Colfer has already contributed the second volume *The Hook Peninsula*. Historical studies of various aspects of the Irish landscape have become an important trend in recent years, reflecting an enduring interest in local studies and local history. But they probably also reflect a newly energised geographical approach to landscape and place, facilitated by CUP's innovative style of presentation and publication – in atlas-style page format with lavishly produced illustrations in maps, photographs, art reproductions and diagrams; the Irish landscape is nothing if not fundamentally a visual experience. Many of the images in this and other volumes are stunningly reproduced, beginning with a striking aerial view on the dust jacket of Wexford town, its hinterland and harbour.

Colfer's historical narrative of Wexford town is very much the perspective of the insider familiar with every nook and cranny of the place and its story; he also manages to inject a refreshingly 'heroic' dimension to the survival of the town and its community through some of its turbulent experiences. As the editors of the series repeat, the series is about focussing on the landscape as an expression of the relationship between nature and culture, and the challenges faced by the inherited landscape in the face of increasingly pervasive forces of change. Towns undoubtedly are the locations of most change. Colfer's study focuses on the artefacts of landscape, interpolated with individual lives and moments in the history of Wexford. But the principal attention is paid to the landscape as it evolved through different layers of time and experiences: this is manifested in place names and street names in the town's hinterland, and within its walls, as well as in material features, such as the town walls, its quays, fortified houses, bridges and other infrastructure.

In terms of urban history, Colfer presents a grand sweeping overview from early Christian beginnings, through Norse Waesfiord and the turmoil of the seventeenth century. His narrative inevitably lacks the detail that specialists in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, for example, will require. But he provides a seamless account of the full story, which will be popular with locals, with students looking for detailed case studies, and with historians and historical geographers interested in the methodologies of landscape history. The superabundant illustrations of all kinds bring to life a text that is tightly written and supported throughout with comprehensive notes: the chapter on the town walls has seventy-two footnotes, that on the trading port has eighty-four. One of the useful and innovative features of this series is the separate narrative accompanying each illustration, which provides supplementary details for the main text.

Wexford always had a significant port function, trading with Chester, the Bristol Channel ports and France in the late Middle Ages. In 1587 fifteen Wexford ships were carrying coal from Milford. In the later sixteenth century, timber from Shillelagh was floated down the Slaney to Wexford for export. In 1642 Eoghan Roe O'Neill was supplying ammunition and war matériel from Antwerp through Wexford, which was the principal port for Confederate supplies. Following Cromwell's explosive intervention in 1649, Wexford was a main port of embarkation for prisoners being transported to the West Indies. By 1788 it was the

sixth busiest port in Ireland, with forty-four ships. Cromwell and 1798 were two defining moments in the history of the town, when the vibrant Catholic community teetered on the verge of extinction. However, it survived through much of this upheaval, and one of the markers of the social landscape of Wexford in the past four centuries has been the enduring role of its Catholic population as fisherfolk, merchants and priests.

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IRELAND AND WALES IN THE MIDDLE AGES. Edited by Karen Jankulak and Jonathan M. Wooding. Pp 296. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2007. €55.

For some reason or other, Welsh history is not sexy. For thirteen years, this reviewer offered an undergraduate special subject on medieval Irish links with Scotland and Wales. Students seemed to like the Scottish parts of the course, but often failed to warm to Wales. For natives of this archipelago, the problem may have been as simple as the difficulty in getting their tongue around Welsh personal and place names. For non-natives, it may have been the lack of a recognition factor: one well recalls the surprise of a visiting student from the Far East who, never having heard of Wales, came prepared for a lecture on a certain sea mammal (in the plural) that was a delicacy at home.

But while the study of the Hiberno-Scottish relationship may be greeted with enthusiasm and its Welsh counterpart evoke only apathy in certain quarters, ironically this is despite an historical legacy that is in many respects every bit as rich and as vital as the former, at least until modern times. In order to overcome the anachronistic pressure to view the Ireland/Scotland nexus as more 'important' than any shared Ireland/Wales experience, the dearth of scholarship in the latter must be addressed, and for this reason the volume under review is to be welcomed.

The University of Wales at Lampeter has been home in recent years to a group of scholars punching well above their weight in the field of early medieval Celtic studies. Two of their number, Karen Jankulak and Jonathan Wooding, organised the Cymru ac Iwerddon conference in 2000, an important gathering on this neglected theme, the proceedings of which are here meticulously edited for publication. The focus of the organisers' own research is on the early Middle Ages, and perhaps for this reason, rather more emphasis is given to this at the expense of later medieval links between the two countries; paradoxically, therefore, the times and topics about which, for obvious reasons, the least is known and recoverable are those about which most is written in this volume. Readers of this journal should also note that there is much here that is not 'history' per se – voyage tales (a characteristically learned discussion by John Carey); distribution patterns of ogham-inscribed stones (Catherine Swift); conclusions to be drawn from the construction of early Christian churches on island sites off the Irish and Welsh coasts (Jonathan Wooding); comparative rules concerning medicine and medicine men in early Irish and Welsh law (Morfydd Owen); brooch types and their distribution (Susan Youngs); visual and verbal depictions of the Virgin Mary in late-medieval Ireland and Wales (Madeline Gray and Salvador Ryan) – but it is none the poorer for it.

The volume opens, appropriately, with a wide-ranging and absorbing overview of the subject by that gentlemanly doyen of Irish-Welsh studies, Proinsias Mac Cana, here posthumously published following his passing in 2004. Among other readily accessible essays is Karen Jankulak's robust challenge to the controversial reductionist technique championed by Pádraig Ó Riain (which involves attempting to demonstrate that many supposed early saints are no more than one of their better-known peers under an alias). In a very impressive contribution, Iwan Wmffre presents a corrective to oft-repeated claims that Welsh toponymy can attest to Irish colonisation of Wales in the fifth and sixth centuries.