Alan J. Fletcher, *Drama, Performance, and Polity in Pre-Cromwellian Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000). xv + 520 pages. IR£45.00 (hardback).

'In tracing the progress of society,' observed Joseph Cooper Walker in 1788, 'we discover the Drama amongst the first amusements of man. It is therefore very extraordinary that we cannot discover any vestiges of the Drama amongst the remains of the Irish Bards'. Walker's 'Historical Essay on the Irish Stage' stands at the beginning of Irish theatre history as a discipline, a distinction it shares with Robert Hitchcock's *History of the Irish Stage* (the first volume of which appeared that same year). From the beginning, Cooper and Hitchcock (who makes a similar observation) define what would become one of Irish theatre's central puzzles: why was there no theatre in pre-conquest Gaelic culture?

This was no petty issue. Walker was one of the leading antiquarians of the Celtic revival in the late eighteenth century. His essay on the theatre had been published in the *Transactions of the Royal Irish Academy*, putting it in the context of some of the period's most influential work on everything from early Irish dress to round towers. Walker's own *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards*, published in 1786, was one of the key texts in establishing the idea that a tradition stretching back to the remote Irish past could inform and nourish the present when it came to creating poetry, music, song and the visual arts — but not, unfortunately, theatre.

This meant that the theatre disrupted what continues to be one of the key assumptions about Irish culture: that Irish-language culture *precedes* English-language culture in Ireland. The fact that this was not apparently the case with theatre explains some of the Irish theatre's more contradictory features, particularly in the early years of the twentieth century when this underlying sense of precedence was operating so powerfully in other cultural forms. It helps to explain why, for instance, Douglas Hyde wrote *Dráma Breithe Críosta* in 1902, a mystery play that could almost have been written in 1402; or why Pádraic Pearse would claim in 1906 'there is something in our playwrightship of the naïveté of the Moralities and Mysteries'. Indeed, it even suggests why the term 'Irish Renaissance' caught on so quickly as the name of a whole movement in which theatre was particularly prominent; it is, in part, the name we give to the fantasy that the Irish theatre had been put under a spell some time prior to the sixteenth century, and was only waking up three hundred years later, picking up where it had left off, and putting things back in their proper order.

Until now, Irish theatre historians have not gone much further than Joseph Cooper Walker two hundred years ago in unravelling this puzzle. For the most part, they either accept it or ignore it — which is why Alan J. Fletcher's *Drama, Performance, and Polity in Pre-Cromwellian Ireland* is

such an important book, and why it deserves a readership beyond the specialists the title might attract. Fletcher offers not one, but two answers to the question which continues to shape the way in which we think about theatre — and, indeed, culture as a whole — on this island.

In his first chapter, temptingly titled 'Drama and the Performing Arts in Gaelic Ireland', Fletcher tries to make the case that pre-conquest Gaelic culture did indeed have theatre. The problem, he contends, is that we will only see Gaelic culture as lacking in theatre if we define theatre too narrowly, confusing it with the written text of the drama. He has a good point. Even when writing about twentieth-century theatre, Irish theatre historians, perhaps dazzled by the dramatic accomplishments of the past century, have tended to focus on the written text of the play, ignoring other, equally important elements, such as performance, design, actor-audience relationship, and so on. There is no good reason for doing so in relation to twentieth-century theatre, and even less so when writing about the fifteenth century.

Having thus cleared the ground for himself, in his opening chapter Fletcher embarks on a virtuoso sweep through ten centuries of Irish culture, beginning in the seventh century, and ending up at the end of the Classical Irish period, around the year 1650.

It is clear from the range of sources used in this chapter alone that in *Drama, Performance, and Polity in Pre-Cromwellian Ireland* we are dealing with a book that is the fruit of many long years of research. From the Yellow Book of Lecan, through city ordinances, scraps of early legal tracts, through to the full range of modern commentary on these traces of early Irish culture, Fletcher pulls together an astonishing array of primary and secondary material. Indeed, anyone daunted by the sheer bulk of this book should keep in mind that almost half of the volume's 520 pages are taken up by lengthy appendices, notes, bibliography and index.

In spite of this, it must be said that Fletcher does not fully convince his reader that early Gaelic culture actually did possess a form of theatre. The problem is his lack of a clear structural definition of theatrical performance. On the one hand, he is correct in saying that we must not think of theatre too narrowly; on the other hand, any basic definition of theatre must include an element of personification — that is, the difference between saying: 'There was a man named Oedipus' and 'I am Oedipus'. The former may be performance; but only the latter is theatre. Some of Samuel Beckett's late works — notably *Not I* and *Ohio Impromptu* — skate as close as possible to the outer edge of this distinction.

The absence of such a definition only detracts marginally from this otherwise superb chapter in which Fletcher opens up a rich, complex and evolving world of performers, ranging from the *druth ríg* ('king's jester'), to the *clessanaig* ('jugglers, tricksters, acrobats') to the *braigetori* (who entertained their patrons by displays of farting). Although apolo-

gizing for the lack of specific dates and times (which is a function of the material), he reveals a shifting and variegated culture of entertainers, whose art and social function changed as the society of which they were a part was subjected to increasing strains. In the end, it seems possible, on the basis of the evidence presented here, that some of these performers did use an element of personification in their acts; in the majority of cases, however, it was at best a marginal part of the performance, and does not seem to have been central to their craft.

This, then, is one answer to the puzzle of the lack of theatre in Gaelic culture: there was no theatre (or very little), but there were so many other forms of performance that it really did not matter.

The other answer, which Fletcher pursues through the book's next five chapters, is more complex. There was a medieval theatre in Ireland (as Walker and earlier historians acknowledge), but it was not in Irish: it was initially in Latin, and later in medieval English. From this point of view, the Irish theatre begins to look less anomalous, and more like other European cultures of the time.

Of course, this explanation only works if we accept English as a vernacular language of Ireland from a very early period (at least when we are dealing with urban Ireland), but given the range of material Fletcher has assembled here, this conclusion seems inescapable. From the *Visitatio Sepulcri*, which dates from the fourteenth century, (the text of which he helpfully includes as an appendix), through the Dublin Corpus Christi pageant, to Bishop Bale's plays in sixteenth-century Kilkenny, to the household pomps and revels of the early seventeenth century, there is a narrative of theatre history here which fits with what we know of other European cultures, but which has never before been brought together so thoroughly or so comprehensively in an Irish context. By the time the reader reaches what for many will be the unfamiliar world of early seventeenth-century Irish theatre, it is as if a hidden world has been unveiled for the first time. Even for those readers familiar with the territory, Fletcher's convincing intervention in the long-running debate over the date of Ireland's first theatre building (in Dublin's Werburgh Street) will equally come as something of a revelation. Once again, long hours in the archives have turned up a document that lays to rest decades of speculation based on anecdotage.

Drama, Performance, and Polity in Pre-Cromwellian Ireland is a milestone in Irish theatre history. Cork University Press (in conjunction with the University of Toronto Press) are to be congratulated for taking a chance on what may have seemed an unlikely topic. Given its scope, lucidity and judicious weighing of sources, Alan Fletcher's book will be the starting point for all future work in the area, in the way that the work of E.K. Chambers or Glynne Wickham was for an earlier generation of English theatre historians. Indeed, it is tempting to say that with its

publication, the study of early Irish theatre takes its biggest leap since the work of W.S. Clark in the nineteen fifties (and, indeed, Clark's work only really begins where this study concludes). Had Fletcher's book been around a hundred years ago, there might have been less need to create a medieval Irish theatre retrospectively.

CHRIS MORASH