REVIEW ARTICLE

Medieval Ireland and the Wider World

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I

‘British History has been much in the air of late; but it still seems strangely reluctant to come down to earth.’

How times—and academic fashions—do change. In the years since R. R. Davies made this pronouncement at Gregynog in 1986, the medieval strain of that polymorphous project, the ‘new British history’, has become something of an academic creed and, for publishing houses, big business. Now that we have reached the point when early modernists are beginning to ask whether the ‘British’ approach is old hat, it is well to recall that, as late as 1993, Conrad the first earl Russell was insisting that the archipelagic cap would not fit


3 Jane Ohlmeyer, ‘The “old” British histories?’, Historical Journal, 50 (2007), 499–512. Ohlmeyer’s contention, as her question mark indicates, is that there is life in the old paradigm yet.

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the medieval British Isles at all. ‘[T]here is no case’, he averred, ‘for a medieval British history, which would be as much an abstraction as European history, and a slightly less logical one’.

The work of the past decade and a half suggests that Russell was mistaken. For historians of medieval Ireland, it has been invigorating to discover that the Irish experience mattered, that what happened on the fringes of Latin Christendom was important to the story as a whole. This shift in attitude is evident in many of the volumes under review. Not all the authors are Irish specialists, nor do they all locate themselves self-consciously within the framework of the ‘new British history’; but each of their works expounds, reflects upon, or (in the case of primary texts) illustrates some aspect of the theme of medieval Ireland and the wider world. In an era obsessed with the quantification of academic output, it is not the number of publications on this subject that is impressive, but their quality—an encouraging sign that, despite considerable institutional and infrastructural pressures, medieval Irish history is thriving.

Among the more dynamic subsidiaries of ‘British History Inc.’ is the historiography of the ‘Irish Sea World’, which, after more than a decade of steady growth, now boasts an impressive portfolio of work. Ireland and Wales in the Middle Ages is the product of just one conference among many to have addressed itself to this theme since Seán Duffy began to open up the subject in the early 1990s. The volume is exceptional not only for its display of multi-

5 See Seán Duffy, ‘The British perspective’, in S. H. Rigby, A companion to Britain in the later Middle Ages (Oxford, 2003), esp. 167: ‘Once admitted, Cinderella has stubbornly refused to leave the ball, which has been immeasurably illuminated by her presence.’
6 The emphasis has been predominantly on the North Channel. Of recent books, see Benjamin Hudson, Viking pirates and Christian princes: dynasty, religion and empire in the North Atlantic (Oxford, 2005); idem, Irish Sea Studies, 900–1200 (Dublin, 2006); and Clare Downham, Viking kings of Britain and Ireland: the dynasty of Ívarr to A.D. 1014 (Edinburgh, 2007).
disciplinarity and the distinction with which the editorial work has been accomplished, but also for the magisterial ‘overview’ by the late Proinsias Mac Cana (†2004) with which it opens. Stepping back from the weft and warp of Hiberno-Welsh relations, Mac Cana regards a whole tapestry of social, cultural and political interactions across a millennium from Tacitus to the later Middle Ages. His five-fold categorization of the ‘continuing traffic between Ireland and Wales’ (p. 22)—which we might further compress to traders, fugitives, mercenaries, raiders and saints—sets up the remaining eleven contributions very well. These include commendable essays on political connections by Alex Woolf (‘The expulsion of the Irish from Dyfed’) and Colmán Etchingham (‘Viking-age Gwynedd and Ireland: political relations’), and on the cult of saints by Karen Jankulak. After c. 1100 the collection begins to fizzle out, leaving the impression that a more realistic title would have been Ireland and Wales in the early Middle Ages. Only two essays tackle the period after the invasion of Ireland in the late 1160s, and an opportunity was perhaps missed to engage with the substantial corpus of work that has already been undertaken on the later period, as well as to identify the corners that remain to be swept.\(^8\)

While the thrust of much recent work on the English invasion of Ireland has been to de-emphasise its significance as a hiatus in Ireland’s political development, research on the Irish Sea region as a whole has tended to affirm the importance of 1169 as a watershed. This is just one of many subjects addressed by R. Andrew McDonald in Manx kingship in its Irish Sea setting, 1187–1229: King Rögnvaldr and the Crovan dynasty.\(^9\) Despite being one of the larger islands in


\(^9\) On this subject, see also R. Andrew McDonald, ‘Man, Ireland, and England: the English conquest of Ireland and Dublin–Manx relations’, in Seán Duffy (ed.),
the archipelago, the Isle of Man has been relatively little studied from an ‘archipelagic history’ perspective. McDonald’s book is a conscious attempt to rectify this and, in the author’s words, to ‘reverse traditional perspectives so that the periphery becomes the centre and the centre becomes the periphery, thus placing the Isle of Man in the interesting position of a cultural crossroads in the middle of the Irish Sea, open to influences from all sides’ (p. 37). This is an exciting point of departure. Rögnvaldr son of Guðrøðr, king of Man (1187–1229), features prominently in the title and text, but this is emphatically not a traditional royal biography—an exercise that the sparse documentary and narrative sources would scarcely have allowed. Instead, McDonald attempts something far more challenging and absorbing: a thematic account of Manx kingship that touches on such widely dispersed topics as kin-strife, royal self-representation in charters, inauguration rituals, relations with the church, and the growth of ‘bureaucratic’ kingship. The author explores these themes by working outwards from the familiar (the Manx chronicle and a Gaelic praise poem addressed to Rögnvaldr [alias Raghnall] are among his staple sources), adding layer upon layer of contextualizing detail drawn from an eclectic range of primary sources. Moreover, like the ‘super-viking’ (p. 30) about whom he writes with verve, McDonald raids and trades with any number of national and supranational historiographies. The result is a success, and the two chapters on Man’s interactions with its neighbours make for particularly satisfying reading, although the label ‘foreign relations’ perhaps rather begs the question. A key interpretative idea is an old chestnut of Scottish historiography: the balance of new and old. Manx kings, we are told, were ‘Janus-like’ in their ability to straddle the ‘old’ Gaelic-Scandinavian world and the ‘new’ Frankish culture (pp 30, 67, 69, 221). Cultural exchange is undoubtedly one of the aspects of Rögnvaldr’s career that will continue to fascinate. But how appropriate are the (value-laden) terms ‘old’ and ‘new’? And to what extent does the metaphor of the two-faced Janus arise from the categories of the sources rather than the social reality of the time? That McDonald provokes these questions, among others, is a sure sign of the value of his work.

Medieval Dublin VIII (Dublin, 2008), 131–49.


De Courcy: Anglo-Normans in Ireland, England and France in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, by Steve Flanders, should serve as a useful complement to McDonald’s volume, since both authors are gnawing on some of the same bones. The most famous son of the de Courcy family, John (†1219?), the conqueror of Ulster, married Rögnvaldr’s sister, Affreca, and fled to Man after his expulsion from Ulster by Hugh (II) de Lacy in 1205. Flanders traces the de Courcy pedigree back to its origins in Normandy, and his particular concern is to distinguish the Norman branch of the family, whose caput was at Courcy-sur-Dives in Calvados, from the de Courcys of Stoke Courcy (Stogursey) in Somerset. On this and related topics, he has been industrious in the archives. It is regrettable, then, that one of the more conspicuous features of the volume is its limited apparatus, especially since this brand of forensic genealogical investigation demands close footnoting. The treatment of the secondary literature is also curious. Flanders betrays no anxiety of influence when he remarks that ‘John [de Courcy] was evidently well-informed of the history of the region … which comprised Ulster, Galloway, the Isles, Man, Cumbria and, perhaps, north Wales, all linked by that motorway of the medieval world: the sea’ (p. 19). This is the first of several opportunities to direct the reader’s attention to Seán Duffy’s landmark essay on the importance of de Courcy’s Cumbrian connections in the so-called ‘first Ulster plantation’. In the event, the reader must wait until the final chapter for the first citation of this work (p. 127). Should the author write further on his subject (and one earnestly hopes that he will do so), the addition of comprehensive references to all his authorities would be most welcome.

12 Flanders (unlike John de Courcy?) is more at home in the Anglo-French world than in the Celtic peripheries: the unfortunate Ruaidrí Mac Duinn Sléiske, king of Uílaid, who was expelled by John de Courcy in 1177, appears variously as ‘Mac Duinn Sléibe’ (p. 19), ‘Mac Duinn Schléibe’ (p. 137), ‘Mac Duinn Schlibe’ (pp 140–2), and ‘MacDunleavy’ (pp 162–3). The Gaelic and Anglicized forms of the name are entered separately in the index without a cross-reference (p. 199).

13 Seán Duffy, ‘The first Ulster plantation: John de Courcy and the men of Cumbria’, in T. B. Barry, Robin Frame and Katharine Simms (eds), Colony and frontier in medieval Ireland: essays in honour of James Lydon (London, 1995), 1-27. Note also the absence of a citation when the author states that ‘the myth of John de Courcy haling [sic] from the West Country of England can be discarded’ (p. 46). Likewise, the author’s discussion of the church (e.g., pp 154–6) might have included a reference to the important work on that subject by Marie Therese Flanagan: ‘John de Courcy, the first Ulster plantation and the Irish church men’, in Smith (ed.), Britain and Ireland, 154–78. Both works are, however, cited in the bibliography. James Lydon’s colourful sketch of de Courcy’s career is not: Lydon, ‘John de Courcy (c.1150–1219) and the medieval frontier’, in Ciaran Brady (ed.), Worsted in the game: lasers in Irish history (Dublin, 1989), 37–46.
Citation of authorities is not a problem in Paul MacCotter’s remarkable *Medieval Ireland: territorial, political and economic divisions*. If all recent publications were avowedly in the ‘British history’ or trans-regional mould, it would make for a monochrome historiography. Refeshingly, MacCotter’s book is a contribution to the discipline of *dinnseanchas*, a venerable tradition that explores Ireland’s topographical lore—though here too the author demonstrates a marked concern to place the Irish evidence in the wider context of insular and European developments (ch. 7). The volume takes as its subject the political geography of medieval Ireland, focussing on the spatial unit known in Gaelic sources as the *tricha cét* and, in post-invasion colonial Ireland, as the cantred. MacCotter’s command of the primary sources and onomastic evidence is nothing short of breathtaking. His technique (to borrow Maitland’s term) is ‘retgressive’; by working backwards, often from colonial record sources, he seeks to reconstruct the territorial divisions that constituted pre-invasion Ireland. At least half of the volume is comprised of a gazetteer of the cantreds, *tricha cēts* and local kingdoms of Ireland, as well as a colour ‘Atlas of the cantreds and *tricha cēts* of Ireland, c. AD 1200’. This alone would be some achievement, but the tightly-written analysis that occupies the first half of the volume also represents a major contribution to scholarship. MacCotter demonstrates convincingly that the cantred of post-invasion Ireland was the lineal descendant of the *tricha cét*, which in turn preserved the boundaries of Irish local kingdoms from the early historic period. As the author puts it, “the Anglo-Norman colonists inherited the topography of the Irish system of local administration, thus preserving—in amber, as it were—for centuries afterwards the boundaries of the *tricha cét* under the guise of cantreds and, in some cases, baronies” (p. 44).

MacCotter dedicates his volume to a host of eminences including John O’Donovan, William Reeves, Goddard Henry Orpen, Hubert T. Knox, Edmund Hogan, James Hogan, Paul Walsh and Liam Ó Buachalla. But, in his knowledge of arcane manuscript sources, he is perhaps most reminiscent of his mentor and erstwhile collaborator, Kenneth Nicholls. Indeed, MacCotter sometimes seems more Nicholls-like than Nicholls, not least in his facility with the flick-knife aside. While this book supersedes all previous examinations of the subject, the author might have been more generous to the work of

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scholars who have struggled with the issues before him, among them A. J. Otway-Ruthven and her pupil C. A. Empey. If MacCotter takes no prisoners, he may also have left a few hostages to fortune. He is sensitive to the fact that his analysis is unfashionably schematic (pp 45, 103), doubtless in anticipation of the *odium scholasticum* of carnivorous Celticists. And despite the trouble he takes over definitions, there are still some elements in his lexicon that may cause readers to stumble, among them ‘late *tuath*’, ‘feudal barony’, and the distinction between ‘administrative’ and ‘original cantreds’. Such cases of ambiguity are, however, unusual, and the reader who persists will usually find enlightenment. The author can rest assured that scholars from the early historic period to the early modern will find themselves reaching for this volume time and again to find out ‘what MacCotter has to say’.

II

We can approach the subject of ‘Medieval Ireland and the wider world’ from a different angle by taking another trend in medieval Irish studies, namely the production of critical editions and calendars of primary texts. ‘Sadly, the age of calendaring has largely passed’, Paul MacCotter remarks, ‘and it is to be regretted that so little of the not-inconsiderable quantity of calendared manuscripts which remain has been published’ (p. 27). Quite so. Since the incineration of the records in the treasury of the Public Record Office of Ireland in 1922, the attitude of successive Irish governments to the state’s archival heritage has not been enlightened. The latest, and as yet unfinished, chapter in this sorry story is the proposed merger, pending legislation, of the National Archives and Irish Manuscripts Commission into the National Library of Ireland. The loss of one national archive was a misfortune. To lose a second looks, to coin a phrase, like carelessness.


18 After an initial flurry, the public response has been muted, a sign (one hopes) of silent despair rather than apathy. Note, however, Prof. Donnchadh Ó Corráin’s letter
Against this background, it is instructive to note a different attitude across the water. The National Archives of the United Kingdom (Kew) has, in recent years, facilitated a host of projects to make its medieval records accessible to researchers and the general public. These projects bear on the development of later medieval Irish history because of the intimate relationship that existed in the later Middle Ages between the colonial administration based (mostly) at Dublin and its ‘mother’ administration at Westminster. To name but three resources that are especially rich in Irish material, we have a new edition of the rolls of the English parliament; an online calendar of the series of Ancient Petitions, complete with images of the manuscripts; and a project, in progress, to calendar the Fine Rolls of the reign of Henry III. All three have been riding the wave of ‘digital humanities’. Time will tell whether, amid the current general crisis, we can detect the ‘melancholy long withdrawing roar’ of research funding in the humanities.

It is in the nature of research projects that they tackle the better-known and more prestigious series first; but documents relevant to Ireland are scattered across dozens of classes of record that are yet to be calendared, some of them highly artificial and miscellaneous in character. The task of locating such documents has become significantly easier of late due to the production of handlists, calendars, editions and guides to ‘Irish material’ in English archival repositories. In this, the late Philomena Connolly (†2002) was a pioneer. At the time of her death, she was in collaboration with Brendan Smith of the University of Bristol on a major project to trawl the National Archives at Kew in search of material relating to the

to the Irish Times in which he protests strenuously at the ‘ill-judged and impractical proposal’. He continues: ‘The library and archives are not quangos, but venerable anchor institutions of Irish culture that trace their origins back to the eighteenth century […]’ (Irish Times, 20 Oct. 2008). See also Fintan O’Toole, ‘A state hell-bent on wiping its collective memory’ (ibid., 1 Nov. 2008).


20 Accessible through the website of the National Archives of the United Kingdom. The petitions relating to Ireland are surveyed in Philomena Connolly, ‘Irish material in the class of ancient petitions (SC 8) in the Public Record Office, London’, Analect a Hibernica, no. 34 (1987), 1–106. Editions of some of them are published in G. O. Sayles, Documents on the affairs of Ireland before the King’s Council in England (Dublin, 1979).

21 Paul Dryburgh and Beth Hartland (eds), Calendar of the Fine Rolls of Henry III (Woodbridge, 2007–).

22 Philomena Connolly, Medieval record sources (Dublin, 2002), is a minor masterpiece and the standard introduction to its subject. See also Brian C. Donovan and David Edwards, ‘British sources for Irish history before 1485: a preliminary handlist of documents held in local and specialised repositories’, Analect a Hibernica, no. 37 (1998), 191–220.
history of medieval Ireland. The result was a *Handbook and select calendar of sources for Medieval Ireland in the National Archives of the United Kingdom*, prepared by Smith and his collaborator Paul Dryburgh, which appeared in 2005. 23 The same editors have now produced a companion volume, *Inquisitions and extents of medieval Ireland*, which provides a calendar of inquisitions taken by the royal administration primarily to establish the crown’s rights and prerogatives *vis-à-vis* the Irish estates of lay tenants-in-chief who also held lands in England. 24 This calendar, which is accompanied by a superb apparatus, is a model of its kind. Lest the title should unintentionally mislead, it is worth emphasising that the volume does not exhaust the material of this nature from medieval Ireland: extents (that is, surveys or valuations of land) also survive in seigniorial and ecclesiastical archives, while the Dublin administration kept its own files of inquisitions. The latter are no longer extant, but they can sometimes be reconstructed from antiquarian transcripts and calendars. 25 The appearance of *Inquisitions and extents* will, however, doubtless excite new interest in this genre of record, which has been put to such productive use in an English context. 26

The editors scarcely need an advocate to speak in defence of these endeavours, but there may be value in pre-empting one curmudgeonly objection, namely that the production of calendars discourages the next generation of students from engaging in archival work and, worse, obviates the need to study Latin. The argument, I would submit, is specious. One reason why the period before 1307 in Ireland enjoys such a rich historiography is surely the existence of H. S. Sweetman’s five-volume *Calendar of documents relating to Ireland*. 27 Consequently, the efforts of Smith and Dryburgh—

23 Paul Dryburgh and Brendan Smith (eds), *Handbook and select calendar of sources for medieval Ireland in the National Archives of the United Kingdom* (Dublin, 2005). See also idem (eds), ‘Calendar of documents relating to medieval Ireland in the series of Ancient Deeds in the National Archives of the United Kingdom’, *Analecta Hibernica*, no. 39 (2006), 1–161.

24 For an excellent guide to this class of record, see the general introduction by Christine Carpenter to the new series of inquisitions *post mortem* for the reign of Henry VI: Kate Parkin, (ed.), *Calendar of inquisitions post mortem and other analogous documents preserved in the Public Record Office*, xxii: 1 to 5 Henry VI (Woodbridge, 2003), 1–42.

25 Cf. the introduction to *Inquisitions and extents*, where it is stated that ‘the depletion of Irish records over the centuries means that evidence … in Ireland is also lacking’ (p. iv).


undertaken with the purpose of facilitating further archival work, not of rendering such work redundant—augur well for the future of the late Middle Ages in Ireland, a period that has never quite escaped from the doldrums.28 To be sure, intellectual access to medieval English record sources requires competence, at a minimum, in dog Latin and low French. In this regard, the decline of Latinity is worrisome. But historians of an older generation, who could parse Caesar’s Gallic Wars while still in their short pants, must do more than wring their hands at the standard of students emerging from second level today. If we are serious about maintaining interest in medieval studies then we must labour at third level to encourage (dare I say ‘incentivise’) the learning of languages in general, and Latin in particular, among undergraduates.29 Aside from the obvious enrichment this would bring to a humane education, it would have the functional benefit of making the next step into original research in medieval studies far less daunting.

The era when a late medievalist could live on administrative sources alone has long since passed, and the last decade has witnessed a remarkable efflorescence of work on the narrative sources emanating from the English colony in Ireland.30 Credit for this must go in large part to Bernadette Williams, who has now produced a critical edition of the annals of the Franciscan John Clyn, last edited 160 years ago by Richard Butler for the Irish Archaeological Society.31 This new

28 Note their conclusion that ‘the harvest … is even richer than has previously been assumed’: Dryburgh and Smith (eds), Handbook and select calendar, 275.
29 It is precisely the mindset of ‘if it’s not in the exam, I don’t need to know it’—an attitude sadly encouraged by current second-level (and increasingly third-level) examination procedures—that university courses must overcome. For a provocative discussion of this issue, see John J. Cleary, ‘The price of education’, in T.A. F. Kelly (ed.), What price the university? Perspectives on the meaning and value of higher education, from the National University (Maynooth, 2006), esp. 26–7.
31 R. Butler (ed.), The annals of Ireland by Friar John Clyn, of the Convent of Friars Minors, Kilkenny; and Thady Dowling, Chancellor of Leighlin, together with the Annals of Ross (Dublin, 1849). There is still material of interest in the notes to this volume, many of which were prepared by the distinguished antiquarian Rev. James Graves (†1886).
edition is generally of a very high standard, although (as anyone who has put matter into print will know) it can be as difficult to decipher minims on the printed page as in a medieval manuscript. In 1330, Clyn’s laconic account of the demise of Roger Mortimer, first earl of March (†1330) [Lat. morti damnatur R. de Mortuo Mari comes Marchiæ] is rendered, by a slip of the pen, ‘Richard de Mortimer, earl of March, was condemned to death’. The report under the year 1349 of ‘a great shortage of corn and spices; for a pound of corn was selling for twenty pence and pepper and ginger for forty pence’ [Lat. In magna karistia sere et specierum, nam libra sere vendebatur xx\textsuperscript{d} denariis et piperis et zinsiberis x\textsuperscript{l} denariis] causes the editor some concern because corn is not normally measured by the pound (p. 252, n. 4). Could the problem be resolved by translating sere as ‘wax’ [Lat. cera]—a commodity measured by the pound in murage grants of the period?\textsuperscript{33} The entry, then, suggests that the import of goods, such as wax and spices, was disrupted by arrival of the Black Death in 1348, causing a spike in prices.\textsuperscript{34}

These are relatively minor matters and should not detract from the editor’s considerable achievement in providing not only a fresh collation of the manuscripts, but also a translation with copious explanatory footnotes. It is, of course, Clyn’s account of the arrival of the Black Death in Ireland that has won for him some celebrity.\textsuperscript{35} This and other matters are addressed by Williams in over one hundred pages of prefatory analysis, including an important interpretative chapter with the evocative title: ‘Clyn, a window on counties Tipperary and Kilkenny’. This region, the heartland of the Butler family, has been much studied, especially since Edmund Curtis began the publication of the Ormond deeds in calendar form in the 1930s.\textsuperscript{36} Williams adds a new dimension to this body of work by

\textsuperscript{32} See, e.g., ‘castrum’ for castrum (p. 209), ‘scilicet’ for scilicet (p. 213), ‘communionem’ for communionem (p. 249) and ‘infirmitate’ for infirmitate (p. 249). At page 201, n. 126, ‘vacabatur’ should perhaps read vocabatur.

\textsuperscript{33} To take an example from the region with which Clyn was familiar, a murage charter to Thomastown, co. Kilkenny (1 March 1375), grants the town a licence to take \textsuperscript{\frac{1}{2}d}. from every two pounds of wax for sale in the town: Chartae, privilegia et immunitates, being transcripts of charters and privileges to cities, towns, and other bodies corporate, […] 1171–1395 (Dublin, 1889), 68. For the demand for spices and other exotic commodities in the fourteenth century, see Avril Thomas, ‘Financing town walls in medieval Ireland’, in Colin Thomas (ed.), Rural landscapes and communities: essays presented to Desmond McCourt (Blackrock, 1986), 72–3.

\textsuperscript{34} Cf. the prices for wax in Scotland and England tabulated in Elizabeth Gemmill and Nicholas Mayhew, Changing prices in medieval Scotland: a study of prices, money, and weights and measures (Cambridge, 1995), 300.

\textsuperscript{35} The relevant extract from Clyn’s annals (s.a. 1348) is translated in Rosemary Horrox (ed.), The Black Death (Manchester, 1994), no. 23.

\textsuperscript{36} The subject is one that C. A. Empey has made his own. See, esp., his overview:
delving into perceptions and attitudes as revealed by Clyn, whose account is valuable precisely because his depiction of life on the frontier stands in stark contrast to the world of the Dominican annals being compiled contemporaneously at Dublin. Drawing on recent research in England, Williams touches on a range of issues that have been neglected in Irish historiography. So much of what she has to say is new that it is likely that this chapter will date more quickly than the edition itself; but if Williams provokes further work that modifies or amplifies her conclusions then she will have done Irish historiography a great service. Take knighthood, a subject on which Williams is intrepid in an Irish context. It is not quite true to say that Clyn’s annals ‘are unique in Ireland for the information they contain about the making of knights’ (p. 106). The Dublin annals record how Edward III’s son, Lionel of Antwerp, celebrated a victory over the Gaelic Irish of Leinster in 1361 with a knighting ceremony, while the chronicler Henry Marlborough notes that Roger Mortimer, fourth earl of March, did likewise in 1397.37 We might also quibble with the conclusion that ‘Clyn was writing a military history of the geographical area of Kilkenny and Tipperary’ (p. 72). Much of Clyn’s parchment may have been consumed by local affairs, but his world-view was not unduly narrow and his annals are punctuated with reports of English dynastic politics and the crown’s adventures in France and Scotland. Every great conflict has its spectators, and Clyn’s annals add a morsel of further detail to the larger picture of the ‘domestic response’ of the English political nation to the first phase of the Hundred Years War.38

III

One occasion when the English of Ireland were truly participants rather than spectators was in the reign of Richard II. As the only


regnant English king to visit Ireland between 1210 and 1690, Richard has received a good deal of attention from Irish historians, but the last book-length study was that produced by Edmund Curtis in 1927, which included editions of the submissions the king received from the Gaelic chiefs on his expedition of 1394–5. It was also Curtis, indulging his poetic side, who wrote of the second royal expedition of 1399: ‘And so Art Kavanagh, having first wrought the death of Mortimer, now, by delaying Richard in the wilds of Leinster, let in usurping Bolingbroke [soon-to-be Henry IV] and wrecked the unity of England for a hundred years.’ It is the latter events that are subjected to close scrutiny by Douglas Biggs in his recent volume, *Three armies in Britain: the Irish campaign of Richard II and the usurpation of Henry IV, 1397–99*. Biggs writes with the benefit of a renaissance in Ricardian scholarship in England. This has involved forays into the Irish evidence by the king’s most recent biographer Nigel Saul, as well as a stimulating essay by Michael Bennett on ‘Richard II and the wider realm’, which argues persuasively that ‘Richard clearly had a vision of his realm which was richer, broader, and more transcendental than the nation-state whose increasing definition and integration have been assumed to be the main concerns of English kings from the later Middle Ages on’. Biggs’s approach is that of a military historian. The three armies of his title are the expeditionary force led by Richard II to Ireland in 1399; the army commanded by Edmund, duke of York, keeper of the kingdom in Richard’s absence; and the army that flocked to Henry Bolingbroke after he landed at Ravenspur in July 1399. The bulk of the text is taken up with a detailed analysis of each army in turn, together with a blow-by-blow account of the events of the usurpation itself. All this serves the greater purpose of presenting readers with a

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bold reappraisal.43 Far from being an unstable and impulsive tyrant, Richard II is portrayed as a man of considerable military acumen. By contrast, his nemesis Henry Bolingbroke is not K. B. McFarlane’s ‘perfect knight’, but a ‘wastrel’ (p. 15) from whom Richard had little to fear. This, in effect, turns the traditional story of the Lancastrian revolution of 1399 on its head. I was reminded of Sir Geoffrey Elton’s wry confession, concerning the revolutionary upheaval of the 1640s, that ‘some of us wonder whether there really was a civil war since its famous causes have all disappeared’.44

As with the revisionist trend in early Stuart historiography, the merit of Biggs’s approach lies in the challenge he presents to the seeming inevitability of crisis and his insistence on contingency and pure luck in the shaping of events. Nonetheless, his argument seems to overtax the evidence. It is startling, for instance, to learn that Richard II’s decision, after returning from Ireland late in July 1399, to abandon his army and move into north Wales ‘might be considered a display of one who possessed a sound grasp of political and military strategy’ (p. 213). Was not the proof of that pudding in the eating?45 Perhaps this issue might be left to the arbitration of English specialists; but so much of the depiction of Richard as a successful soldier hangs on Biggs’s interpretation of the two royal expeditions to Ireland that some detailed comment is called for. Readers are likely to find aspects of the author’s discussion of Ireland quaint, not to say disquieting, among them the repeated allusions to ‘the Emerald Isle’ (pp. 31, 35, 198) and references to the work of ‘Jack [sic] Lydon’ (p. 34).46 The latter is one of many infelicities, responsibility for which must be shared by the editor of the ‘History of Warfare’ series.47

46 The article by Lydon cited here (‘Richard II’s expeditions to Ireland’) did not appear, as Biggs states (p. 31, n. 4; p. 284), in the Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, but rather in the Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland. It is reprinted in Crooks (ed.), Government, war and society, ch. 13.
47 See, inter alia, ‘Sir Gronwy [=John Goronwy] Edwards’ (p. 39); ‘Rees Davis [=Davies]’ (p. 42, n. 45); ‘Dorothy Johnson [=Johnston]’ (p. 201); ‘G. O. Salyes [=Sayles]’ (p. 269, n. 18). Medieval personalities fare little better: ‘Clerve [=Clerc] earl of Gloucester’ (p. 32); ‘Lacey [=Lacy] of Meath and Ulster’ (p. 32); ‘lord of Ruthien [=Ruthin]’ (p. 33 and passim). Unless it is a scribal error, ‘Sir Robert Hefford’ (35) should probably be Sir Robert Herford. The location of Roger Mortimer’s death in 1398, given in the text as ‘Kells [=Kellistown] near Carlow’ (p. 40), is transposed to Kells, co. Meath, on the map of ‘Richard II’s campaign in Ireland 1399’ (p. 81).
Their cumulative effect is most unfortunate, making one chary of the serviceable appendices, based primarily on English exchequer records, which anatomize the composition of the army Richard brought to Ireland in 1399. When it comes to the interpretation Biggs proffers, one has some sympathy, since here he follows James Lydon and Dorothy Johnston in viewing the royal expedition of 1394–5 as a military success, although he goes beyond those cautious scholars when he describes Richard as ‘the only commander of English forces in the fourteenth century to have any military success in Ireland’ (p. 269). As long ago as 1982, however, Robin Frame poured cold water on the myth of Richard II’s Irish triumph. ‘Ireland’, he wrote, ‘was no exception to Richard’s record of misjudgments. Even his military success was deceptive. It took no genius to bring the Leinster chiefs to heel.’ However that may be, there is a prior question to be addressed: what would have constituted ‘success’ for Richard II? The king actively cultivated the image of the lover of peace, and Biggs recurrently describes Richard’s desire to ‘pacify’ Ireland and subdue those whom he describes at one point, rather insensitively, as ‘roving bands of Gaelic terrorists’ (p. 32). Si vis pacem, para bellum. The adage rings hollow in any century.

How then should we interpret the policies, attitudes and actions of the English in late medieval Ireland? This question is at the core of a volume of essays edited by Brendan Smith in honour of Robin Frame, one of the most eloquent interpreters of the history of the medieval British Isles. Frame’s historiographical achievement is multifaceted, but one consistent preoccupation has been to break away from the insularity that characterized much of Irish historiography in the earlier twentieth century. To some extent it is possible to bench-mark his success by setting this Festschrift alongside the essays that James Lydon edited to mark the retirement of Jocelyn Otway-Ruthven in 1980. If one were to judge books by their jackets alone, it would seem a small step indeed from England and Ireland in the later Middle Ages: essays in honour of Jocelyn Otway-Ruthven (1981) to Ireland and the English world in the late Middle Ages: essays in honour of Robin Frame (2009). Beneath the covers, too, there are striking similarities ranging from the superficial (the size and format

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48 However, Dorothy Johnston’s important article on ‘Richard II and the submissions of Gaelic Ireland’ (Irish Historical Studies 22 (1980–1), 1–20) seems to have been neglected. Another work by the same author is cited in footnotes but does not appear in the bibliography: Johnston, ‘Richard II’s departure from Ireland, July 1399’, English Historical Review 98 (1983), 785–805.

of the two volumes, and their respective lists of contributors),50 to matters of substance, such as the prevailing historiographical mode, which in both is one of traditional empiricism and theoretical innocence. The principal difference—and here Frame’s contribution to scholarship emerges—lies in the mindset of the contributors. The Otway-Ruthven Festschrift is, by and large, an introspective volume focussed on the activities of the English in Ireland. Not so the Frame-schrift. If there is any navel-gazing by Irish historians here, the objects of contemplation belong to the midriffs of Ireland’s insular and continental neighbours. As well as opening up medieval Ireland to the wider world, Frame’s interpretation of the character of political society in the colony is notably more subtle than that of his predecessors. Michael Prestwich’s ‘appreciation’, which opens the volume, alludes more than once to Frame’s Ulster background. Is this what made Frame more receptive than his peers (including his doctoral supervisor, James Lydon) to nuance and to what he has called ‘the practical complications and contradictions of “being” ’? In his address to the Royal Historical Society, delivered in May 1992 against the backdrop of the Northern troubles and an acrimonious debate on historical revisionism in the pages of Irish Historical Studies, Frame remarked of the English in medieval Ireland that their embattled Englishness ‘has something in common with the strengthening of the British strand in the brittle self-image of Ulster Protestants during the traumatic decade 1969–78’.51 The same link between the historian and his history emerges from Frame’s remark, made in 1994, that ‘Irish Englishness [of the mid-fourteenth century] was not a straightforward phenomenon … But it was more than just a reflection of the fact that there was no alternative label available, of the sort that enables modern Ulstermen to maintain a “British” allegiance while articulating a loathing of the English equal to anything to be heard in a Glasgow bar’.52 There is fodder here not just for students of the medieval British Isles but also historians of modern Ireland, for whom issues such as ‘colonial nationalism’, ‘patriotism’ and ‘identities’ remain hotly contested.

The editor is to be congratulated on producing a coherent compendium of essays, all of which touch on themes close to the heart of the honorand. Of the twelve contributors, four examine aspects of English governance in Ireland, including essays on chief

50 Not counting Robin Frame himself, the following contributors are common to both: Katharine Simms, Steven Ellis, J. R. S. Phillips and James Lydon.
governors (by Paul Dryburgh and Beth Hartland), the judiciary (Paul Brand) and the exchequer (James Lydon). Royal government is a subject that Frame resuscitated from the deadening institutional approach of H. G. Richardson, G. O. Sayles and Otway-Ruthven, and, appropriately, the essays in this volume focus on personalities rather than administrative procedures. Two contributions help us to locate the place of Ireland in the gamut of English ‘imperial’ pretensions. J. R. S. Phillips presents a fascinating glimpse of what might be termed the ‘apologetics of empire’ with his edition of a manuscript containing ‘three thirteenth-century declarations of English rule’. Here the juxtaposition of Aquitaine with Ireland and Wales reminds us that, while France may seem to have been edited out of Rees Davies’s account of the ‘first English empire’, the continental possessions in fact played a central role in shaping royal policies. The latter point is taken up by Steven Ellis, who shows how English priorities shifted after the loss of France (Calais excepted) in 1453, leading ultimately to a renewed zeal under the centralising Tudor dynasty for subduing the ‘barbarous’ Celtic peripheries. A further two essays deal with early Lancastrian Ireland, and they are particularly welcome since the period after 1399 remains something of a black hole in the historiography. Katharine Simms muses on the possibility that there was an anti-Lancastrian dimension to the revolt of the Gaelic chiefs of Ulster in 1403–4: her account brings out the resilience of English settlement in the earldom of Ulster, as well as the interconnection between events at the core and the periphery—two themes that recur in much of Frame’s work. Elizabeth Matthew examines an intriguing but neglected episode from 1421 when the Irish parliament dispatched messengers to Henry V, the victor of Agincourt, with a proposal that he should request the pope to authorise a crusade [Fr. croysorie] against the king’s Gaelic enemies. The overture came to nothing, but, by exploring its European context, Matthew argues convincingly that the proposal was neither naïve nor impractical, but rather offers evidence of the vibrancy and sophistication of political life in English Ireland in the early Lancastrian period.

Medieval Scotland features in a pair of essays that reflect the British dimension to Frame’s work. Ruth Blakely displays much of

54 The author has also explored aspects of this theme in Ellis, ‘From dual monarchy to multiple kingdoms: unions and the English state, 1422–1607’, in Allan I. Macinnes and Jane H. Ohlmeyer, The Stuart kingdoms in the seventeenth century: awkward neighbours (Dublin, 2002), 37–48; and idem (with Christopher Maginn), The making of the British Isles: the state of Britain and Ireland, 1450–1603 (Harlow, 2007).
her teacher’s characteristic sensitivity to nuance in her discussion of conflicts of loyalties and the nature of borders in Galloway, which found itself playing the role of piggy-in-the-middle during the Anglo-Scottish wars of the early fourteenth century. Steve Boardman’s offering is a marvellous essay on language and identity that runs in contraflow to the normal direction of Scottish (nationalist) historiography. Boardman mines the ‘original chronicle’ of Andrea Wyntoun—a metrical history composed in English in the late fourteenth century—for what it reveals of the extent to which English-speaking Scots celebrated their Anglo-Saxon past and traced the origins of the Scottish ruling dynasty back to the union of Malcolm III [Mael Coluim Ceann Mòr] and the saintly Margaret (†1093), daughter of Edward Aetheling. Can we, perchance, look forward to a monograph entitled The English identity of the kingdom of the Scots in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries? The absence of a similar Welsh perspective is a poignant reminder of the death in 2005 of Rees Davies, ‘whose work’, Frame himself once remarked, ‘must inspire all students of the medieval British Isles’.56

The two remaining essays—one by the editor himself, the other by Andrea Ruddick—dwell on British history ‘as subject’. Both concern themselves with whether the paradigm can be usefully pursued into the late Middle Ages, when the acquisitive and expansionist character of the English state becomes less conspicuous, at least within the archipelago. Their arguments may be seen as complementary. Brendan Smith’s piece on ‘shaping the regions’ argues that, amid the hardening of national sentiment and economic dislocation of the fourteenth century (both of which pose challenges to a holistic treatment of the British Isles), there is a place for the history of non-national constituent units—a history of the ‘regions’. Ruddick uses Gascony to test the ‘limits of British history’. Elaborating on Frame’s much-quoted line that, in writing British history, ‘as well as looking over the partition walls, we need to do some thinking about the design of the building itself’, she suggests that ‘the building plans might from now on include an annexe for the king of England’s French

55 Cf. Dauvit Broun, The Irish identity of the kingdom of the Scots in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (Woodbridge, 1999). Boardman also explores some of these issues in his contributions to another Festschrift: ‘Robert II (1371–1390)’ and ‘Robert III (1390–1406)’, in Michael Brown and Roland Tanner (eds), Scottish kingship, 1306–1542: essays in honour of Norman MacDougall (Edinburgh, 2008), chs. 3 and 4. The contents of these chapters range much more widely than their titles suggest. See also idem, ‘Late medieval Scotland and the matter of Britain’, in Edward J. Cowan and Richard J. Finlay (eds), Scottish history: the power of the past (Edinburgh, 2002), 47–72.

56 Frame, Political development, p. viii.
possessions’ (p. 83). One imagines that J. G. A. Pocock would be willing to grant the necessary planning permission.\footnote{Pocock’s conception of ‘British’ history, as he presented it in 1973, was not restricted to the archipelago, but embraced all of Britain’s entanglements: J. G. A. Pocock, ‘British history: a plea for a new subject’, \textit{Journal of Modern History} 47 (1975), 601–21, esp. 617–21. For a reappraisal, see David Armitage, ‘Greater Britain: a useful category of historical analysis?’, \textit{American Historical Review} 104 (1999), 427–45; and Pocock’s riposte, ‘The new British history in Atlantic perspective: an antipodean commentary’, \textit{ibid.}, 490–500.}

These suggestions for the future of medieval British history are a fitting salute to Robin Frame, who has done much to shape the development of the subject; but, taken together with the other essays in the volume, they also highlight the continued ascendancy in the existing historiography of high politics, cultural and institutional links, and dynastic and aristocratic networks.\footnote{There are important exceptions to the rule. On social and economic matters, see Richard Britnell, \textit{Britain and Ireland, 1050–1530: economy and society} (Oxford, 2004); and an outstanding essay by B. M. S. Campbell: ‘Benchmarking medieval economic development: England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland, c.1290’, \textit{Economic History Review} 61 (2008), 896–945 (with corrigendum, \textit{ibid.} 946–8).} In this respect, the volume inadvertently suggests an alternative route forward.

‘Comparison’, Chris Wickham has recently affirmed, ‘is essential’, both as a means of avoiding ‘cultural solipsism’ and because it is ‘the closest that historians can get to [quasi-Popperian] testing, attempting to falsify, their own explanations’.\footnote{Chris Wickham, \textit{Problems in doing comparative history: the Reuter Lecture 2004} (Southampton, 2005), 2–3.} As we should expect, Rees Davies anticipated these comments at the Gregynog colloquium in 1986 when he presented his bipartite vision for the development of medieval British history, which was to consist of ‘comparisons and contrasts’ on the one hand, and, on the other, ‘connections’.\footnote{These ‘twin aims’ are set out in Davies, ‘Introduction’, in \textit{idem} (ed.), \textit{The British Isles, 1100–1500}, 1–2.} With important exceptions, it is the ‘connections’ that have been most fully investigated.\footnote{For two excellent comparative studies, see Keith Stringer, ‘States, Liberties and Communities in Medieval Britain and Ireland’; in Michael Prestwich (ed.), \textit{Liberties and identities in the medieval British Isles} (Woodbridge 2008), 5–36; David Green, ‘Lordship and principality: colonial policy in Ireland and Aquitaine in the 1360s’, \textit{Journal of British Studies} 47 (2008), 3–29.} Many of the nagging doubts about the efficacy of the British approach for the late Middle Ages melt away if the object is not to treat the islands integrally but rather comparatively. Divergent experiences cease to be an impediment, but serve instead as a means of finding the right questions to ask and as a source of instructive contrasts. For those in pursuit of the future of the subject, there may be profit in returning to the agenda Davies tabled at Gregynog in
order to discover which items remain outstanding.\textsuperscript{62} The ageing 'British' history, like this review, may find an end in its beginnings.