

*A dictionary of Irish saints* by Pádraig Ó Riain (Dublin 2011: Four Courts Press) 660 pages.

Ireland is a land of saints and Professor Pádraig Ó Riain has spent much of his career surrounded by them. In particular, his work on the genealogies of early Irish saints (*Corpus genealogiarum sanctorum Hiberniae* published in Dublin in 1985) and on early martyrologies (*Feastdays of the saints: a history of Irish martyrologies* Brussels 2006) provide solid foundations for this current work. Almost equally important is Professor Ó Riain's other major field of interest in early Irish onomastics and place-name studies and a key feature of this volume is the careful identification of the part(s) of the country where each saint was active. The influence of the famous Bollandist, Hippolyte Delehaye (*Les légendes hagiographiques*, Brussels 1905; *Cinq leçons sur la méthode hagiographique*, Brussels 1934) and the latter's emphasis on the need to distinguish between the cults of homonymous saints through the clear delineation of their feast day and location is clearly visible in this *Dictionary*. Indeed, these are stated by the author to be his priorities in identifying individuals for inclusion (p.39).

Though the vast majority of Irish saints are said to have lived in a narrow timeframe between the time of Patrick and the arrival of the Vikings (and this book is deliberately limited to those who died before 1200 – p.46), they are still a major feature of Irish life today. Travelling through the countryside, you can find a hospital named after St Lommán, a church dedicated to St Nessan, a school named after St Munchin or a road commemorating St Declan. Some of these saints might be relatively well known, others almost unheard of outside their own district. Writing in far away Louvain in the days of the Counter-Reformation, John Colgan wrote letters to Irish diocesan bishops asking that they collect and send him as much local data as they could amass and his magisterial works, *Acta Sanctorum Hiberniae* (1645) and *Trias Thaumaturgae* (1647), are, in consequence, often peppered with place-names and local lore. There is also the happy coincidence that nineteenth-century Ordnance Survey researchers were collecting data about local saints immediately before the Great Famine swept away much of the Irish-speaking population from large areas of the country. In the same period, too, Catholic Emancipation was producing a new Catholic parochial system, based around new church buildings reflecting contemporary needs and settlements – and those churches needed dedications. The national school system for primary schools introduced in 1831 had been intended to foster a non-denominational education in secular subjects but the effort to separate out religious education was opposed by the three main denominations and already by the middle years of the century, it had evolved into a mixed system in which religion (of whatever denomination) was firmly embedded into the curriculum. The 1838 Poor Law set up a workhouse and hospital system which was originally designed to be firmly secular but the practice of medicine in other contexts was heavily denominational and the growth of the nursing religious orders in the later nineteenth century means that Irish names and dedications became common. Thus today there are many contemporary parish churches, schools and hospitals in modern Ireland which, despite originating in the Victorian period, are named after local holy men and women of the Middle Ages. This book provides those who want to explore a key element in Irish culture and tradition with an immense resource.

The sheer amount of work and scholarship represented is staggering. There are, for example, by my count, 1013 identified feast-days which are dispersed throughout the calendar year. There are 1118 civil parishes indexed where churches associated with individual saints might be found and 850 other place-

names. To find, track and classify this material, the list of abbreviations contains some 596 entries delineating the sources consulted. Many of these, such as various Irish language journals, local history and archaeology journals or the Ordnance Survey letters represent many multiples of volumes in their own right. The languages in which this source material is written are Irish of all phases of the language from the seventh century to the modern era as well as other sources in Latin and English and a reasonable percentage of these are not available in translation. The secondary literature includes volumes in French and German as well as Irish and English. Some of the sources are not edited at all and abbreviations such as StonyA and StonyB refer to individual manuscripts. As a field, Celtic studies is inter-disciplinary by its very nature but the wide-ranging level of expertise displayed here is, unfortunately, likely to disappear as universities evolve away from their traditional focus on the humanities into a brave new world of business and technical know-how.

One of the difficulties in using Irish sources from a wide chronological range is the variation in spelling conventions over time. The author has decided to use Classical Irish conventions (of the early modern period), because “it represents a happy mean between Middle and Modern Irish, not far removed from the earlier forms preferred by previous commentators, yet easily recognizable by those proficient in Modern Irish.” (p.47) Unfortunately, the study of Irish church history and indeed of Irish saints are not confined to those proficient in Modern Irish and the scrupulous attention with which Professor Ó Riain formulates these Classical Irish forms may cause problems for some. To find that the seventh-century biographer of Patrick from north Mayo – known throughout secondary literature as Tírechán (with or without accents) is listed as Tíreachán (p.130) is not a major difficulty but not everybody who wishes to learn more information concerning the character known as Aileran Sapiens is going to be able to find him under the spelling Oilearán Sapiens (p.520). There is an index for anglicised forms (pp. 633-635) so that those wanting to find saints such as Kevin of Glendalough can find the form “Caoimhghin” which is the head-word for the relevant entry. At 660 pages in a reasonably-sized font, the *Dictionary* is at the outer limits of binding production for a single volume but a larger index, designed to help those who know saints under the Old Irish spelling of their names, would probably have added to the usefulness of the volume.

For the specialist reader, one of the interesting facets of Professor Ó Riain’s approach has been to emphasise the role of high medieval foundations, generally houses of Augustinian canons and canonesses, in writing the lives of individual saints. So, for example, the life of Saint Senan (Seanán) of Scattery is linked to a “house of canons regular in south Clare, probably Clareabbey” (p.559); that of St Brendan (Bréanainn) “was informed by the mind of a canon regular” (p.116), that of St Ailbhe of Emly has details that “argue against an early date” (p.58) and that of St Íde may be linked to the house of canons at Rathkeale or the convent of canonesses at Shanagolden (p.377). This is a useful corrective to the often widespread habit of assuming that our information about Irish saints stems from the period to which the (often inserted) death-notice in the annals ascribe them. This is a particularly common problem in many modern Catholic lectionaries, for example. On the other hand, the very popularity of the Augustinian orders in the Anglo-Norman period and the fact that so many of them were located on sites known to have been earlier church centres may well indicate that many canons and canonesses shared a widespread interest in older traditions and possibly even manuscripts of the pre-Norman

period. Thus the lives and indeed liturgies of high medieval date may well be based on a far more extensive early medieval documentary record than has survived to the present day.

To be asked to review a volume like this is a real privilege. As it happens, before being contacted by the editor, I had already purchased the book and was using it as a reference work, dipping in and out to find specific entries. As a reviewer, I read the book as a unit and thus learnt such gems as the fact that Pope Gregory the Great was thought to have visited Ireland and was even said by some to be buried on Aran (Grioghóir Béaloir p.371), that the saints of Thomond, both male and female, came together to defend the southern half of Ireland from a bondage which St Finnian of Clonard attempted to impose (p.535) and that the Óengus who wrote a magnificent martyrology in 591 quatrains of perfect *rinnard* rhyme as Vikings were first appearing off the west coast of Ireland, is the man commemorated in the Limerick parish of Dysert (Díseart Aonghasa) near Croom (p.79). I was also taken by the realisation of how often Irish female saints are depicted as mothers – not just in the genealogical tract on the mothers of saints but also as dedicatees in so many Irish churches. Early Irish Christianity enjoys the most detailed early vernacular record of any country in western Europe and it is interesting that, in an era when saints were identified by popular acclaim, the physical dangers and demanding responsibilities involved in motherhood were accorded such respect.

I am not sure that many will peruse this book from cover to cover: it is a rather weighty tome for reading on the beach, even assuming that one has the weather and the opportunities to do so while the consistency of the entries (with the constant reiteration of the saint's genealogy, feast-day and location in each entry) can make it occasionally repetitive for a leisure-time read. However it very much deserves to become an integral element of the research tools available to those studying the regional history and culture of Ireland and it fills a truly vital gap in our current provision. Finally, a particular delight for readers of the North Munster Antiquarian Journal and members of the Thomond Historical and Archaeological Society, many of whom have known Pádraig and Dagmar for years, will be the strength and detail of the coverage of saints from this particular part of the island. Happy reading one and all.