

Book Reviews

Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *The Irish church, its reform and the English invasion*, Trinity Medieval Ireland series 2, Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2017. 148 pp. ISBN 978-1-84682-667-2. Price €31.50.

There are current professors of Irish medieval history who tell their students that they were first inspired to study medieval Ireland as young teenagers by Donnchadh Ó Corráin's marvellous school text book *Celts and Normans* (published under the pseudonym Gearóid MacGearailt by Gill and Macmillan in 1969). Today's youngsters are being introduced, not just to medieval Ireland but to Irish documents of all eras because of Donnchadh's extraordinary imaginative prescience in setting up, long before smart phones or even laptops, the Corpus of Electronic Texts for Irish History, Literature and Politics – a searchable online textbase now holding over 18 million words and still growing. Throughout Ireland, there are untold (historically-minded) households who still have a battered copy of his Gill and MacMillan volume, *Ireland before the Normans* (1972) on their book shelves. In short, for almost his entire career, Donnchadh Ó Corráin has been a dominant presence in medieval Irish history – with an output valued not just by Irish scholars but by all European historians interested in how Ireland fits into the wider story of the Europe after the fall of Rome. As *The Irish church, its reform and the English invasion* was being launched this spring, the Belgian publisher Brepols was also publishing Ó Corráin's three volume *Clavis litterarum Hiberniae* – a comprehensive bibliography of Irish texts and manuscripts covering the era between the 4th and the 17th centuries.

As befitting the era in which the modern Irish diocesan system was first established, the twelfth-century church reforms are one of the better researched topics in early Irish medieval history. It was the primary research focus of the Jesuit scholar, Aubrey Gwynn, whose prolific writings on the subject spanned the decades from the 1940s through to the 1970s and who placed events in Ireland firmly within the broader Continental context of Gregorian reforms and the growth of papal power. J.A. Watt, of UCD and the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, published a monograph on *The church and the two nations in medieval Ireland* (Cambridge, 1970) as well as the more popular *The church in medieval Ireland* in 1972. Not surprisingly, given the period in which he was writing, his work has a strong emphasis on ethnicity and the often-tortuous relationships that existed between incomers and natives. More recently, Marie Therèse Flanagan, as part of her series of monographs on twelfth-century Ireland, has produced *The transformation of the Irish church in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries* (Woodbridge, 2010). This is a tripartite study of the impact of the reforms on bishops, monastic orders and the laity with a particular interest in the pre-existing Irish church structures and a strong background in the parallels to be found within the twelfth-century Angevin empire.

In addition to these monographs, the topic has also been covered extensively in general histories of Ireland. The most detailed analysis of the various approaches taken is a work entitled 'The Twelfth Century Reform of the Irish Church: A Historiographical Study' by Liam Irwin in our own journal in 1983 (volume 25, pages 19-29). In his final summing up, he underlines his argument that the topic has traditionally been treated as a stalking horse for ongoing debates around issues of national and ecclesiastical independence:

the treatment of the reform, depending on the function it was intended to serve, varied in emphasis, distortion or omission. The common factor which transcended these individual concerns was a siege mentality. Particular denominational, sectarian or political viewpoints had to be defended. The degree to which they were vulnerable dictated the extent of the deviation from acceptable standards of historical enquiry. The historiography of the twelfth century church reform in Ireland, therefore, provides some extremely valuable insights into the diverse assumptions, preoccupations and prejudices of historians, both lay and clerical, from the medieval era to the present day.

The Irish Church, its Reform and the English Invasion thus enters what is, for Irish medieval history, a relatively crowded field. It has to be said, however, that unlike some of its predecessors, it largely avoids the pitfalls of nationalism. Its first chapter, on the nature of the Irish church, ranges widely and covers all of the major scholarly controversies of medieval Irish church history over the last thirty-five years. There are succinct sections covering the various roles of bishops, the organisation of monasteries, the nature of the inhabitants of church lands known as *monachi* (Irish *manaig*), clerical celibacy, pluralism and federations, royal/church relations, violence involving churches, taxation, asceticism and religious practice, foreign connections and synods. Whereas much of the previous discussion on these topics has been primarily focussed on the seventh and eighth centuries (a period well covered by canon and vernacular law), Ó Corráin instead concentrates here on the annals of the tenth and eleventh centuries, providing a detailed background with which to consider the events and personalities of the twelfth century. He has written on some of these topics before but this chapter provides a succinct summary of his ideas. Many were first aired in publications which can often be increasingly difficult for individual scholars to access, being volumes of essays published in cities from Stuttgart to Odense and from Cork to Oxford.

One of the points of agreement for a diverse and evolving group of reformers was that that there were too many Irish bishops. Ó Corráin argues that episcopal authority could be limited to the *muintir* or household of ecclesiastical communities such as Bangor and perhaps to the smaller churches controlled by such famous houses but that the powers of bishops were growing in the tenth and eleventh centuries and becoming more closely associated with royal dynasties and larger kingdoms (pp 5-10). They did not, however, enjoy the landed resources of bishoprics in other parts of Europe for much church land was held instead by tenantry under the control of *airchinnaig* (erenaghs) and *comarba* (coarbs) – and this same tenantry continued to do so, in Ó Corráin's view, right through the middle ages up to the period of the Elizabethan rebellions in the sixteenth century. It was this reservoir of church land under 'lordly lineages, often closely related to royal dynasties' that paid for the ecclesiastical achievements of the Age of Saints and Scholars including the schools, the manuscript production and the art for which this period is still famous today (p. 20, p. 64, p. 119). In contrast to nineteenth-century writers such as J. H. Todd, Ó Corráin sees monasteries (as defined by canonists and the Church Fathers) playing a relatively minor role in the earlier period. In the era immediately before the reforms, Irish foundations remained un-affected by Carolingian and Anglo-Saxon enthusiasm for the Benedictine rule while 'their senior members are more likely to resemble well-endowed secular canons, whose communal and individual wealth maintained... different kinds of coenobitic communities of varying severity' (p. 15). Summing up a wide-ranging discussion, one might say that, for Ó Corráin, the pre-reform Irish church

was, as he says of its bishops, 'conservative, tolerant of diversity and did not take into account recent significant recent changes in canon law' (p. 9). It was also heavily affected by church pluralism whereby one man might enjoy authority in many establishments. This was partly due to the ambition of individual clerics and partly, (and more importantly), to the expansionism of the larger monastic institutions (p. 20). On the other hand, in one of the asides that are a particular feature of this book, he also makes the interesting suggestion that the obits of individual churchmen in the annals may represent a summary of an entire career rather than, as has hitherto been assumed, a recitation of the offices held at the point of death (p. 5).

In his second chapter, Ó Corráin deals with the background to a second major concern of the reformers: the marital and sexual behaviour of the Irish laity. He lists a number of observations by Italian commentators of the later eleventh century, such as Pope Gregory VII, Archbishop Lanfranc and his successor, Anselm (who came from the same north-western part of Piedmont as Lanfranc and succeeded him both as leader of the monastic school at Bec in Normandy and subsequently as archbishop of Canterbury) as well as by the famous twelfth-century Burgundian leader of the Cistercian Order, Bernard of Clairvaux. They wrote that the Irish abandoned their wives, exchanged them for others and that they did not obey the canonical rules on the forbidden decrees of kindred (pp 43-8). Ó Corráin points out that, in point of fact, the Irish were following instead the rules of parallel cousin marriage in the Old Testament and, moreover, were constrained by the social customs of an underpopulated island: a relatively narrow aristocratic élite and 'the limited pool of high-status women who can be used diplomatically in forming alliances between dynasties' (p. 52). The result is that the marriage practices of the Irish aristocracy 'openly differed from the current thinking on marriage in regard to indissolubility and legitimacy, consanguinity and affinity'. (p. 57). In another interesting aside, Ó Corráin suggests that, in this debate, the marriage practices of lower classes were largely ignored. He finishes the chapter with a fascinating discussion of the marital career of Tairdelbach Ó Conchobair, king of Ireland at the height of the reform, who was married seven times over the course of his career. His spouses included both the daughters of provincial kings and of local lords within his own kingdom of Connacht and indeed, he may have had more than one wife at a time (pp 56-7).

Chapter three outlines the position of Canterbury vis á vis the Irish church; chapter four, the decrees of the synod of Cashel in 1101 and chapter five, the synod of Ráith Bresail in 1111. Ó Corráin argues that Canterbury fought for an 'almost patriarchal authority that included a responsibility for Ireland' (p. 60) over more than eighty years although their claims over Ireland were largely ignored by the contemporary papacy. Their *point d'appui* is identified as the O'Brien kings of Thomond who ruled Ireland in this period; the significance or otherwise of the fact that Lanfranc wrote also to the king of Dublin, addressing him as *gloriosus Hiberniae rex Gothricus* and commending him for his laudable endeavours in the cause of reform, is not investigated. By the time of the synod of Cashel, however, the O'Brien ruler, Muirchertach Ua Briain, is seen as 'keen to counter Canterbury's ambitions' (p. 65) but the canons passed at that synod (which deal with issues of simony, clerical celibacy, sanctuary and degrees of affinity) are seen as largely reflecting a Canterbury agenda which was being promoted in contemporary Britain as well as by the papacy more generally (p. 68). However, the next significant development marked a distinct break with previous occasions, being the promotion by Gille, bishop of Limerick (the key urban base of the O'Briens), of an Irish ecclesiastical hierarchy, independent of Canterbury (p. 71). The synod of Ráith Bresail took place while

Gille was papal legate and although the *Annals of Inisfallen* state that it was presided over by Muirchertach Ua Briain and Ua Dúnáin, eminent bishop of Ireland, Ó Corráin believes that Gille was the main inspiration behind it (p. 72). The key decisions of the synod were that a newly created episcopal hierarchy was to be funded by giving them legal ownership over all ecclesiastical property, at the expense of hereditary church families and that the city of Dublin was to become a suffragan of Cashel, ignoring both Canterbury's claims over the rights to consecrate Dublin's bishops and the apparent wishes of Dublin to hold independent authority.

Chapter six deals with the figure of St Malachy of Armagh whom Ó Corráin depicts in largely political terms, decrying the panegyric nature of his biography by Bernard of Clairvaux which he describes memorably as 'tedious and tendentious hagiography... brimming with pious platitudes and heavy with biblical ballast' (p. 45). Malachy's appointment as archbishop of Armagh in 1132 is seen as the result of political pressure brought to bear by Bishop Gille in the face of strong opposition, both by local Armagh churchmen and by the provincial king of the North, Conchobar Mac Lochlainn (p. 78). Similarly, Malachy's resignation in 1136 'was motivated by calculation rather than by saintly humility' because the reformers needed a great ecclesiastical grandee to support their aims and Malachy's replacement, Gilla Meic Liac, former abbot of Derry and member of the Uí Néill dynasty, gave them credibility. Ó Corráin does not pull his punches:

like nearly all political leaders [Malachy] was charismatic, political, persuasive, conciliatory, coercive, manipulative, subtle and disingenuous; he was one who could dissimulate and, if necessary bully. Bernard's image of the shy, withdrawn holy man is a pious fiction (p. 79).

He was, however, only moderately successful. Seeking to be awarded the *pallium* at Rome in 1140, he was countered by the representations of Canterbury in defence of their primatial claims with the results that Malachy was told to return home (albeit with papal blessing and authority), convene a national synod and get its united backing. The scale of this challenge is seen by Malachy's eventual achievement at Inis Pátraic off the Dublin coast where fifteen bishops and two hundred priests (but no lay rulers) met over five days in 1148 to formulate a second appeal for an Irish primacy. In order to achieve even this level of unison, there had had to be the concession of a metropolitan see to Dublin. In contrast, Malachy's promotion of monastic innovation and reform and in particular the introduction of foreign religious orders was rather more productive and garnered much local aristocratic support. In yet another memorable aside, on the dedication of Mellifont in 1157, Ó Corráin notes 'contemporary observers may have wondered how, on this magnificent occasion, clerical splendour, high society, displays of great wealth and apparent monastic purgation and purification could sit well together and constitute reform' (p. 84). Ó Corráin believes that the high-water mark of Cistercian influence was at the synod of Kells in 1152 and that despite the four Cistercian bishops who held office in the later twelfth century, their monastic foundations soon fell into disorder and decay (with apparent reference to the thirteenth-century conspiracy of Mellifont). In contrast, he sees Malachy's introduction of Augustinian canons as being far more important and locally influential, with Arrouaisian canons being established close to many episcopal seats and extensive lands being granted to them. This is estimated by looking at sixteenth-century records of land confiscations (p. 87) and seems historically somewhat problematic for no allowance is made for lands that might have been given to the Augustinians by subse-

quent Norman colonists and their descendants. More detailed work on the medieval records of the order is probably needed to substantiate this idea.

Chapter seven looks at the records for the synod of Kells in 1152 and here we find the most evocative pen-portrait of all:

The synod was a very grand affair, attended by 3000 clerics, including Cistercian monks and Augustinian canons, and presided over by Paparo as *legatus a latere*. This was a most expensive event for the Irish church. Each of these 3000 clerics had an attendant cleric, and at least a servant. That makes a minimum daily round of 9000 meals, 18,000 collations and the provision of accommodation and transport for 9000 per day. For the entire synod, about 261,000 meals, wine and proportionate accommodation was required. Thousands of horses need to be foddered, watered, stabled and gillied. The papal party were surely the guests of the Irish bishops. This estimate does not account for formal meals and feasting. Nor does it account for new vestments, altar linen, church plate, processional and pectoral crosses, thurifers, incense and other items of expenditure. Scribes had to be provided with parchment, seals and wax to make multiple copies of the decisions and constitutions, and a certified official copy had to be prepared and dispatched to Rome to be enrolled in the papal archives. Where did the bishops raise the money and credit for this lavish event? Who paid for this? We do not know but the cost fell ultimately on the *manaig* of the Irish church who cultivated its lands and paid its taxes, and on the contributions and tithes of the laity. Reform did not come cheap (p. 92).

In the face of this wonderful rhetoric, it may well be carping to note that these figures imply that at the synod of Inis Pátraic, convened to formulate a national request for *pallia* in line with papal demands, the attendant bishops had retinues of approximately thirteen churchmen each while at Kells, gathered to receive the *pallia*, they were attended by something closer to a hundred and thirty (quite apart from servants and attendants). If one doesn't want to believe that the Kells figures may have been inflated by subsequent commentators (as happened for example, to records of the battle of Clontarf or even to accounts of people fighting in the G.P.O in 1916), perhaps Inis Pátraic suffered from a shortage of boatmen or perhaps Malachy's political influence was limited to an even smaller coterie than Ó Corráin is prepared to countenance.

Kells is famous in Irish history as the synod which awarded archbishoprics to Dublin and Tuam as well as to the older centres of Cashel and Armagh but much of Ó Corráin's discussion is taken up with analysis of its other decrees: on simony and usury, on payment of tithes, on violent crime, on marriage and on the suppression of smaller sees. As first noted by Diane Hall in her study of later medieval Irish nunneries, *Women and the church in medieval Ireland* in 2003, the papal envoy John Paparo is also said to have decreed (with some vehemence) that the abbess of Kildare should no longer participate with the bishops in public assemblies.

Chapter eight deals with the impact of Henry II on Irish church affairs. Ó Corráin believes that Canterbury, balked of its primatial ambitions with regard to Ireland, may well have spearheaded a campaign to encourage an invasion of Ireland and certainly Canterbury's representative at Rome, John of Salisbury, states that the island was entrusted to Henry as a result of his petition. The resulting papal letter, *Laudabiliter*, has long been controversial but Ó Corráin throws his weight behind those who believe it to

be an authentic product of the papal chancery (p. 99) with the purpose being to foster the good of religion in Ireland, rather than any invasion. The successes of a home-grown Irish reform movement (as Ó Corráin sees it) were to be air-brushed out to make way for a 'burgeoning, if not bumptious, papacy' (p. 101) egged on by a disappointed Canterbury leadership.

This interpretation places considerable emphasis on the account of Henry's council of Cashel, as recounted by a Parisian-trained Welshman, writing in support of his relatives' triumphs during the invasion, namely, Giraldus Cambrensis. The enormities and filth of Ireland and its people were to be solved by a church council, issuing decrees on church discipline but promulgated by the king in the form of constitutions. The faithful of Ireland were yet again urged to observe lawful marriage practices, baptism was to be standardised and undertaken by priests in fonts, tithes were to be paid to parish churches and lay exactions (in particular food levies) were to be discontinued. Clerics were to be exempt from fines for murder committed by their kinsmen and new arrangements for burial and inheritance were to be put in place. These were, as Ó Corráin says, local concerns, reflecting current Irish realities rather than Angevin pressure.

Far more importantly, the assembled archbishops and bishops, thirty-three in all according to *Gesta regis Henrici*, took the opportunity provided by Cashel, to send the king 'their letters in the form of a charter with seals attached confirming to him and his heirs, the kingdom of Ireland, testifying that they had constituted him and his heirs kings and lords over them for ever'. As Ó Corráin says, 'they gave what was not theirs to give' (p. 109) and this is where his book is clearly marked by a sense of what reads as outraged patriotism:

Those Irish bishops whose views carried the day at Cashel – like their reforming predecessors who prated indiscriminately into any ear prepared to listen to their ingenuous complaints about the morals of their countrymen – displayed all too much holy simplicity in their support of Henry II as a rod of correction if that was their expectation in reality (pp 112-13).

The bishops may have been led into this by the papal legate, Gilla Ó Con Áirge of Lismore, who spent two days in conclave with Henry and whose episcopal church was made the site of a royal castle. Letters sent by Pope Alexander to the Irish bishops with instructions to support Henry (possibly in the hope of Angevin support for a papacy under threat by the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa) may have proved the deciding factor; there may have been Irish hopes that Henry would provide episcopal stability or even of reform; there may even have been despair about the effectiveness of Irish dynastic support for moral reform but for Ó Corráin, the crux of the matter is that the Irish bishops agreed to hold the temporalities of the Irish church as royal tenants in chief of the Angevin king. In so doing they turned their back on their own institutions and on their heritage as well as destroying the aristocracy from which they mostly sprang. (p. 116).

His final conclusions are entitled 'The harvest of reform'. Whereas the synod of Kells had established a diocesan and archiepiscopal structure, much remained to be done. Following the rulings of the Third Lateran Council, churchmen's livings were not to pass to their progeny but despite a council in Clonfert in 1179 presided over by St Laurence O'Toole, such practices continued, certainly in the Gaelic west. The loss of church lands to the new bishoprics was compensated for by some through the promotion of hagiographical cults of their founders and veneration of their relics. A cathedral school at Armagh

was endorsed by the high-king Ruaidri Ua Chonchobair but there is little evidence for other such establishments. The existing church tenantry paid rent and services to the new bishops rather than to the older monastic houses but continued to provide many of the clergy of the later middle ages and by the fourteenth century, hereditary clergy once again dominated many Irish church offices. For Ó Corráin, the Gregorian reform imposed a costly but relatively shallow superstructure on the pre-reform church and increased royal influence on the appointment of office-holders. It did little for the general populace: for him (as opposed to scholars such as Jocelyn Otway-Ruthven and her followers), there is no real evidence for improvement in pastoral care in the later twelfth and early thirteenth century while clerical celibacy was often limited to a public parade of virtue and even that died out in time. The Irish church may have looked less different to European eyes but the lower clergy lived much as they did before the reform and the laity retained their devotion to the saints, sites, cults and devotional practices that were already long established at the beginning of the twelfth century.

The Irish Church, its Reform and the English Invasion is a book which is clearly written by someone immersed in the writings and scholarship of its period. Its range is such that younger historians working on secular Irish marriage practices, as well as those specialising in church organisation and even on the politics of the Norman invasion, will all find stimulus in the multitude of ideas which jostle for attention on its crowded pages. The sheer wealth of points being made may make parts somewhat difficult for the interested layperson to follow – on occasion, it is only a knowledge of the pre-existing literature which reveals the full import of what is merely being alluded to in passing. All readers will, however, be able to appreciate the comment in the preface: ‘The historian’s mind must ever be ruled by constant questioning, constant doubt, without respect of persons or office. (p. 3) It represents a statement of scholarly integrity which sums up the over-arching aspiration, not just of this book but of all Ó Corráin’s work and in its articulation of a fundamental principle at a time of increasing social polarisation, it is, perhaps, his most important comment of all.

Catherine Swift

Gisbert Hemprich, *Ri Érenn >>König von Irland<<: Fiktion und Wirklichkeit*, 2 vols, curach bhán publications, Berlin, 2015. 980 pp. ISBN: 978-3-942002-19-6. Price €95.

The idea of a ‘high-kingship’ with its lists of supposed kings has provided the framework within which Gaelic scholarship traditionally took place, and the material supplied by works such as the *Leabar gabála*, *Réim rígraide*, genealogies, annals, saints’ lives, place lore, etc. continue to be mined for information on this and other matters to the present day. Hemprich’s two-volume set in reasonably straightforward German provides us with the latest form of king-list, a super-duper king-list, one that unites and might even be said to supercede all foregoing king-lists.

Hemprich has trawled deep in Irish lore: besides the ‘canonical’ kings of *Réim rígraide*, he lists many ‘uncanonical’ kings such as the Laigin kings named in *Nidu dir dermait* and other Leinster sources. But the historian will look in vain for an exploration of the historical processes reflected in these king-lists. What were these kings, how did they operate? Hemprich avoids any direct answer to this question. His opening sentence states that ‘the kingship treated of in this study is largely fictitious, but nevertheless enormously influential’ (*‘das Königtum, das in der vorliegenden Untersuchung thematisiert wird, ist zwar überwiegend fiktiv, dessen ungeachtet aber von enormer Wirkmächtigkeit’*)