

EARLY CHRISTIAN IRELAND

This is the first fully documented history of Ireland and the Irish between the fourth and ninth centuries AD, from Saint Patrick to the Vikings – the earliest period for which historical records are available.

It opens with the Irish raids and settlements in Britain, and the conversion of Ireland to Christianity. It ends as Viking attacks on Ireland accelerated in the second quarter of the ninth century. The book takes account of the Irish both at home and abroad, including the Irish in northern Britain, in England and on the continent. Two principal thematic strands are the connection between the early Irish Church and its neighbours, and the rise of the Uí Néill and the kingship of Tara.

The author, Thomas Charles-Edwards, is Professor of Celtic in the University of Oxford. His previous books include *Bechbretha* (1983, with Fergus Kelly), *The Welsh Laws* (1989) and *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (1993).

EARLY CHRISTIAN IRELAND

T. M. CHARLES-EDWARDS



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 0521363950 - Early Christian Ireland - T. M. Charles-Edwards
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK www.cup.cam.ac.uk
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA www.cup.org
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

© Cambridge University Press 2000

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
 no reproduction of any part may take place without
 the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2000

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeset Monotype Baskerville 11/12.5 pt. *System* QuarkXPress™ [sE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Charles-Edwards, T. M.
 Early Christian Ireland / T. M. Charles-Edwards.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 36395 0 (hb)

1. Ireland – Church history. I. Title.

BR792.C43 2000

274.15'02-dc21 99-054974

ISBN 0 521 36395 0 hardback

Contents

<i>List of maps</i>	page viii
<i>List of tables</i>	ix
<i>List of figures</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiii
<i>A note on pronunciation</i>	xvi
<i>A note on the Chronicle of Ireland</i>	xix
Introduction	I
1 Ireland in the seventh century: a tour	8
(i) The lands of the southern Uí Néill	15
(ii) The lands of the Connachta	36
(iii) The north-east	54
2 Irish society <i>c.</i> 700: I. Communities	68
(i) Free and unfree, noble and commoner	68
(ii) Communities	80
(a) Kinship	84
(b) <i>Gens</i>	96
(c) Neighbours	100
(d) <i>Túath</i>	102
(e) The household (<i>muinter</i>)	106
(f) The retinue, the warband and the company of boys (<i>déis, fian</i> and <i>macrad</i>)	112
(g) Fosterage	115
(h) Church and monastery	117
3 Irish society <i>c.</i> 700: II. Social distinctions and moral values	124
(i) The problem of incommensurable status	124
(ii) The hierarchies of status	129
(iii) Honour and moral values	136

vi	<i>Contents</i>	
4	Ireland and Rome	145
	(i) From the Late Iron Age to Early Christian Ireland	145
	(ii) Irish settlements in Britain	158
	(iii) Language and identity in western Britain	163
	(iv) The ogam inscriptions in Ireland and the beginnings of literacy	172
	(v) The Latin culture of Ireland and Britain before 600	176
5	Conversion to Christianity	182
	(i) The evidence	183
	(ii) Conversion and culture	185
	(iii) Palladius	202
	(iv) Patrick	214
	(v) The development of the mission	233
6	The organisation of the early Irish Church	241
	(i) Bishops and monastic <i>paruchia</i>	241
	(ii) Scholars, bishops and abbots	264
	(iii) Bishops, scribes, scholars and the <i>túath</i>	271
7	Columba, Iona and Lindisfarne	282
	(i) The sources	283
	(ii) Columba's education	290
	(iii) The foundation of Iona	293
	(iv) Columba and the Picts	299
	(v) Iona and the English	308
	(vi) Insular art	326
8	Columbanus and his disciples	344
9	The Paschal controversy	391
	(i) Time, power and the calendar	391
	(ii) Exegesis	396
	(iii) The development of the controversy	405
	(iv) The seriousness of the issues	411
10	The primatial claims of Armagh, Kildare and Canterbury	416
	(i) Bishops, metropolitans and archbishops	416
	(ii) The <i>Collectio Canonum Hibernensis</i> and the Book of the Angel	421
	(iii) Kildare and the <i>Romani</i>	428
	(iv) The claims of Wilfrid and Theodore	429
	(v) The dating of the Irish texts relevant to the issue of an Irish archbishopric	438
11	The origins and rise of the Uí Néill	441
12	The kingship of Tara	469
	(i) Perceptions of Tara	469

<i>Contents</i>		vii
	(ii) Tara and Tailtiu	476
	(iii) Tara and the kingship of Ireland	481
	(iv) Druimm Cete, the Uí Néill and Osraige	488
	(v) The partiality of <i>Baile Chuinn</i>	491
	(vi) Non-Uí Néill kings of Tara	494
	(vii) The annals and the king-lists	501
	(viii) Variations in the power of the king of Tara	507
	(ix) The Airgialla and the Uí Néill	512
	(x) The kingship of Tara in the laws	518
13	The powers of kings	522
	(i) The fiscal resources of kings	525
	(ii) Free peoples and 'base-client peoples'	530
	(iii) <i>Frithfolad Muman</i>	534
	(iv) <i>Fortúatha</i> , 'external peoples'	548
	(v) The <i>óenach</i>	556
	(vi) The <i>cáin</i>	559
	(vii) The power of the Uí Néill in the eighth century	569
14	Conclusion	586
	<i>Appendix: Genealogies and king-lists</i>	600
	<i>Glossary: Irish and Latin</i>	630
	<i>Bibliography</i>	635
	<i>Index</i>	671

Maps

1	The kingdoms of the southern Uí Néill	<i>page</i> 16
2	Brega	18
3	Mide and Tethbae	23
4	Peoples and kingdoms of Connaught	39
5	Sites in Connaught	42
6	The north-west	52–3
7	The north-east	56–7
8	Three zones of Roman influence in Ireland	174
9	Leinster peoples and kingdoms	236
10	Sites in Leinster	238
11	The Irish in Britain	311
12	The northern frontier of Leinster	529
13	Munster peoples and kingdoms	532
14	Sites in Munster	535

Tables

2.1	Northern and southern clientship compared	page 78
3.1	<i>Crith Gablach</i> on lay status	130
3.2	<i>Uraicecht na Riar</i> and <i>Uraicecht Becc</i> on poets and the laity	131
3.3	<i>Uraicecht Becc</i> on kings, nobles and churchmen	132
4.1	Columbanus' education	179
5.1	Associates of St Patrick	234
6.1	Offices and places	265
6.2	<i>Scribae</i> and <i>sapientes</i> in the Annals of Ulster up to 911	266
6.3	<i>Scribae</i> and <i>sapientes</i> : AU figures compared with inclusive figures	268
6.4	Titles and places	270
6.5	Churches in Brega associated with bishops and scribes, 690–900	272
6.6	Kingdoms and churches in Brega	273
6.7	The incidence of patronymics in ecclesiastical obits in AU 701–50	274
6.8	Plurality of ecclesiastical titles in AU 801–50	275
6.9	The incidence of patronymics 801–50	276
9.1	The chronology of feasts in the Synoptic Gospels	399
9.2	The Celtic reconstruction	402
9.3	Cummian's reconstruction	403
9.4	Bede's exegesis	404
9.5	The Victorian and Dionysiac cycles compared	409
10.1	Justinian and the ranks of bishop	420
11.1	Leinster king-list	455
11.2	Kings of Tara	462
12.1	The Tara king-lists to 695	484
12.2	Kings of Tara omitted by <i>Baile Chuinn</i>	487
12.3	An emended version of the Middle Irish king-list, 560–642	493
12.4	The feuds of the Uí Néill, 600–37	496

12.5	The opposing sides at Mag Rath	497
12.6	The opposing sides at Áth Goan	499
12.7	An amended version of the Middle Irish king-list to 846	502
12.8	Chronicle of Ireland 590–650	504
13.1	Regional kings in Munster	540

Figures

1.1	Development of the Patrician texts	<i>page</i> 13
1.2	Síl Fergusa Cáecháin	25
1.3	Patrick's fictional kindred	32
1.4	Uí Ailella bishops	44
1.5	Uí Amolngada and Uí Fíachrach Múaide/Muirisce	50
1.6	Brón of Caisel Irroí	51
1.7	Dál Sailni	62
2.1	Kinship and fosterage	83
2.2	Descendants	84
2.3	Ancestor-focus and ego-focus	85
2.4	Collateral inheritance	88
2.5	The problem of resharing	89
2.6	Alternation and father–son succession to the kingdom of Tara	91
2.7	The ancestresses of Muiredach	94
4.1	The ogam alphabet	165
4.2	'(The memorial) of Voteporix' (ogam inscription)	167
7.1	Dál Riata to <i>c.</i> 630	297
8.1	The Merovingian kings	354
11.1	Cenél Conaill and the abbots of Iona	442
11.2	Patrick and the sons of Níall	445
11.3	Early Leinster	456
12.1	Cenél Conaill and <i>Baile Chuinn</i>	486
12.2	The feuds of the Southern Uí Néill	508
12.3	The Airgíalla, the Connachta and the Uí Néill	515
12.4	The Mugdorna	516
13.1	The principal Éoganachta	537

Acknowledgements

This book derives from an invitation by David Dumville to contribute to a Cambridge History of Ireland. I am very grateful to him for the initial stimulus and subsequent encouragement. Fergus Kelly, Clare Stancliffe, Paul Russell and Luned Davies have read all or part of the book and allowed me to see important work of their own in advance of publication. The important book by Colmán Etchingham, *Church Organization in Ireland AD 650 to 1000* (Maynooth, 1999) was only published when this book was at the press; it would, no doubt, have much improved my chapter 6. The quality of the maps (but not any mistakes they may contain) is due to help given by Elizabeth O'Brien, Edel Bhreathnach, Paul Synnott and Barry Masterson. Richard Sharpe allowed me to read his unpublished editions of the early lives of Brigit. Particular chapters have been much improved by reading unpublished theses by Catherine Swift and Philip Irwin. Like many others I have been the recipient of many precious items from the treasure-chest of scholarship kept and most generously disbursed by Francis John Byrne. As the Welsh poet remarked of Urien his king, 'As he gathered so he gave'. My first steps in early Irish history were taken under the expert guidance of D. A. Binchy and Gearóid Mac Niocaill when I was a scholar at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies; any subsequent progress has been helped by the example, learning and friendly encouragement of one of my fellow-scholars in 1967–9, Donnchadh Ó Corráin. My wife and children have had to endure the company of someone who seemed much more concerned with the late seventh than with the late twentieth century. That the book has finally appeared at all is due to the forbearance and care of the Cambridge University Press, and in particular its senior commissioning editor, William Davies, and the copy-editor, Rosemary Williams.

Abbreviations

AASS	<i>Acta Sanctorum</i> (Bollandists)
AB	<i>Analecta Bollandiana</i>
AClon	Annals of Clonmacnois, ed. D. Murphy, <i>The Annals of Clonmacnois</i> (Dublin, 1896)
Adomnán, VSC	Adomnán, <i>Vita Sancti Columbae</i> , ed. A. O. Anderson and M. O. Anderson, rev. edn by M. O. Anderson, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1991)
AI	Annals of Inisfallen, ed. and tr. S. Mac Airt, <i>The Annals of Inisfallen (MS. Rawlinson B. 503)</i> (Dublin, 1951)
AT	Annals of Tigernach, ed. and tr. W. Stokes, <i>Revue Celtique</i> , 16 (1895), 374–419; 17 (1896), 6–33, 119–263, 337–420; 18 (1897), 9–59, 150–97, 267–303; reprinted in two vols. (Felinfach, 1993)
AU	Annals of Ulster (with the ‘corrected’ AD dates as in the edn of S. Mac Airt and G. Mac Niocaill, <i>The Annals of Ulster (to AD 1131), Part I. Text and Translation</i> , Dublin, 1983)
BAR	British Archaeological Reports (Oxford)
Bede, HE	Bede, <i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i>
BN I, II etc.	<i>Bretha Nemed</i> texts numbered, ed. and tr. L. Breatnach, <i>Uraicecht na Ríar</i> (Dublin, 1987)
CCCM	Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Medievalis (Turnhout, 1971–)
CCSG	Corpus Christianorum, Series Graeca (Turnhout)
C CSL	Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina (Turnhout, 1954–)
CGH i	<i>Corpus Genealogiarum Hiberniae</i> , i, ed. M. A. O’Brien (Dublin, 1962)
CGSH	<i>Corpus Genealogiarum Sanctorum Hiberniae</i> , ed. P. Ó Riain (Dublin, 1985)

xiv	<i>List of abbreviations</i>
<i>CIH</i>	<i>Corpus Iuris Hibernici</i> , ed. D. A. Binchy (Dublin, 1979)
<i>CIIC</i>	R. A. S. Macalister, <i>Corpus Inscriptionum Insularum Celticarum</i> , 2 vols. (Dublin, 1945–9; vol. 1 repr. Blackrock, Co. Dublin, 1996)
<i>CMCS</i>	<i>Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies</i> (nos. 1–25), continued as <i>Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies</i> (nos. 26–)
<i>CS</i>	<i>Chronicum Scotorum</i> , ed. and tr. W. M. Hennessy, <i>Chronicum Scotorum: A Chronicle of Irish Affairs from the Earliest Times to AD 1135</i> (London, 1866)
<i>CSEL</i>	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum (Vienna, 1892–)
<i>DIL</i>	<i>Contributions to a Dictionary of the Irish Language</i> , ed. E. G. Quin <i>et al.</i> (Dublin, 1973–76)
<i>EIWK</i>	T. M. Charles-Edwards, <i>Early Irish and Welsh Kinship</i> (Oxford, 1993)
<i>ECMW</i>	V. Nash-Williams, <i>The Early Christian Monuments of Wales</i> (Cardiff, 1950)
<i>Fél</i>	<i>The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee: Féilire Óengusso Céili Dé</i> , ed. and tr. W. Stokes, Henry Bradshaw Society, 29 (London, 1905; repr. Dublin, 1979)
Heist, <i>Vitae</i>	<i>Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae e Codice olim Salmanticensi nunc Bruxellensi</i> , ed. W. W. Heist, Subsidia Hagiographica, 25 (Brussels, 1965)
<i>Hib.</i>	<i>Collectio Canonum Hibernensis</i> , ed. F. W. H. Wasserschleben, <i>Die irische Kanonensammlung</i> , 2nd edn (Leipzig, 1885)
Hogan, <i>Onom.</i>	E. Hogan, <i>Onomasticon Goedelicum Locorum et Tribuum Hiberniae et Scotiae</i> (Dublin, 1910)
<i>JRSAI</i>	<i>Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland</i>
Kenney, <i>The Sources</i>	J. F. Kenney, <i>The Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical</i> , Records of Civilization (New York, 1929)
<i>LL</i>	<i>The Book of Leinster, Formerly Lebar na Núachongbála</i> , ed. O. Bergin, R. I. Best, M. A. O'Brien and A. O'Sullivan, 6 vols. (Dublin, 1954–83)
Löwe (ed.), <i>Die Iren und Europa</i>	H. Löwe (ed.), <i>Die Iren und Europa</i> , 2 vols., Veröffentlichungen des Europa Zentrums Tübingen (Stuttgart, 1982)
<i>MGH</i>	Monumenta Germaniae Historica
AA	Auctores Antiquissimi

List of abbreviations

xv

- SRG Scriptores Rerum Germanicarum in usum
 scholarum
- SRM Scriptores Rerum Merovingicarum.
- Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii* Muirchú, *Vita S. Patricii*, ed. and tr. L. Bieler
 with F. Kelly, *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh*,
 Scriptores Latini Hiberniae, 10 (Dublin, 1979)
- Ní Chatháin and Richter (eds.), *Irland und Europa* P. Ní Chatháin
 and M. Richter (eds.), *Irland und Europa: Die Kirche im
 Frühmittelalter / Ireland and Europe: The Early Church*,
 Veröffentlichungen des Europa Zentrums Tübingen,
 Kulturwissenschaftliche Reihe (Stuttgart, 1984)
- Ní Chatháin and Richter (eds.), *Irland und die Christenheit* P. Ní
 Chatháin and M. Richter (eds.), *Irland und die
 Christenheit: Bibelstudien und Mission* (Stuttgart, 1987)
- PG J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Graeca*, 161 vols. (Paris,
 1857–86)
- PL J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina*, 221 vols. (Paris,
 1844–64)
- PLRE A. H. M. Jones, J. Morris and J. Martindale, *The
 Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, 3 vols.
 (Cambridge, 1971–92)
- Plummer, *Vitae* *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae*, ed. C. Plummer, 2 vols.
 (Oxford, 1910)
- PRIA *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*
- RC *Revue Celtique*
- SC Sources Chrétiennes (Paris)
- Tírechán, *Collectanea* Tírechán, *Collectanea*, in *The Patrician Texts in the
 Book of Armagh*, ed. and tr. L. Bieler with F. Kelly
 Scriptores Latini Hiberniae, 10 (Dublin, 1979)
- UJA *Ulster Journal of Archaeology*
- VT² *Vita Tripartita Sancti Patricii*, ed. K. Mulchrone, *Bethu
 Phátraic: The Tripartite Life of Patrick* (Dublin, 1939)
- ZCP *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie*

A note on pronunciation

There is no room here for a full discussion of the pronunciation of early Irish names, but some important points can be covered. (For further guidance, see P. Russell, *An Introduction to the Celtic Languages*, London, 1995, pp. 223–7.)

Normally, Irish words were stressed on the first syllable. Towards the end of the period covered by this book this initial stress caused vowels in other syllables to be reduced to the ‘murmur vowel’ (as in the second syllable of English *father*). This did not, however, affect long vowels, normally denoted in Old Irish by an acute accent (a long *a* is thus *á*). The main difficulty, however, is with the consonants. Most consonants have two values, mainly depending on whether they are initial or not. So, for example, *deorad* ‘foreigner, alien’ has two *ds*, one initial, the other final. The initial *d* is pronounced as *d*, but the final one as *ð* (*th* as in ‘the’). Similarly, an initial *m* is pronounced as an *m*, but a non-initial one (unless doubled) is a *v*. A different duality is found with *c* and *t*: when non-initial they were pronounced *g* and *d*. These principles of early Irish spelling can be illustrated by a name which recurs frequently in this book, Adomnán, and by two words, *tét*, ‘(harp-)string’, and *éc*, ‘death’. These were pronounced approximately:

aðovnān, with the stress marked on the initial *a*. (For the pronunciation of the *a* see the end of this note.)

Later the *o* in the second syllable was reduced to a murmur vowel, represented by an upside-down *e*. Hence:

aðəvnān

The other two were:

tēd, ēg (*ēd* was pronounced approximately as in northern English ‘made’)

It may be noted, first, that the short *a* in the first syllable of Adomnán or Cathal was normally pronounced further back in the mouth than a

standard English *a* (to get an approximately correct pronunciation shorten the long *a* in ‘father’) and, secondly, an *s* before an *e* or an *i* may well have been pronounced as a *sh*: hence Caisel = Cashel.

Another difficulty with consonants is that, as in Russian, they may be either ‘palatal’ or ‘neutral’ (‘slender’ or ‘broad’). This complication will largely be ignored here for simplicity’s sake; where it is shown, this will be by a superscript ⁱ, which indicates that the adjacent consonant is pronounced in the way it would naturally sound before an *i* or *y*. Thus English ‘key’ has a palatal *k*, while ‘cap’ does not. The use of the accent over a diphthong, such as *ai* (approximately English ‘aye’), is to distinguish it from *a* followed by the ‘glide vowel’ signifying that the adjacent consonant is palatal.

In the following suggested pronunciations of some common early Irish names *x* stands for the *ch* in *loch*; *γ* stands for its voiced counterpart, as in German *Tage*; *θ* stands for the *th* in ‘thin’, to be distinguished from *ð* standing for the *th* in ‘the’; all the names are pronounced with the stress on the first syllable:

Áed	aið (approximately to rhyme with ‘hythe’)
Áedán or Aídán	aiðān (but anglicised as Aidan), where <i>ān</i> rhymes with Khan
Báetán	baidān
Brega	breyɑ
Cathal	caθəl (later <i>th</i> came to be pronounced <i>h</i> , and this pronunciation is common)
Colmán	colmān
Congal	conγəl
Domnall	dovnəll
Donnchad	donnəxəð
Éogan	ēoγən (but later, in Middle Irish, Éogan changed to Eógán, and later still the <i>E</i> was dropped and the <i>γ</i> came to be pronounced <i>w</i> ; hence this name is commonly pronounced <i>owən</i> , to rhyme with ‘low ‘un’)
Flaithbertach	flaθvərtəx
Lóegaire	loiγəre
Mide	miðe (anglicised as Meath = mīð)
Muirchertach	murxərtəx
Muirchú	mu’rəchū
Murchad	murəxəð

xviii

A note on pronunciation

Óengus

oinɣəs

Suibne

su'vne (the later pronunciation is anglicised as
Sweeney)

Tadgg

taðg (often pronounced 'taig')

In the names of kindreds (including royal dynasties), it is customary to use a relatively modern pronunciation for *Uí* 'descendants':

Uí Néill

ī nē'ill (the *ll* is 'slender' or 'palatal')

Uí causes the following letter to have its 'internal' value:

Uí Dúnlainge

ī ðūnləŋe

Uí elides a following *F* and changes *S* to *h* (this is shown by a superscript dot):

Uí Fáeláin

ī āilā^hn.

A note on the Chronicle of Ireland

The ‘Chronicle of Ireland’ is a handy term for the parent-text lying behind the extant annals up to AD 911, in very much the same way as one Alfredian text of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle lies behind extant copies. It is believed that up to *c.* 740 this single source was written on Iona; from then until 911 it was continued at a monastery in the Irish midlands, probably in Brega. From 911 the text represented by the main hand of the Annals of Ulster was continued at Armagh until the break in the text in the twelfth century, but other annals derive from a continuation written at Clonmacnois. Hence, for the period before 911, if the Annals of Ulster agree with any of the Clonmacnois group of annals, one can be reasonably certain that the entry in question derives from the Chronicle of Ireland. However, it is very likely for other reasons that many other entries, now preserved only in one branch of the tradition, also go back to the Chronicle of Ireland.