

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-18083-2 - Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe: Studies in Memory of Kathleen Hughes
Edited by Dorothy Whitelock, Rosamond McKitterick and David Dumville

Excerpt

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Foreword

When Kathleen Hughes died in 1977, she had just begun to prepare the Wiles Lectures which she was to have delivered in Belfast the following year: the result would have been a book published by the Cambridge University Press. On many occasions during her last months she had discussed with the editors of the present memorial volume a variety of themes and their suitability as topics for this major lecture-series. Many possibilities were canvassed, but they shared in common Kathleen's determination to offer an assessment of an aspect of Irish history *within its European context*. As one who had spent her adult life teaching mediaeval history she well knew the importance of the mutual relationships between Ireland and the rest of western Europe in the early Middle Ages.

At the beginning of 1977 none of us could have believed that these plans were to be so abruptly terminated. When, later in the year, suggestions for a tribute to Kathleen were being mooted, it seemed that somewhat of the plans for the Wiles Lectures might yet be achieved. The editors approached various friends of Kathleen's, scholars interested in viewing mediaeval Irish history and culture within a wider context, to invite them to offer contributions discussing Ireland's interrelationships with other European cultures. The response was such as to encourage the Cambridge University Press to undertake publication.

It is still too often the case that the history of individual European cultures is studied and written in a narrow way, in ignorance or disregard of the cultures of neighbouring countries. The history of mediaeval Ireland has suffered grievously from such attitudes. Students of mediaeval Ireland rarely allow a just place to external influences on the development of Irish culture, and almost never take advantage of the many fruitful comparisons which may be drawn between mediaeval Irish history and that of other European countries. Similarly, students of those other societies, confronted by the reality of Irish influence in the Middle Ages, have generally been ignorant of the Insular context from which these stimuli emerged. In short, there has

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been insufficient give and take between scholars with geographically diverse interests, and this lack of contact is writ large across the pages of the relevant academic literature. Kathleen Hughes was acutely aware of the problem; in creating this volume the editors and contributors have sought to display some of the very varied aspects of mediaeval Ireland's role in European history and to suggest the fruitfulness of collaboration between scholars having different specialist interests yet sharing a common aim – the elucidation of early mediaeval European culture.

The dimly perceptible beginnings of the Irish Church, and thus of the history of mediaeval Ireland, establish, in the plurality of their sources, something of a pattern for the future. There is no period in the history of pre-Norman Ireland of which we can say that it was characterized by an exclusive relationship with a single external culture. In the secular as in the ecclesiastical sphere Ireland's strength and weaknesses lay in diversity. Such diversity is the dominant characteristic of her external relations, both of what she received from abroad and of what she contributed to west European culture. Indeed, one of the recurring themes in Irish ecclesiastics' contacts with foreign Churches is the lack of uniformity, the lack of organization, the lack of authority and hierarchy perceived by the foreign observer of Irish ecclesiastical practice.

By other European standards early mediaeval Ireland was odd, as we are so frequently told by modern scholars; behind that oddity, however, lay not merely the unfamiliar patterns of Celtic society but also the strength of a culture not beaten down by centuries of Roman occupation. When the institutions of the Late Roman Church were transplanted to the barbarian soil of Ireland – the first such movement in the west of Europe – compromise was, if not inevitable, at least not incredible. The existence of an organized native learned class, which proved able to survive and adapt to the impact of Christianity, provided one of the major forces for compromise and for assimilation. The continuity of the Irish literary tradition with the pagan Celtic past has often been remarked, a continuity which manifests itself as much in hagiography as in the production and redaction in ecclesiastical scriptoria of written versions of heroic tales.

From native concepts of learning Irish ecclesiastical scholars inherited their joint passions of excessively thorough (if often strikingly original) classification and intellectual nit-picking. Grammatical and theological exegesis particularly lent themselves to such approaches; the Irish displayed their talents to the full in both these disciplines. There were other aspects of the new religion and learning which gave themselves naturally to assimilation with native techniques and genres. The secular men of learning were much

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concerned with propaganda, especially dynastic propaganda; the hagiographical genre came to their hands almost begging for manipulation. Just so, another group of the native *aes dána*, the craftsmen, were able to blend with their native inheritance the artistic themes and motifs imported in Christianity's train. Their behaviour formed a precedent adopted, whether consciously or unconsciously, by their counterparts in Pictland and Northumbria: the eighth-century Book of Kells is one of the finest, and most controversial, products of this marriage.

In the seventh century the work of building Irish Christianity must have seemed well advanced. Controversy about essentials of organization and morals racked the Church, now full of status in a hierarchical society. A remarkable Latin culture had begun to be displayed. The intellectual influence of Spain and Gaul was at its height, while the British Churches which had, in a dark period, nurtured and sustained Irish Christianity, transmitting to it various aspects of a provincial Late Roman civilization, withdrew – with their countrymen – into an increasingly bitter geographical and intellectual isolation. Almost by accident, Christian Ireland suddenly became a giver as well as a receiver of religion, learning, and Latin culture. The Irish involvement in England was one of the decisive events of early mediaeval European history, for the evangelization of the Anglo-Saxons and their development of a Christianity uniquely blended from Roman, Gaulish, and Irish elements, was to inject, in the course of the eighth century, a new vigour into the western Church.

If Ireland's impact on England was great, in another area of Britain it brought about a series of developments unique (it would seem) in mediaeval Irish history. The colonizing movement which led to the establishment of a sixth Irish province, but one situated in north Britain, was to lead ultimately, in the union of Dál Riata and Pictland, to the creation of the distinctive culture of Scotland. The kingdom of the Scots remained, for the rest of the pre-Norman period (to say nothing of succeeding centuries), firmly attached to Gaelic forms of speech and literature. The links which bound together the various parts of the Scottish and the Irish worlds were expressed, and developed retrospectively, in a learned and propagandistic literature which was the common coin of Gaelic – or even Celtic – culture. Only in Scotland, however, did the context of colonization, and hence of language, persist in such a way that a major geographical extension of Gaelic culture was achieved. In Wales, where – as part of the same context of migration which had created Scottish Dál Riata – there had also been Irish settlements, the continuing effects of Irish culture are intangible; the links of geography, of sentiment, and of shared peculiarities which associated the Irish and Welsh Churches with each other have left insufficient evidence for us to be able to

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assert the occurrence of any decisive impact of Gaelic on early mediaeval Welsh culture.

The ninth century may have seen the expansion of Gaelic culture in Scotland, but in that century other and opposing forces of expansion were at work. The Scandinavian irruption into the life of the British Isles had many far-reaching effects, not least of which was the development of Scandinavian settlements in coastal Ireland, and the consequent – if irregular and partial – assimilation of various Scandinavian and Irish customs and institutions. Viking activities caused both scandal and fear in Ireland, as elsewhere, and (also as elsewhere) horrified ecclesiastics were not slow to record their dismay. The more unusual the vikings' activities, the greater the annalist's dismay, despair, or outrage; reporting within the circumscribed conventions of the largely Latin formulae of his trade was, in consequence, the more difficult. The fillip thus given to the vernacular is mirrored in many other Irish literary contexts. In Ireland Latin began a rapid decline which may have been exaggerated by the exodus of many distinguished Irish scholars to the centres of Carolingian learning and religion.

The Irish continued to give of themselves in the ninth century, but the recorded gifts will seem (and not unjustifiably) more extraordinary than ever before as we concentrate our attention on the heretical ravings of Niall mac Ialláin, on the English red martyrdom of a coarb of St Columba, and on the remarkable talents and accomplishments of Eriugena. Irish connections with England were never broken, though they were probably greatly attenuated, in the later ninth and tenth centuries. The Continental links fared better, even withstanding in the tenth century a major shift in the direction of cultural impetus. As recovery from the worst of the viking irruptions led to revival and reform of ecclesiastical institutions, and to changing assessments of the relationship of lay power to ecclesiastical office and property, so Ireland once more, if slowly, became the inheritor of an external trend. By the early twelfth century, reform was very much in the air in Ireland, reform which had much of central Europe in its atmosphere, though England's influence was not far away. And at Killaloe we have a nice example of the meeting of these influences with many older aspects of Irish Christianity, the result of earlier adaptations of external trends to Irish *mores*. The reform-hagiographers at Killaloe, utterly regicentric in their attitudes, attached themselves to a type of kingship which was to have no future in Ireland after the Norman conquests of the late twelfth century. External ecclesiastical influence was now followed into Ireland by the secular arm, aided by a papal bull and perhaps by Irish ecclesiastical support. The whole basis of Ireland's external links was revolutionized by the events of 1169, putting a term to the questions asked in this book.

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Given the richness of the theme, we can confidently anticipate considerable progress in its study. For example, the massive series of essays being collected by Heinz Löwe under the title *Die Iren und Europa im früheren Mittelalter* will assuredly advance our knowledge to a notable degree. Current work, of which the essays in the present volume are one representative, suggests a number of important avenues for profitable exploration or reconsideration.

Recent study of Frankish history has stressed the importance of the Frankish, as against the Irish, contribution to the growth of monasticism and the religious life in the seventh and eighth centuries. The saints' Lives, the foundation-histories of seventh- and eighth-century monasteries, the progress of missionary work (where the influence of the south-west on northern Gaul is now receiving keen attention), and the nature of manuscript production, all provide evidence to suggest that the influence exerted on the religious life of Frankish Gaul by a distinctively Irish type of monasticism, emanating from the Columbanian houses, was far smaller than is usually supposed. The whole place of the Irish centres of monasticism – and especially those associated with Luxeuil and Péronne – in the ecclesiastical life of Merovingian Gaul is ripe for reexamination.

A comparable reexamination of the corpus of Hiberno-Latin exegesis and its alleged influence on that of Continental Europe is now long overdue. Great difficulty is occasioned students of the period by the cloud of suspicion which hangs over this important body of texts. Only when we can speak with confidence of the range of sources available in Ireland and (separately) of those to hand in other centres of Irish activity in the seventh and eighth centuries – as well as of the range of texts produced by Irishmen at home and abroad in that period – shall we also be able to grasp more of the Irish contribution to the Carolingian renaissance.

Much manuscript evidence has been made available, allowing us many and varied glimpses of the activities of Irish scholars on the Continent in the ninth and tenth centuries. But we still lack an attempt at a survey of the subject, as we lack also an appreciation of the contexts, whether institutional or private, within which Irish scholars and ecclesiastics worked. One of the major difficulties for the student of relations between Ireland and the rest of Europe in the early Middle Ages is the apparent absence of evidence, over long periods, for institutional contacts between centres of learning, religious devotion, or ecclesiastical authority in Ireland and their Continental counterparts, most noticeably the Papacy.

Uncertainty as to the institutional structures created by Irish missionaries extends in some measure to England, in spite of the evidence of Bede. An aspect of Irish missionary work better studied in its Continental than its

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Insular context is the impact of Irish Christianity and its mission theology on the Christian vocabulary of the Germanic vernaculars. This is part of our great difficulty – compounded by the problems of certainly identifying Hiberno-Latin exegesis – of understanding the Irish ecclesiastical mentality at the end of the sixth century and the beginning of the seventh when Ireland began to export its religion. Greater attention to the exegesis will no doubt be most informative, but we are likely to continue to feel the difficulty that our contemporary sources start only at about this date. An issue as important as the beginnings of the paschal controversy (and its attendant disputes) in Ireland suffers from these disabilities, though here recent work is helpfully stressing the importance of the Gaulish Council of Orléans (541) in prompting Irish thinking on the question.

After the initial period of conversion to Christianity in Ireland, this indication of controversy must have been one of the first and most formative stimuli to be felt by the Irish Churches. At much the same time, and perhaps not unrelated, may have come the stimulus to keep annalistic records. In time, such records were expanded, and retrospectively extended, by the use of foreign chronicles: we need detailed studies of the sources of the foreign annals, of the contacts and interests which they indicate, and of the dates of activity which they suggest. The interrelationships of the various Irish annal collections still require an enormous amount of work, but that remains a prerequisite for the proper use of these texts as historical evidence.

The earliest Irish annals seem to emanate from Iona; although the Iona annals do not extend beyond the mid-eighth century, we continue thereafter to obtain a large proportion of our evidence for Scottish political history from the Irish annal collections. The connections of Scottish *Dál Riata* with Ireland remain close, in spite of a rapidly developing political independence. The continuing existence, but also the developing and changing forms, in Scotland of Irish institutions and habits must be studied in part through Irish annals whose authors may have had no comprehension of altering political conditions in Scotland. An examination of how Scottish behaviour – for example, in questions of succession to kingship – develops from its Irish origins, being modified not merely with the passing of time but under pressure of Pictish institutions and new Scottish conditions, would be most valuable and enlightening. The same type of question could be raised for the Western Isles of Scotland, and indeed for Iceland, with reference to the considerable admixture of Gaelic and Norse populations in both areas. What is more, recent work on the Scandinavian cities of York and Dublin suggests the possibility of a substantial advance in our understanding of the interaction of these two peoples.

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The vikings may have provided an important link between Ireland and England in the ninth and tenth centuries, but they were not of course the only one. At a more pacific level, we may note in later Anglo-Saxon England the presence of a Celtic strain (of which much more study is needed) among the saints culted. Tenth-century England, by virtue of the hermeneutic style of Latin which it cultivated, was once believed to be a hotbed of Celtic influences. This view no longer seems justified, for the Continent now offers itself as a more ready source of such a fashion. However, among the ultimate influences on the development of these tendencies in early mediaeval Latin writing may nonetheless have been texts by Irish authors, such as the seventh-century *Hisperica Famina*, or the poetry of Eriugena; the diffusion and influence of such works requires investigation. We may eventually discover here a remoter, but more certain, aspect of Irish influence on early English culture.

From England came encouragement towards ecclesiastical reform in eleventh-century Ireland, but in this question too Irish influence sown on the Continent at an earlier date seems to have returned bearing new fruit. The Irish ecclesiastical presence in central Europe allowed the return to the home country of new ideas of Church-reform. One of the leaders in twelfth-century Irish reform wrote a tract which depended on models produced during the Carolingian renaissance. The Roman pilgrimage resumed in the eleventh century; this, too, cannot have failed to encourage the spread of new ideas. But the Irish reformers looked also to their own past; we find texts from the seventh-century debates being quoted in the service of another reforming movement. As yet, we know too little of the centres which preserved such texts, encouraged research, and benefited from intercourse with the Continent. At the end of our period, however, Ireland still retained sufficient institutional vitality to attempt to adapt foreign influences to native conditions, just as it had in preceding centuries.

The eight early mediaeval centuries of Ireland's history are not to be surveyed, even in respect of one theme, in sixteen essays. The period is one of remarkable variety. Yet, if the Ireland of 1150 is different from the Ireland of, say, 650 – as surely it is – twelfth-century Ireland nonetheless remains decidedly unusual by comparison with her European partners. We can see that Ireland's influence abroad was largely spent by the time we enter the eleventh century, though earlier Hiberno-Latin texts continued to be copied and read throughout western Europe in the twelfth century; thereafter, Ireland's place in Europe seems characterized by an almost continuous, yet erratic, series of attempts to assimilate her to a European normality. What makes *early* mediaeval Ireland so fascinating is the vitality and independence of her response to stimuli from other European countries and

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her individual, even idiosyncratic, but vital contribution to the development of European culture.

Inevitably, there are some regrets in the making of a book like this. Of course we should have liked to do more. Some only of Kathleen's friends and admirers could contribute to this volume. One absentee in particular should be named. We had hoped to begin this book with a paper on 'The Original and Influential Character of the Early Irish Church' by Denis Bethell, a distinguished mediaeval historian whose friendship with Kathleen Hughes was of long standing. At the eleventh hour he was stricken with a serious illness which prevented completion of his contribution. The editors have reluctantly sent the book to press without him, trusting that his hoped-for recovery will eventually allow the paper to appear – elsewhere, alas. In spite of his enforced withdrawal (and this is not the only disappointment the editors have suffered) we confidently dedicate *Ireland in Early Mediaeval Europe* to the memory of a fine scholar and dear friend whose standards and enthusiasms are, we believe, mirrored in these pages.

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Kathleen Winifred Hughes 1926–1977

ROSAMOND MCKITTERICK

Kathleen Hughes was first and foremost an historian. Her work was a model of what she felt history should be: ‘based on a critical and exhaustive examination of source-material, the date, where the author obtained his material and how reliable it is likely to be, his prejudices, why he wrote, what his style shows of his associations and milieu’. Her rigorous critical appraisal of and sympathy with her source-material was, throughout her working life, complemented by a creative imagination, a soundness of judgement and a lucidity of expression which made what she wrote a pleasure and an inspiration to read.

Born in Middlesbrough on 8 September 1926, Kathleen Hughes attended various schools before entering Bedford College, University of London, as an undergraduate in 1944. After she graduated she gained her Teacher’s Diploma at the Institute of Education before embarking on her doctoral research on St Finnian of Clonard. During her years as a research student she attended the classes of Francis Wormald, from whom she acquired her deep and lasting interest in manuscripts, mediaeval art and the liturgy. She also travelled regularly to Oxford to attend the classes in Old and Middle Irish given by Sir Idris Foster, and spent long summers in Ireland reading Irish with a number of Irish scholars who became her firm friends. In these and subsequent years she travelled widely in the Irish countryside and gained her intimate knowledge of and deep affection for the country and its people. In this period also she formed a close friendship with Paul Grosjean, and their remarkable and lively correspondence, learned and full of new ideas, continued until his death in 1964. In 1951 she gained her doctorate and for the next four years was an Assistant Lecturer in History at Royal Holloway College, where she was much appreciated by her students and colleagues alike. She was elected into an Official Fellowship and College Lectureship in History at Newnham College, Cambridge in 1955, and remained a Fellow there until her death, fully involved in College life and in directing studies for both the History Tripos and the Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic Tripos. In

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1957 she was appointed a University Assistant Lecturer in the Faculty of History – one of the few women who had become a Lecturer in that Faculty. But she resigned this post when she succeeded Nora Chadwick as Lecturer in the Early History and Culture of the British Isles in the then Department of Anglo-Saxon and Kindred Studies. In this post she felt her research and teaching would run more in harness than they would had she stayed in the Faculty of History. Her fruitful and happy years in the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic under the chairmanship first of Dorothy Whitelock and then of Peter Clemoes culminated in her appointment as the first Nora Chadwick Reader in Celtic Studies in the University of Cambridge in 1976. Her tenure of the Readership was tragically short; she held it for only two terms, before her death on 20 April 1977.

Her scholarly career was one in which her teaching and research always complemented and enriched one another. She prepared for her teaching extremely conscientiously and gave herself wholeheartedly to it. Undergraduates who were taught by her have remarked how she constantly stimulated her students to give of their best. Supervisions were something to look forward to, with some trepidation, but she always expressed a respect for students and their opinions and herself acknowledged any insight which a student offered to or provoked in her. She taught above all by example – deep and rigorous scholarship underlay the easy familiarity she displayed in her teaching. I myself was never fortunate enough to be taught by her in the formal sense, but I learnt an enormous amount from her in the three years before she died. Breakfast, lunch and supper, especially breakfast on Sunday mornings, would often be prolonged as we discussed our work; it was Kathleen's particular gift to make one feel that one was helping and informing her as well as receiving from her friendly advice and constructive criticism. She was impressive in the zest and efficiency with which she tackled the unfamiliar or a new field of knowledge which had to be mastered, and was always ready to consult other scholars on any subject when she felt her own knowledge to be inadequate.

As her reputation grew, Kathleen was increasingly in demand as a lecturer outside Cambridge. She gave the O'Donnell Lectures in Wales (1969), Edinburgh (1974) and Oxford (1975), the Jarrow Lecture (1970), the Sir John Rhys Memorial Lecture at the British Academy (1973), the Hunter Marshall Lectures in the University of Glasgow (1977) and was to have given the Wiles Lectures in Belfast in 1978. In 1973, she obtained the Cambridge degree of Doctor of Letters. She was to have received an honorary doctorate of the National University of Ireland in Dublin on 31 March 1977, but her heart attack on 26 March prevented her from travelling to take it.

In the field of the ecclesiastical history of early mediaeval Ireland Kathleen