General Introduction

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This book spans one thousand years of historical writing and thought in England, Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. It begins, at its early limit, with Gildas (*fl.* 500–550 CE), whose *De excidio Britanniae* (*The Ruin of Britain*) took the demise of the Roman empire as its beginning point for a history of the Britons. It charts, at its outer chronological limit, the transition from manuscript to print and from medieval to Reformation historiography.

Like the medieval histories that comprise its subject, this volume seeks to give a shape – or many shapes – to the past. One of the challenges, however, of describing medieval historical writing is the capaciousness of *historia* as a premodern concept. In the Middle Ages history writing did not belong to any particular genre, language, or class of texts.[1] Its remit was wide, embracing the events of biblical and classical antiquity; the deeds of warriors, saints, rulers, and abbots; practices of archival recording and preservation; and acts of contemporary reportage. Equally wide is the remit of contemporary medieval studies, in which many disciplines collaborate on the project of interpreting the medieval past. The twenty-seven chapters in this volume embrace this collaborative ethos as they address the historiography of medieval Ireland, Scotland, Wales, and England from a range of disciplinary perspectives, including political and legal history, literary history, art history, religious studies, codicology, the history of emotions, gender studies, and critical race theory. They share an interest not only in what medieval historical texts can reveal about past lived experiences but how these sources functioned as cultural products themselves, intrinsically rhetorical in nature and hence highly mediated in their transmission and interpretation. Contributors map terrains of historical thinking across literary genres, such as romance, travel writing, and elegy. They uncover fictions in the archive, as well as the rich veins of national mythmaking tapped by medieval writers of all stripes. Additionally, the

[1] See Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: Writing of History*, pp. 1–2.

chapters in this volume attend to the ways in which historical narratives cross linguistic and geographical borders, both insular and continental. They trace institutional lines of affiliation but also affectionate ties between individuals. Above all, they resist teleological readings of medieval historical writing, focusing instead on the multiple temporalities and productive anachronisms that fuelled some of the richest and most innovative writing in the Middle Ages.

The medieval past, and medieval efforts to understand and shape the past, constitute a shared field of inquiry across contemporary medieval studies. For medieval writers no less than modern scholars, the question of what defined 'history' proved inextricable from the question of who defined history and for what purposes. From the Roman rhetorical tradition, the Middle Ages inherited a definition of *historia* that carried both ethical and temporal connotations. In the words of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (*c*.86–82 BCE), *historia* was 'an account of exploits actually performed, but removed in time from the recollection of our age' ('gesta res, sed ab aetatis nostrae memoria remota').[2] Echoed in Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* (*c*.615–36), this definition would find a prominent place in Bede's preface to the *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (*c*.731 CE), where he arrays the 'sayings and doings of the men of old' ('priorum gestis siue dictis') alongside the words of holy scripture as mutually valuable instruments in teaching audiences how to imitate the good and eschew the bad.[3] This model of history competed with other ways of organising the past. Isidore, for instance, found it necessary to subdivide history into 'diaries', 'calendars', and 'annals' and to make a further distinction between annals and history, the former recording 'years that our age has not known' ('eorum annorum quos aetas nostra non novit') and the latter 'those times that we have seen' ('eorum temporum quae vidimus').[4] Nearly six hundred years later, his influential set of distinctions would still resonate for Gervase of Canterbury, writing *c*.1200, as he attempted to describe the difference between the historian and the chronicler: while 'each strives towards truth' ('uterque veritati intendit'), the historian sets forth events 'expansively and

[2] It stood in contrast to *fabula*, which related events 'neither true nor probable' (*neque veras neque veri similes*) and *argumentum*, which narrated imaginary events in a plausible way. Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, pp. 24–5. See also Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, 1.xli–xliv. On the difference between *historia, fabula, and argumentum*, see Mehtonen, *Old Concepts and New Poetics*; Ward, '"Chronicle" and "History"', pp. 115–16; Kempshall, *Rhetoric*, pp. 122–5; Deliyannis (ed.), *Historiography*, pp. 2–7; and Tyler, *England in Europe*, pp. 62–5.

[3] *HEA*, pp. 2–3.

[4] Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, ed. Lindsay, 1.xliv.4, pp. 22–5 (translation from *Etymologies*, ed. Barney *et al*., p. 67).

elegantly' ('diffuse et eleganter'), while the chronicler proceeds 'simply and briefly' ('simplicter . . . et breviter;). The historian instructs an audience in worthy deeds and mores, while the chronicler 'reckons' ('computat') the years and months.[5]

The question of whether history belonged to the distant past or the urgent present, to a style of writing or a form of recording, preoccupied the producers and consumers of historical writing across the whole of the Middle Ages. Their ways of organising and theorising 'history' comprise the matter of this volume. Also central to this book, however, are the ways that contemporary scholarship organises and theorises the medieval past. In this way, the volume maintains a dual outlook, seeking to offer a broad survey of major historiographical developments in Britain and Ireland across the Middle Ages, while also re-evaluating our own methodological approaches to these topics. For Clare Lees, for instance, the ability to posit women as producers and consumers of historical writing in the early Middle Ages means shifting our evidential assumptions about the 'sayings and doings of the men of old'. For Elizabeth Tyler, understanding the genesis of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* means situating it within broadly continental historiographic trends. Richard K. Emmerson argues that the 'end of time' fundamentally shapes medieval conceptions of times past, while Magali Coumert shows how the dissolution of the Roman empire deprived Gildas, the ostensible founder of a British historiographical tradition, of his temporal bearings. Taken together, the twenty-seven chapters in this volume reappraise the idea of an 'insular historiographic tradition', both by taking an expansive approach to the purview of history writing – its genres, textual forms, and practitioners – and by examining the constructed nature of insularity and its related concept, the 'nation'.

As many authors discuss in this volume, moreover, Irish, Welsh, Scottish, and English writers understood the imperatives of history writing differently at different points in time. To speak of 'an' insular tradition is thus to overlook both the European context of medieval historiographic production as well as a highly variegated set of practices across England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. Indeed, notions of insularity have always travelled closely with the concerns of empire, as the late antique chronicler Paulus Orosius demonstrates in his *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* (417 CE). Written as the historiographic complement to Augustine of Hippo's own monumental feat of Christian scholarship,

[5] Gervase of Canterbury, *Historical Works*, vol. 1, p. 87. See also Given-Wilson, *Chronicles: Writing of History*, p. 1; and Gransden, 'Prologues', pp. 137–8.

The City of God Against the Pagans, Orosius' universal history went on to become the widest circulating history of antiquity in Latin Europe.[6] It is perhaps best known for its chorographic *mappa mundi*, a survey of the rivers, mountains, oceans, and political boundaries of Asia, Africa, and Europe.[7] Within this global geography, Britain and Ireland appear as larger islands among a constellation of many smaller ones. As Coumert and Foot discuss elsewhere in this volume, these places resided at the margins of the Roman and post-Roman European landscape, inhabiting a liminal geography that writers from Gildas onwards would alternately lament and celebrate in their own historiographic projects: '800 miles long and 200 miles wide' ('in longo milia passum DCCC, in lato milia CC'), as Orosius describes it, Britain would seem to reside at the edge of the world.[8] Beyond it lay an 'infinite expanse of Ocean' ('oceano infinito patet'), populated only by the Orkney Islands and past them 'Thule', 'known to very few men' ('uix paucis nota habetur').[9] Ireland he describes in more detail, suggesting that one can see the Galician city of Brigantia (present-day A Coruña) from 'that promontory where the mouth of the river Scena is found'.[10] Though the mouth of the Shannon River provides no actual vantage on Spain, fifth-century traders regularly sailed from there to the port city of Brigantia.[11]

For Orosius, then, Britain and Ireland constituted distinctive islands, but they were far from isolated ones. Rather, they formed integral parts of the larger networks of trade, pastoral care, intellectual exchange, and military movement that connected continental and insular communities in the late antique and early medieval periods. Orosius serves in this way as an apt figure with which to open a volume of this kind. Though he claimed the Christian Roman empire as his *patria*, his historical template proved readily adaptable to more local geographies and struggles. By the eleventh century, the *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans* had seen translation into Old English and Arabic; in the thirteenth and fourteenth

[6] See Mortensen, 'Diffusion of Roman Histories'; and also Borsa *et al.*, 'Medieval European Literature', p. 14.
[7] Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, 1.2. On Orosius' chorography, see Merrills, *History and Geography*, pp. 70–9. For further discussion in this volume, see Chapter 7, pp. 117 and 124, Chapter 8, pp. 142–7, and Chapter 10, pp. 183–7.
[8] Orosius, *Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, 1.2.77 (for the Latin, see Orosius, *Histoires contre les paiens*, ed. Arnaud-Lindet, p. 31).
[9] *Ibid.*, 1.2.78–9. 'Thule' could refer perhaps to Iceland or the Shetland or Faroe Islands. See *Histoires contre les paiens*, p. 31 n. 42 and, for further discussion, Merrills, *History and Geography*, pp. 95–6.
[10] *Ibid.*, 1.2.81 (*Histoires contre les paiens*, p. 32: 'promunturio, ubi Scenae fluminis ostium est').
[11] See Ó Corráin, 'Orosius'.

centuries, versions appeared in French, Aragonese, and Italian.[12] Writers from Gildas to Bede to Henry of Huntingdon and Ranulf Higden all drew on his example. For these writers, as for Orosius, history was never either universal or local: it was always both, with the fates of particular places – be they Rome, Britain, London, or a local abbey – bound inextricably with the larger patterning of the divine plan and the larger cultural networks that crisscrossed Latin Europe and beyond. Implicitly, many of these histories prove as well to be *contra paganos* in the broad sense – that is, they emerge as defences of or apologiae for one's own locality or belief system against a neighbouring, and perhaps threatening, set of legal, religious, or political differences. As in the case of Orosius, however, such histories also depended on 'pagan' antecedents and contemporaries to articulate their own specific vision of the past. As Christine Chism describes in her chapter, the figure of the pagan proved richly productive of historiographical writing from Augustine and Orosius onwards, encompassing both the rhetorical and literary traditions of the classical past and the intellectual and religious traditions of Jewish and Arabic contemporaries.

Just as medieval writers used the purviews of the universal and the local to their own ends, so too has medievalist scholarship, from the early modern antiquarians, jurists, and polemicists who combed medieval chronicles for evidence of ancient liberties to the first academic medieval historians of the nineteenth century, like William Stubbs (1825–1901), whose editorial skill and interpretive zeal unfolded a powerfully influential narrative about the origins and development of the English state. In all of these cases, the ways that one delimits 'medieval history' play a crucial role in defining the purpose of historical scholarship itself. It was this point that Richard Southern placed at the centre of his 1961 inaugural address as the Chichele Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford. Surveying the previous century of academic medieval history, he suggested that Stubbs and his successors had succeeded in 'proving to themselves and to the world that history was not an easy study for rich men and that it had a discipline of its own'. But their commitment to the history of institutions came at the 'cost . . . of those parts of human experience which are not related to public affairs'.[13] To enlarge the study of history, Southern admits, risks losing disciplinary specificity; but to confine it risks excluding

[12] Borsa *et al.*, 'Medieval European Literature', p. 14.
[13] Southern, 'Shape and Substance', p. 99. See also Partner (ed.), *Writing Medieval History*, pp. xi–xiii.

'other fields of experience, some of them very distant in time, that have never been more alive, never more necessary to us'.[14]

This volume reflects the enlarged 'fields of experience' that shape contemporary approaches to medieval historiography. Its contributors come from the fields of literature, history, and art history, a combined perspective that looks to capture some of the disciplinary fluidity of medieval history writing itself. Medieval Britain and Ireland in this way serve as the subject of this book, but also as a methodological case study, showing how different scholarly perspectives can build a cohesive and multifaceted view on a time period and its historical self-understanding. Certain authors and texts thus recur over multiple chapters, but always with a different purview and set of critical investments. Nor does this book seek to replicate the work of Antonia Gransden, whose two-volume *Historical Writing in England* remains unsurpassed as a survey of chroniclers and biographers writing in England from the early to the late Middle Ages. But if Gransden took a 'pragmatic, not theoretical'[15] approach to her survey of history writing, we have opted for a more theoretical approach to ours, combining an overview of key figures and developments in the historical tradition with an attention to the overarching questions of how medieval writers conceived of the past and how modern scholars, in turn, make use of those efforts. These questions lead contributors beyond the traditional confines of the chronicle – to poetry, art history, and material culture – as well as beyond the bounds of Britain and Ireland, to a European tradition that both enfolded and influenced insular developments. Like Nancy Partner's *Writing Medieval History* (2005), this collection takes as axiomatic the notion that historical sources are never 'transparent passive containers of good and dubious facts'.[16] And in keeping with Peter Lambert and Björn Weiler's *How the Past Was Used* (2017), it presumes history writing to be always an interested practice, invested in creating 'useable' pasts conditioned by place, time, and communal demands.

A tacit assumption shared by medieval and modern readers alike is that time moves forward and that historical writing, broadly speaking, follows a path that is unfolding. In practice, however, medieval archives reveal a far more variegated and complex set of textual practices than this linear ideal suggests: medieval historical writing can take the shape of a charter or a chronicle, a romance or a manuscript roundel. It amasses unevenly across a landscape of institutional libraries and national archives. As Marie Turner

[14] Southern, 'Shape and Substance', p. 99. [15] *HW1*, p. xi.
[16] Partner (ed.), *Writing Medieval History*, pp. xv–xvi.

shows in her chapter in this volume, even the genealogical roll, a paradigmatically 'linear' history, must accommodate all varieties of disruption – whether in the form of conquest and deposition, alternative blood lines and rival claims, or lost and invented pasts.

Rather than take linear chronology as the governing structure of this volume, then, we have instead decided to divide the contents according to thematic concepts. The chapters in this volume thus do not proceed 'in order' from the earliest to the latest of medieval historiographers – although the contents begin in the sixth century and end in the sixteenth. Instead, we have grouped chapters according to the categories of Time, Place, Practice, and Genre. These headings are neither exclusive nor restrictive: any medieval historical work might be investigated through the lens of its temporal, geographic, generic, and practical investments. But as an alternative to chronological arrangement, this organisation is meant to highlight affinities and relationships across different kinds of historical materials. It aims as well to demonstrate the range of methodologies used by literary scholars, historians, and art historians as we approach our shared field of study.

Time

Today medievalists give much thought to periodisation and to the boundaries between disciplines; after all, questions regarding what separates late antiquity from the early Middle Ages, and when and where the Renaissance began, have consequences for the allocation of institutional resources as well as for the ethical identification of the public with the medieval past. Although historians in the Middle Ages did not share our preoccupations about disciplinary boundaries, they were equally interested in periodisation and anxious about the implications of period divisions. For example, following Augustine, universal chroniclers divided the history of the world into seven ages, placing themselves in the sixth, and searching the past and present for apocalyptic signs, which included corruption and heresy in the Church, Mongol incursions in Asia Minor and Eastern Europe, and the dominance of Islam in the Holy Land. Indeed, as Richard Emmerson argues in this volume, apocalyptic writing, though it relies on temporal schemes rejected by modern Western historians, was absolutely inseparable from the medieval 'secular' chronicle. Religious difference likewise had temporal consequences. As Chism explains in 'Pagan Histories/Pagan Fictions', medieval Christianity could only understand its own identity by periodising the

Christian/pagan and Christian/Jewish divide: people born before Christ who did not anticipate Christian salvation, such as Aristotle and Virgil, and those born after Christ's death who did not convert to Christianity, such as the Emperor Trajan, would be condemned to hell. But Christian writers' continuing desire for the culture of classical antiquity compelled them to find historiographical loopholes for their favourite doomed philosophers and rulers, who seemed morally defensible if temporally out of step.

The influences of biblical and classical chronologies, as well as the mobility of medieval historical texts across Europe and the eastern Mediterranean, meant that historians in the Middle Ages thought about the division of history, and of historiography, in multiple, simultaneous schemes. For instance, the monastic historian Ranulf Higden, in his influential universal history, the *Polychronicon* (*c*.1325–50), explains that his chronicle is divided into seven books to represent the seven Ages of the World, but that one cannot truly understand history without also considering the single geography of the world, the two spiritual states of man (before and after Christ), the three states of religious Law (before the Old Law, the Old Law, and the New Law), the four principal kingdoms, the five modes of living (the first being the natural, ungoverned state, the fifth being Islam), the six ages of human history, the seven types of persons worthy of historical record, and the eight systems of recording time.[17]

Writers in Britain and Ireland, while embracing universal Christian schemes, had their own insular investments in periodisation, with the meaning of particular dynastic and epochal shifts, such as the withdrawal of Roman forces from Britain and subsequent Scandinavian and Norman invasions, forged according to the complex political and personal affiliations of individual chroniclers. For example, Gildas, writing in a period demarcated by the decay of Roman Britain and the coming of the Germanic-speaking peoples, initiated a trend of periodising the history of the Britons that henceforth would be bound up in ethnic, dynastic, and national identity and would link conquest with the moral character of a people. As Coumert argues, Gildas, writing in a sixth-century Britain that had 'lost its reference points', portrayed the Britons as Old Testament Israelites who were divinely punished for their sinfulness but later reformed and divinely saved. Later historians, most notably Geoffrey of Monmouth, redeemed Gildas's Age of the Britons for a post-Saxon and post-Norman world by relocating this period between the arrival of Trojan exiles to 'New Troy' and King Arthur's

[17] Higden, *Polychronicon*, vol. 1, pp. 30–7.

glorious reign. Likewise, the Norman Conquest of 1066, one of the most important events in modern schematisations of medieval English history, registered unevenly in the historiographic landscape of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. While canonical twelfth-century historians such as Henry of Huntingdon and William of Malmesbury would use the Conquest as an opportunity to renegotiate the relationship between the present and the past, other historians showed different temporal investments. For Welsh chroniclers, as Owain Wyn Jones and Huw Pryce explain, 'the crucial dividing line' was not the one separating Anglo-Saxon from Anglo-Norman rule, but the one 'some five centuries earlier', when the Britons ceded sovereignty to the Anglo-Saxons.[18] Likewise, the historiographic imprint of the viking invasions, Paul Gazzoli suggests, only asserts itself in writing in the wake of the Conquest, when the Scandinavian influence on northern England comes to be expressed in a historical record no longer dominated by the West Saxons. The work of assigning where one epoch ends and another begins is thus always ethically and politically interested, a point emphasised by Cynthia Turner Camp in her chapter exploring the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century invention of the Anglo-Saxon period as a 'golden age' of ethical rule.

As Jaclyn Rajsic explains in 'The *Brut:* Legendary British History', the unrivalled success of Geoffrey of Monmouth's legendary *Historia*, along with the continuous and sometimes strenuous reworkings of the *Historia* into what has become known as the *Brut* tradition, both extended the Age of the Britons and sutured it to the histories of Anglo-Saxon and Norman England. In this way the *Brut* tradition helped to transform Gildas's (and Bede's) sequences of rupture, loss, and conquest into a narrative of continuity.[19] Likewise, as Marie Turner argues in 'Genealogies', the *Brut* tradition helped to fuel production of genealogies from the thirteenth century onwards, populating unrecorded centuries of history and establishing, through the genealogical form, 'continuity in the face of conquest'.[20]

Place

Histories are both products and producers of the places they describe. They conjure origins and delimit boundaries, memorialise the local and aspire to the universal. No 'place' is more vexed for a volume of this kind than Britain itself, that island which Gildas situated 'virtually at the end of the world' ('in extreme ferme orbis limite').[21] As Sarah Foot describes in her

[18] See p. 213 below. [19] See Burek, 'Mending a Broken Chain'. [20] Below, p. 100.
[21] Gildas, *Ruin of Britain*, pp. 16, 89.

contribution to the volume, Britain's perceived liminality, its distance from Rome, served as its own centralising form of historiographic orientation for writers such as Bede, William of Malmesbury, and Henry of Huntingdon. As they recited its breadth and length and mapped its interior geographies, these writers also 'textualis[ed] territory through narrative', Foot suggests, and in doing so allowed for a more dynamic sense of place to emerge, connected and enlivened through human actions and movement.[22] Moreover, as Jones and Pryce remind us in their discussion of medieval Welsh historiography, territorial narratives are never politically neutral, nor is 'place' easily reducible to the sovereign territorial unit. Local dioceses, monastic institutions, gentry patrons, and a broader bardic culture all contribute to a Welsh historical tradition that did not accede to the Anglo-Norman boundaries of Wales itself. The genealogies that Turner thus discusses under the heading of 'Time' also shape the boundaries of place. In Ireland, as Katharine Simms notes further on in the section on 'Practice', the professional historian had to maintain both a compendious knowledge of local dynastic history and an equally adept knowledge of the parallel developments in classical and biblical antiquity. Such 'synchronisms' knit local, regional, and personal histories to the broader sweep of global history – a point Thomas O'Donnell also makes in his discussion of monastic memory. Places also demand origin stories. As Kate Ash-Irisarri shows in her discussion of Scottish historiography, border territories are especially generative of historical narrative, with lineages and genealogies supplementing for the uncertainties of legal and political control.

More local understandings of place shaped the development of individual archives. Kathryn Lowe details the innovative archival practices developed at Bury St Edmunds as it sought to defend its liberties against enterprising neighbours and rulers. It was likewise in defence of privileges, George Shuffelton shows, that London developed its own civic chronicling tradition, adapting the form of the monastic annal to the patterns of city commerce and governance. But even history written in English, a local language without wider currency, had ties to a broader European tradition characterised by intellectual and population mobility. Elizabeth Tyler makes this argument in the case of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, showing how it 'was enmeshed in the multilingual fabric of Europe from Ireland to the Bosporus, and . . . alert to the linguistic politics of history writing across Latin Europe'.[23] The transitory environments of the universities serve as

[22] See p. 142 below. [23] Below, p. 172.