

UCLA

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

Britain and Ireland 900-1300: Insular Responses to Medieval European Change (review)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1805r5fc>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 31(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

Author

Jones, Andrea

Publication Date

2000-10-01

Peer reviewed

REVIEWS

Brendan Smith, *Britain and Ireland 900–1300: Insular Responses to Medieval European Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999) 283 pp.

Within the context of a growing interest in British—as opposed to strictly English—history, this volume undertakes a survey of the cross-currents between England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales during the earlier portion of the medieval period. As Robert Bartlett, one of the book's contributors, has pointed out, the tenth through the fourteenth centuries were a vitally important period in "the Europeanization of Europe"; they were also a crucial period in the negotiation of power and culture among the component parts of the British Isles. Considering the complexity and range of this collection, it is a wonder that the book manages to be so remarkably clear and coherent. Containing ten articles by some of the foremost British historians, it is a valuable addition to studies of the period—and to the scholar's bookshelf.

The first article in the book is the most problematic, though it is still outstanding. Alfred P. Smyth's "The effect of Scandinavian raiders on the English and Irish churches: a preliminary reassessment" refutes the arguments of revisionist historians with regard to the Vikings, who so profoundly changed the course of British history beginning in the late eighth century. Though Smyth is convincing in demonstrating the revisionists' manipulation of historical evidence to downplay both the size of the Viking raiding parties and the violence they inflicted, he does, perhaps, protest too much. He dismisses claims that the Viking raids led to a revitalization of the European economy and the expansion of international trade by noting that "the Northmen did not operate charities for the benefit of their victims" (3). Furthermore, he asserts that the Vikings effectively destroyed large portions of monastic and church culture in the British Isles, helped to promote the downfall of the Carolingian world, and "accelerated the militarization of Christianity in Germany, Francia and the British Isles, resulting in the active participation of churchmen on the battlefield and in the militarization of Christian ideology *vis-à-vis* non-Christian neighbours" (35).

This last statement, which seems to border on blaming the Vikings for the behavior of British Christians in such matters as the atrocities of the Crusades or the persecution of Jews, is rather questionable. And although Smyth is correct in noting that the revisionists ignore or deny the extensive destruction Vikings wreaked on the British Isles, he in turn simply dismisses what can be construed as the positive results of their depredations—economic growth and the emergence of a more global outlook in Britain. In the end, the truth probably lies somewhere between the views of the historians Smyth opposes and his own characterization of the Vikings as "warriors erupting out of the prehistory of the North, whose descendants more than two centuries later were still languishing in a state of bloody barbarism at Old Uppsala" (38).

Benjamin T. Hudson's "The changing economy of the Irish Sea province" is an excellent overview of the subject that picks up where Smyth left off, and to some degree counteracts him by describing the role Northmen played in the tenth and eleventh century trade boom, which could "resemble a Scandinavian lake" during that period (43). However, beginning in the early eleventh century, the increased involvement of merchants from the south resulted in an Irish

Sea that “began to assume some of the attributes of an English lake” (52). The article also explains the role of the church in encouraging trade beginning in the twelfth century and the shifts that led to the nearly complete dominance of trade in the region by English royal concerns by the end of the thirteenth century.

Robert Bartlett’s chapter on “Cults of Irish, Scottish and Welsh saints in twelfth-century England” begins with a snapshot of the eleventh century, when the saints’ cults of Ireland, Wales, and Scotland “did not overlap substantially with those in England” (67). Bartlett then explains how, in the following century, English ecclesiastics not only began to promote the cults of Celtic saints, but also to integrate episodes from Celtic hagiography into their own. He concludes that “there was little in the way of cultural resistance or distancing in the encounter between English ecclesiastics and the saints of the other parts of the British Isles” (84–86).

Máire Herbert’s “Sea-divided Gaels? Constructing relationships between Irish and Scots, c. 800–1169” explores how Irish-Scottish identities and interactions were defined by members of the Irish *literati* during the period. The relationship between the two nations was depicted in contemporary Irish writing as one defined by common ancestry rather than geographical boundaries until about the late ninth century, but by the mid-twelfth century, Irish men of letters had come to view their relatives in Scotland as a separate people. However, Herbert has found that “cultural relationships . . . continued to affirm the centuries-old transinsular bonds” (97). As Herbert points out, associations between the two nations would change still further after the invasion of Ireland in 1169.

Seán Duffy’s “The 1169 invasion as a turning-point in Irish-Welsh relations” picks up at precisely that point, discussing how the Norman incursions altered subsequent interactions between the Welsh and the Irish. In the period before 1169, the Welsh and Irish nobility were closely allied and the Irish often intervened in Welsh affairs. However, the new generation of marcher barons created by the events of 1169 disrupted many of these old ties while establishing new, and very different, ones. According to Duffy, many of the marcher barons owned land in both Wales and Ireland, and “used the profits of their estates on one side [of the Irish Sea] to finance campaigns of conquest and colonization on the other” (113). This led to a protean relationship in which periods of goodwill between the marcher barons and the Welsh resulted in nonchalant Welsh attitudes toward the Irish plight, whereas the two nations were drawn together by their common experiences when royal or baronial powers impinged more upon Welsh rights.

John Gillingham’s “Killing and mutilating political enemies in the British Isles from the late twelfth to the early fourteenth century: a comparative study” explores Celtic adoptions of and resistance to the chivalric code imported with the Normans in 1066. By the mid-thirteenth century, Scotland and Wales had adopted the chivalric convention of sparing high-ranking prisoners of war, but earlier traditions persisted in Ireland. Gillingham speculates that greater political unity and the build-up of towns and castles in Scotland and Wales, but not in Ireland, may have played a role in this fact. While noting the disgust expressed by English commentators concerning Celtic violence, Gillingham dem-

onstrates that “in Wales and Ireland the English were . . . inclined to treat the native aristocracy with much less than chivalrous respect” (120). He also notes that the English began to diverge from this chivalric code by the fourteenth century—a development mirrored in France and explained by Maitland and others as the birth pangs of the modern state. Gillingham rejects this thesis and proposes that historians’ propensity for seeing “‘modernizing’ trends” in such changes should be scrutinized.

Dauvit Brown’s “Anglo-French acculturation and the Irish element in Scottish identity” documents the changes that occurred between the central Middle Ages, when Ireland and Scotland were so closely allied as to form one people, and the fourteenth century, when that relationship had become more distant and complicated. As the Scots underwent a process of Anglo-French acculturation, they distanced themselves from their Irish connections, probably because of the emergent English stereotype of the Irish as barbarians. However, Scottish origin-legends from the period identify strongly with the history of Ireland, perhaps because “the [Scottish] royal genealogy, from which the kingship took its lustre of antiquity, was studded with legendary Irish figures who each stood at key points in the matrix of power and prestige portrayed in Gaelic high culture” (151).

The last three chapters of the book focus on the lives of exceptional people in the history of the British Isles: the Anglo-Norman John de Courcy, who rose from comparative obscurity in England to lordship in Ireland; the MacSorleys of the Hebrides; and the deVescys of the northern English borderlands. In the process, they reveal how these individuals were both shaped by and themselves affected historical processes. Marie Therese Flanagan’s “John de Courcy, the first Ulster plantation and Irish church men” traces de Courcy’s acquisition of power by using monasteries as a colonizing force. “Coming in from the margins: the descendants of Somerled and cultural accommodation in the Hebrides, 1164–1317” is R. Andrew McDonald’s account of how the MacSorley seakings increasingly became anglicized as the Hebrides were integrated into the Scottish kingdom during the latter half of the thirteenth century, though they had resisted assimilation longer than their neighbors. In the book’s final chapter, “Nobility and identity in medieval Britain and Ireland: The de Vescy family, c. 1120–1314,” Keith J. Stringer traces the history of a northern border family as it demonstrates that “however passionately the Westminster-centred government believed otherwise, defining the contours of power and identity in these islands was not solely its prerogative” (199). Indeed, the de Vescys frequently placed themselves at odds with English royal policy, pursuing their own regional interests at the expense of English stability; a fact which reveals the very fluidity of Anglo-Celtic boundaries during the period.

In the course of its ten chapters, *Britain and Ireland 900–1300* admirably accomplishes what it sets out to achieve: an overview of how the “Celtic fringe” has in fact refused to be a fringe for more than a millennium, not only through interaction between Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, but also in its shaping of English history. It is a useful survey of a complex chapter in the political development of the British Isles, providing both an excellent starting point for those approaching the subject for the first time, and thoughtful, provocative analysis for those more familiar with it.

REVIEWS

281

ANDREA JONES, English, UCLA