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Notes on Contributors
Before Thomas Cahill’s book-title became a notorious catchphrase, the Irish had long been credited with ‘saving civilisation’.¹ In one fervent instance, James J. Walsh said of Irish missionaries that ‘their intensity of purpose and lofty enthusiasm that carried them on in spite of difficulties and obstacles that might discourage the hardiest, was well recognized by the neighboring peoples in the Middle Ages… This is the secret of the achievements they succeeded in making so successfully in those centuries of the early Middle Ages when a great force such as theirs was so sadly [sic] needed by the disturbed world of their time.’² The message here (along with their enormous contribution to learning) is that Irish triumphs over their less Christian adversaries led to widespread, unquestioning recognition of their greatness. However, it must also be acknowledged that anti-Irish sentiment was known among their contemporaries; the best-documented adversaries, or rivals, belonged to the Christian élite.³ It was the Irish students, teachers and missionaries on the European Continent who seemed to provoke the strongest reactions.⁴

To understand the emerging world of colonial Ireland in the later Middle Ages, it is essential to consider the testimonies of those who in earlier times supported the conquest and/or colonisation of the island; however, for the period up to the Norman ‘conquest’, and especially for Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, the question of how Ireland was viewed from abroad remains relatively unexplored. Broad analyses of Ireland’s relationship with the outside world have been written from a modern, usually historical,  

¹ Thomas Cahill, How the Irish Saved Civilization (New York, 1995), 4: ‘Without the Mission of the Irish Monks, who single-handedly refounded European civilization throughout the continent in the bogs and valleys of their exile, the world that came after them would have been an entirely different one — a world without books.’
² James J. Walsh, The World’s Debt to the Irish (Boston, MA, 1926), 37–8 (my italics).
⁴ Cf. section 4, below.
perspective; more specific studies have dealt with English and (more recent) British perceptions of Ireland. Authors of both these kinds of works often begin with the ideas of Gerald of Wales in the late twelfth century. A few mediaevalists have gone so far as to note anti-Irish sentiment in their own times also. The present discussion therefore extends from Antiquity to the point where most previous studies have begun.

It is well known that Gerald was writing in the context of the Norman ‘civilisation’ of Ireland. A great many scholars have been drawn to this extremely serious (though highly entertaining) individual’s works; his two books on Ireland are seen as the earliest full exposition of a conqueror’s mindset in relation to the island, and as crucial sources – even the ‘founding texts for the English writing about Ireland’ – for the next several centuries. His views were incorporated (often unacknowledged) into a great many later works on Ireland, from various periods and political contexts. These adaptations ranged from travelogues based on brief visits to literary portrayals by Irish resident Edmund Spenser, and even included nineteenth-century

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7 For example, Cairns and Richards, *Writing Ireland*, 1–3; Hadfield and McVeagh (eds), *Strangers to That Land*, 25–9.


9 Cf. section 5, below.

10 Hadfield and McVeagh (eds), *Strangers to That Land*, 7.


12 The principal detailed analyses of specifically English perceptions of Ireland are P. Coughlan, ‘Some secret scourge which shall by her come unto England’: Ireland and Incivility in Spenser’, in Coughlan (ed.), *Spenser and Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (Cork, 1989), 46–74; Joan Fitzpatrick, *Irish Demons: English Writings on
accounts.\textsuperscript{13} Significantly, John Gillingham has shown that Gerald’s works reflected earlier and contemporary Norman perspectives on Ireland and the Irish.\textsuperscript{14} In this investigation I hope to extend Gillingham’s work and to show that Norman expansionist (and therefore British imperialist) attitudes had deeper roots and a much longer history in the Middle Ages and earlier.

How Irish people were perceived by those on the outside – and more specifically what scholarly characteristics and attitudes were ascribed to Irishmen – is a different question from how, or whether, they ‘saved civilisation’, but nonetheless a crucial one. Examination of such authors’ motives inevitably helps to deepen our understanding of Irish history: for the period up to the early seventh century we possess no documentary evidence from the Irish in Ireland, so there is no option but to investigate external sources. From then until the Norman intervention, these accounts furnish us with essential historical evidence (in addition to that from within Ireland) and provide new perspectives on Ireland’s relations with the outside world.

Discussion of Ireland viewed from abroad in the Middle Ages necessarily invokes several fundamental issues. Mediaeval Ireland is often characterised by outward missionising and hostile invasion. Those principally credited with ‘saving civilisation’ are the well-documented Columba, Columbanus, Aidan, John Scottus Eriugena, and Marianus Scottus, who together spanned half a millennium. But many figures entered Ireland from other environments, and their interactions with the Irish varied from those who stayed for long periods and made sustained efforts to integrate, for instance St Patrick, Agilbert, Ecgfrith, and Scandinavian colonists, to Gerald of Wales and his royal patrons, who visited much more briefly. Still more outsiders probably never visited but were indirectly informed and/or influenced, like Aldhelm and Bede. Foreigners’ evidence was occasionally based on their personal experiences, most importantly the accounts offered seven centuries apart by St Patrick and Gerald of Wales, but more often came through second-hand information or even hearsay, some writers revealing their views by mention of an individual Irishman, real or imagined.

\textit{Ireland, the Irish, and Gender by Spenser and His Contemporaries} (Lanham, MD, 2000); Elizabeth L. Rambo, \textit{Colonial Ireland in Medieval English Literature} (London, 1994); Andrew Hadfield, \textit{Edmund Spenser’s Irish Experience: Wilde Fruit and Savage Soil} (Oxford, 1997); and John P. Harrington (ed.), \textit{The English Traveller in Ireland: Accounts of Ireland and the Irish through Five Centuries} (Dublin, 1991). For further discussion of Spenser’s views on Ireland see section 5, below.

\textsuperscript{13} Gillingham, ‘Images of Ireland’, especially 16–18.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 18–19.
The present study is concerned with Ireland as perceived by those from other places, rather than with the influence of Irish learning in mediaeval Europe. The latter issue has occasioned much interest among mediaevalists. By contrast, outsiders’ perceptions of Ireland from Antiquity to c. AD 1200 (which were expressed in a multitude of contexts and in several languages) have been discussed peripherally by those considering particular sources, or as brief subsections of larger works, but have never been made the subject of a full investigation. The ultimate objective is to revisit old questions as perceived from Antiquity to the Norman intervention in Ireland: the extent of Ireland’s political and cultural distinctiveness; the perceived issue of anti-Irish prejudice; how particular Irishmen’s contributions to ‘civilisation’ were received in the eyes of those writing in other lands; and


19 For later manifestations of this see Liz Curtis, Nothing But the Same Old Story: The Roots of Anti-Irish Racism (London, 1984).
the development of outsiders’ knowledge and understanding of Ireland in this period.

This geographically peripheral island is accepted as having, and is known among mediaeval historians for, societal features peculiar in European terms. Ireland’s political and social make-up was somewhat distinctive: the society was without overall political governance, as the island had not been Romanised. Instead it had a thoroughly uncentralised structure of kingdoms whose leaders (on all strata) came from the extended kin-group. Also the Irish learned classes (the highly-trained individuals who preserved Ireland’s history and culture) developed a tendency to synthesise Ireland’s pre-Christian and Christian pseudohistory with universal historical events, creating fascinating webs of legendary narrative; in this way we know that they were extremely self-confident in, and passionate about, their own history and culture. Given all these factors, it has been necessary for historians to weave together diverse primary sources, both Irish and foreign in origin, in order fully to reconstruct Irish society. With such an understanding of the questions and issues in the earlier mediaeval Gaelic world as a whole (that is, Ireland and Scotland) we can truly come to terms with how – and how much – politics and culture changed with the Norman intervention. I have attempted to show elsewhere that the Irish ecclesiastical élite (from the seventh century to the twelfth) utilised external texts and ideas, often transforming them to fit the mores and circumstances prevailing in their own society. But regarding the other side of this equation, we need fully to examine the motivations and accuracy of the non-Irish accounts of the Irish and of their history – the basis for compliments, whether negative remarks were intended as racial slurs or personal insults, and if the overall picture was one of stereotype or even outright ‘prejudice’ against the

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20 Cf. section 1, below.
23 Aideen M. A. O’Leary, Trials and Translations: The Latin Origins of the Irish Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles (Aberdeen, 2013). The specific themes of that discussion are the reception and adaptation in Ireland of apocryphal legends about the apostles: I have explored which apocryphal acta were known in Ireland and in Irish contexts abroad, and attempted to show that reworking of apostolic legend played a vital role in Irish ecclesiastical culture.
Irish – in order to make insightful deductions about Ireland’s place in mediaeval Europe.

Foreigners’ views of Ireland and the Irish address four major aspects of Irish history: Ireland’s geographical setting and political, social and military background and customs; the early raids and migrations of some Irish to Britain and their effects there; the arrival and growth of Christianity in Ireland in the fifth century; and perceptions of Irish Christians abroad. As Norman and English colonists’ views have hitherto been characterised as coming from a world of changed relations between Ireland and what had by the late eleventh century become Anglo-Norman England, these will be treated separately in a fifth section.

We also gain insights from outsiders into Irish political and cultural matters at home. The best-documented – and most remarkable – example of those who went there to stay was the Briton, Patrick, subsequently venerated as the Irish national apostle. He left tantalising information about his Christian missionary activity in Ireland in the fifth century. Instances of those who travelled to the island but did not settle permanently there are far more frequent in external records, however: Christian Ireland was seen by many as a highly desirable place for foreigners to gain a broad, intellectually stimulating (and perhaps safer) education in the early Middle Ages. By contrast, much useful information on Ireland and her people came from the pens of those who almost certainly did not see that country for themselves at all. For instance, Bede probably never even left Northumbria but devoted himself to the preservation of all kinds of knowledge, sifted through friends, correspondents, and more formal written sources. Other accounts of matters relevant to the Irish at home were probably based on more superficial knowledge: acquaintance with an individual Irishman in England or on the Continent; the availability of earlier remarks on Ireland (for instance Classical references); or perhaps even through rumour.

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27 For example, Theodulf’s poem on Cadac-Andreas: cf. section 4, below.
The reasons why we might expect to find prejudice, apart from common-or-garden hostility, in foreign accounts of the Irish have to do with the distinctiveness of Irish political life and the shock that that would have caused to the uninitiated who heard or read about it from their own, usually Romanised, environments. We should also consider the early-mediaeval missionary activities of Irish ecclesiastics in other places: Irish churchmen could take intellectual conflict amongst themselves and were unafraid of a good argument, but we should not assume that those unfamiliar with Irish culture would very easily accept this. Another possibility is that the testimonies of pre-eminent ancient or early-mediaeval authors were perpetuated by later commentators who thought it more amusing to convey negative rather than positive views.

1 Background Information

I turn first to consider the background or introductory information: Ireland’s location, landscape, climate; and the political practices and military strategies of her people. Such issues are almost exclusively discussed outside of Ireland: the interest of the Irish in describing their own environment lay not so much in the everyday as in the unusual, which is why we have (proportionately) so many chronicle-entries on plagues, famines and other natural disasters, long hot summers (very unusual), as well as various cosmological phenomena such as comets and eclipses.

For the earliest evidence of Insular activities we have to rely on non-Irish sources, although much of their pre-Christian heritage may have been preserved by the Irish when they committed their heroic tales to writing. The Irish have been seen in more modern times as a Celtic people. Most of the

29 This is possibly true of Archbishop Theodore: cf. section 4, below.
Classical accounts of Celts were concerned with Gauls or other Continental Celtic groups; these were the subject of many accounts by Greek and Roman authors curious to document barbarians and their lifestyles. Their descriptions placed special emphasis on Celtic fearlessness in battle, even recklessness in fighting against the sea, boastfulness, fondness for feasting and (especially) drinking, sexual promiscuity, wealth in gold, and druidic religious teachings and practices. Most of this type of evidence was based on the first-hand testimony of Posidonius (which survives only through subsequent authors’ references), and frequently implied that these fearless Celts were a potential or existing threat. Such Classical themes and descriptions were not, of course, applied exclusively to Celts. Though not specific to Ireland, these accounts are regarded as generally applicable to the island.

The Greek and Roman remarks, however brief, on various specific aspects of Ireland – as well as mediaeval geographical descriptions of the island – serve as very useful evidence for the characteristics of Irish people as perceived by many in the Middle Ages and beyond. The Irish character was often inextricably linked with the island’s natural resources, although that connection varied among the many works under discussion here.

Unsurprisingly, Ireland was known as Britain’s smaller neighbour (it was usually called Hibernia, or, by Greeks, Ierne). Geographical knowledge of the

34 Koch and Carey (trans), The Celtic Heroic Age, 8–9 (§14: Polybius), 12–13 (§18: Diodorus Siculus), and 16–17 (§19: Strabo). (The texts referred to in this section are listed – within each footnote – in chronological order of their composition.)
36 Ibid. (§6: Aristotle) and 13 (§18: Diodorus Siculus).
37 Ibid. (§5: Plato), 12 (§18: Diodorus Siculus), and 10–11 (§17: Athenaeus).
38 Ibid. (§6: Aristotle) and 14–15 (§18: Diodorus Siculus).
39 Ibid., 12–13 (§18: Diodorus Siculus) and 18 (§19: Strabo).
40 For instance, ibid., 13–14 (§18: Diodorus Siculus), 18 (§19: Strabo), and 21–3 (§§13–18: Julius Caesar).
42 Cf. J.F. Killeen, ‘Ireland in the Greek and Roman Writers’, especially 211. The following discussion refers to the most significant Graeco-Roman accounts of Ireland and the Irish. Excerpts have usefully been collected by Philip Freeman, with some commentary: Freeman, Ireland; the citations provided here are, where possible, from specialist editions and translations.
island gradually increased from the time of Julius Caesar, who wrote that Ireland was around half the size of Britain. Caesar’s estimates of geography and distances were fairly accurate except for his implication that Ireland was located near Hisp a n i a. The Greek author Strabo, in his ‘Geography’ of the first century AD, extended the island’s remoteness to its inhabitants: Ireland, at the very edge of the habitable world and north of Britain’s centre, was home to ἁγρίων τελέως ἄνθρωπων καὶ κακῶς οἰκούντων διά ψύχος, ‘completely wild people [who] live a wretched existence on account of the cold’. He added promiscuity, gluttony and cannibalism to the mix – which the Irish practised in common with other barbarians such as the Scythians, Celts (interestingly seen here as a separate people), Iberians and others.

Pomponius Mela (in his De chorographia, written in the 40s AD) was the first known author to extol the wonders of Ireland’s natural landscape: caeli ad maturanda semina iniqui, verum adeo luxuriosa herbis non laetis modo sed etiam dul-cibus, ut se exigua parte diei pecora impleant, et nisi pabulo prohibeantur, dinitus pasta dissiliant, ‘the climate is unfavourable for the ripening of grain, but yet it is so fertile for grass, not only abundant but sweet, that livestock eat their fill in a small part of the day. Unless they were restrained from this pasturage, they would burst from feeding too long.’ Moving immediately on to the human inhabitants, he again made harsh comments: cultores eius inconditi sunt, et omnium virtutum ignari magis quam aliae gentes, pietatis admodum expertes, ‘The inhabitants of this island are unrefined, ignorant of all the virtues more than any other people, and totally lacking all sense of duty’. Here their character was not a direct consequence of the climate in which they lived.
Significantly, this general ‘knowledge’ of Ireland’s physical climate and human character was developed – by the first-century Roman historian Tacitus – into political insights, when he recorded the deeds of his father-in-law Agricola, the Roman proconsul in Britain.\textsuperscript{51}

eamque partem Britanniae quae Hiberniam aspicit copiis instruxit, in spem magis quam ob formidinimum, si quidem Hibernia medio inter Britanniam atque Hispaniam sita et Gallico quoque mari opportuna valentissimam imperii partem magnis in vicem usibus miscuerit … [in melius] aditus portusque per commercia et negotiatores cogniti. Agricola expulsum seditione domestica unum ex regulis gentis exceperat ac specie amicitiae in occasionem retinebat. Saepe ex eo audivi legione una et modicis auxiliis debellari obtinerique Hiberniam posse; idque etiam adversus Britanniam profuturum, si Romana ubique arma et velut e conspectu libertas tolleretur.

‘That part of Britain which faces Hibernia he garrisoned with troops, more out of hope than out of fear. For Hibernia, lying between Britain and Hispania, and placed strategically in the Gallic Sea, would unite the most robust parts of the empire to the great advantage of both … . The approaches and harbours are [better] known due to trade and merchants. Agricola had taken in one of their [underkings] driven out by an internal discord and was keeping him under the pretence of friendship for the right opportunity. I often heard him say that Hibernia could be conquered and occupied by one legion and a moderate number of auxiliaries. Moreover, it would be useful against Britain as well if Roman arms were everywhere raised high and liberty, so to speak, vanished from sight.’

This is revealing about Agricola’s military strategy to use Ireland to control Britain, as well as on Irish political structure and internal disputes. Clearly there were already grades of kingship accompanied by political infighting, protection was sought, and in this early period Ireland was seen as a potential area of conquest.\textsuperscript{52}


\footnote{Cf. Muldoon, \textit{Identity}, 35. Oddly, Douglas Hyde made no mention of the \textit{regulus} or Agricola’s thoughts of conquering Ireland: \textit{A Literary History}, 21. On political
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The words of the sardonic Roman satirist Juvenal are especially interesting as a disillusioned insight into the political predicament and moral hypocrisy of the Roman empire in the second century AD. His ‘Satire 2’, often singled out as vulgar and omitted from school and university curricula, includes a passing mention of Ireland, in the context of discussing an Armenian soldier:

Arma quidem ultra
litora Juvernae promovimus et modo captas
Orcadas ac minima contentos nocte Britannos,
sed quae nunc populi sunt victoris in Urbe
non faciunt illi quos vicimus.

‘So we have come to this. Our arms have invaded the Orkneys, Ireland, the northern lands where the light dwells long in the summer, But the acts that are done in this proud city of victors Never were done by the men we have beaten down.’

Juvenal listed Ireland among the most faraway locations of the known world, along with Orkney and Britain; his anger at the behaviour displayed on Rome’s behalf was obvious. What passed for sophisticated conduct in this great city of triumphs was more debauched than the lifestyles of even the remotest conquered barbarians. Such moral bankruptcy would be rendered yet more offensive, in Juvenal’s view, by its influence on hostages like this Armenian boy.

Solinus’s influential Collectanea rerum mirabilium (written around AD 200) added brief but significant information about Ireland’s fauna. In his brief


54 Satire 2, lines 159–63. Text: Braund (ed. and trans.), Juvenal and Persius, 162; translation: Rolfe Humphries (trans.), The Satires of Juvenal (Bloomingston, IN, 1958), 31; Freeman, Ireland, 62–3. There is no evidence that Iuverna, Ireland, had been conquered, as Britain and Orkney had been; cf. ibid., 63.
57 Cf. Freeman, Ireland, 86.
mention of the island, he wrote that *illae nullus anguis, avis rara, gens inhospita et bellica*, ‘[there] there are no snakes, few birds, and an unfriendly and warlike people’.58 Around a millenium later, these ‘facts’ – particularly the absence of snakes – were reworked by Gerald of Wales with (in my view) somewhat similar purposes in mind.59

Early Christian writers were predictably scathing in regard to what they knew of Irish social and religious affairs. The protagonist here was Jerome, who (at the end of the fourth century) claimed to have witnessed Irish cannibalism: *Quid loquor de caeteris nationibus, cum ipse adolescentulus in Gallia Atticotos [al. Scotos], gentem Britannicam, humanis vesci carnibus*, ‘Why should I speak of other nations when I myself as a young man in Gaul saw the Atticots [or Scotti], a British people, feeding on human flesh?’60 He also mentioned that the Irish were sexually licentious in the extreme: *Scotorum natio uxores proprias non habet: et quasi Platonis politiam legerit, et Catonis sectetur exemplum, nulla apud eos conjux propria est, sed ut cuique libitum fuerit, pecudum more lasciviunt*, ‘The nation of the Scoti do not have individual wives, but, as if they had read Plato’s “Republic” or followed the example of Cato, no wife belongs to a particular man, but as each desires, they indulge themselves like beasts’.61 So the Irish, at home or abroad, did not escape Jerome’s attacks. Likewise, his contemporary Prudentius used the beastly *Scottus* as an example to persuade his readers to accept that a supreme being existed: *semifer et Scottus*, ‘[even] the half-wild Scottus’ was not immune to the divine presence of Christ.62

The Irish people were sometimes thought to be similar to the Britons and Gauls; there was less detailed knowledge, of course, but it is remarkable that this much information was gathered (even incidentally) and conveyed to Greek and Roman elite audiences, who were doubtless entertained as well as educated. Ireland was clearly part of ancient geographical and ethnographic works, and was just one area in an extended world of potential conquests

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58 *Collectanea rerum mirabilium* XXII.2–6: ibid., 86–7. Freeman, *War*, has described Solinus’s *Collectanea* as ‘a gossipy and altogether fanciful collection of stories from various parts of the world’ (78). See also Bede’s geographical portrait of Ireland (clearly Solinus was one of his sources), later in this section.

59 Cf. section 5, below.


which would benefit from being actively ‘civilised’. As we have seen, in particular from Tacitus and Juvenal, this knowledge served as a useful point of comparison (and sometimes sour comment) for Classical writers’ own societies and their advances.63

Even at a very early period, Ireland was already developing a reputation for being environmentally pleasant; having been introduced as a ‘reliable’ piece of knowledge, this grew and became a topic given special attention by outsiders. The idea apparently never waned for over a thousand years to Gerald’s time and beyond. Regarding the people of Ireland, whose character was often said to be shaped by the natural elements around them, their principal characteristics in Graeco-Roman accounts were physical remoteness and psychological inaccessibility to Roman control or influence. There was not much to say, to begin with, and certainly not much information with which to differentiate the Irish from their fellow-barbarians in the far West. This contrasts starkly with, for instance, the Britons, whose political developments were appearing within the realm of received Roman knowledge, during Agricola’s governorship and especially thanks to Tacitus. Ireland and the Irish held further intrigue for Classical writers and their audiences, as they were only slightly and occasionally on Greek and Roman radar. The sarcastic ‘compliment’ from Juvenal on (supposedly conquered) barbarians’ moral superiority, the *semifer Scottus* of Prudentius, the perceived ‘wild’ and ‘warlike’ nature of the Irish, all strongly hint at a people (yet) to be tamed. Like beasts they had the potential to be subdued, given the opportunity, and (as Agricola reportedly said) their proximity to Britain would make this all the easier, and the more advantageous to Rome. The fact that this ‘taming’ never happened had far-reaching consequences for Ireland’s history and for how the island was perceived by those within the ‘Romanised’ world.

In the earliest known first-person account of the island, Ireland’s landscape was experienced in a very real way by the young Patrick: before returning on his mission he had spent six years as a slave on the bleak hills of Ireland, coping only (so he tells us) because it was there that he first found God.64 Several generations later, Bede provided a topographical description of Ireland in the preface to his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*: he offered almost wistful details of her climate (milder than that of Britain)65 and her flora and

64 *Confessio* §16: Hood (ed. and trans.), *Saint Patrick*, 25 and 44. For fuller discussion of St Patrick’s views on Ireland and the Irish, see later in this section.
65 *Historia ecclesiastica* I: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*,
fauna. Milk and honey were abundant, and reptiles were unknown. This information he derived partly from the remarks of Isidore in his *Etymologiae*. Bede almost certainly never travelled to Ireland, but may have been informed by people who did know the island, so as not to rely exclusively on earlier geographical writings, for instance those of Solinus. Although his description is not strictly accurate, it is clear that Bede viewed the neighbouring island favourably in physical terms, even by comparison with his own homeland.

Regarding Ireland’s natural environment and early political and social customs, foreign accounts varied in their accuracy but were predominantly both brief and curious. The commentators’ own surroundings and political circumstances, however, were never far from their thoughts.

2 Early Migrations to Britain and their Effects

Next I turn to the first Irish exodus in this period: migrations occurred in the fifth century resulting in colonies in western Britain. This was a development of the fierce raids to which Patrick provides first-hand testimony, although those incursions may also have had a longer history. These *Scotti* continu-
ally threatened the neighbouring Britons; their settlements in Britain were seemingly first recorded by the sixth-century British ecclesiastic Gildas, who described the twofold enemy of Irish/Gaels and Picts as exceedingly savage, and likened them to rabid wolves and in alto Titane incalescenteque caumate de artissimis foraminum caverniculis fusci vermiculorum cunei, ‘dark throngs of worms who wriggle out of narrow fissures in the rock when the sun is high and the weather grows warm’. Bede showed his indignation at the Irish incursions by referring to inpudentes grassatores Hiberni, ‘the shameless Irish robbers’. This was probably based on Gildas’s account, but for Bede it was still very strong language indeed. His unflattering tone re-emerged later as he concluded his account of an early seventh-century Northumbrian defeat of the Irish in North Britain: he stated that from then on no Irish king in Britain dared to attack the English. It should be said that Bede was not fond of the Picts either but unleashed more of his anger on the Irish.

3 The Arrival and Dissemination of Christianity

Regarding the first known contact with organised Christianity, we rely entirely on non-Irish evidence. In AD 431 Pope Celestine I sent Bishop Palladius to look after (otherwise unspecified) Christians in Ireland. Palladius unaccountably vanished from history, and the most-documented missionary, Patrick, appeared in Ireland. This was his own personal mission and not, at least

80 For example, Historia ecclesiastica I.14: ibid., 48–9.
82 Dumville et al., Saint Patrick, 17–18 and 42–3; Thompson, Who Was Saint Patrick?, 79–102; for a persuasive attempt to resurrect Palladius’s career see Ó Cróinín, Early Medieval Ireland, 21–3.
initially, an official role; his previous Irish experience must have served him well. His two principal compositions, in the form of open letters, are a self-defensive memoir (Confessio) and a diatribe against the persecutor King Coroticus and his soldiers (Epistola). Patrick reveals much about the trials of introducing the new religion into Ireland; and we glean numerous exclusive insights into fifth-century ecclesiastical organisation as well as liturgical practices.

Implied in all this is of course the difficulty in spreading the new faith in such an uncentralised society; it had to take place by persuasion alone. And Patrick’s preaching seems to have been relentless, reaching even the remotest areas of Ireland: etiam usque ad exteras partes, ubi nemo ultra erat, ‘even to the remote districts beyond which there was no-one’. His persistence leaps out from his every utterance on the subject. Also evident are his astuteness and diplomatic skill in dealing with political leaders: he took great care never to provoke them and even admitted to giving presents and payments to kings and judges, but when gifts of jewellery and other treasures were offered to him by some of his wealthier converts, he rejected them. Only in this way could his mission have proceeded at all.

But the introduction of this new religious message was anything but an easy task, and it would be foolish to assume that Irish pagans took it calmly. The most pervasive theme in Patrick’s writings is the extreme danger he faced at every turn. On a daily basis, he tells us, not only did he endure criticism and insult from unbelievers, but his very life was at risk, and he was imprisoned by the heathen of this foreign country. Patrick seems to have been com-

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85 Hood (ed. and trans.), Saint Patrick, 23–34 and 41–54.
86 Ibid., 35–8 and 55–9.
90 On the processes of Christian conversion and ‘civilisation’ in the Middle Ages, see Muldoon, Identity, 11–14.
91 See, for instance, E. A. Thompson, Romans and Barbarians: The Decline of the Western Empire (Madison, WI, 1982), 247–8.
93 Confessio §52: Hood (ed. and trans.), Saint Patrick, 33 and 52; cf. O’Loughlin, Discovering
pletely fearless and was openly willing to die in Ireland for his beliefs. But it was only when his followers were attacked by a band led by the slave-trader Coroticus that he became visibly angry.

Several times in his *Confessio*, he discussed allegations against him made by his elders at home, which arose from an unspecified sin he had committed as a boy, he mentioned a defence-hearing (probably a synod) in his absence in which he was betrayed by the close friend to whom he had confessed his wrong. Self-defence in the face of his various tribulations was one impetus behind his writings, the *Confessio* at least being penned towards the end of his life. It seems that his fellow-Christians in Britain were Patrick’s main intended audience for both works, as we might expect, then, he revealed much about Christian organisation and practices in both Ireland and Britain. In the open letter to Coroticus he referred to the white robes and baptismal chrism of his followers who were put to death. In this way Patrick left invaluable historical evidence for Christianity and its practitioners in early Ireland, as well as for Irish raiding and enslavement of foreigners.

Did all the hardships endured by Patrick, both as slave and as missionary, induce him to turn against the Irish? He was certainly critical of the surrounding pagan activity, and in one passage he even bands together Irish/Gaels (Scotti) and Picts as persecutors (*Lupi rapaces deglutierunt gregem Domini, ‘Ravening wolves have devoured the Lord’s flock’*), so that to recall Bede’s words of 150 years later, north Britain was home to shameless heathen rob-

96 *Confessio* §§26–33: Hood (ed. and trans.), *Saint Patrick*, 28 and 46.
98 *Confessio* §62: ibid., 34 and 54.
99 Apart from the content, it was too early to expect a widespread Christian readership in Ireland: cf. Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?*, 113–24.
100 He mentions incidentally the baptisms he has performed in their thousands — on the precise figures we can be somewhat sceptical — and that these included offspring of royal families. See *Confessio* §50: Hood (ed. and trans.), *Saint Patrick*, 32 and 52; and *Confessio* §§41–2: ibid., 31 and 50 respectively. See also Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?*, 96–102 and 85–7, for discussion of Patrick’s finances and Irish social classes respectively.
101 *Epistola* §3: Hood (ed. and trans.), *Saint Patrick*, 35 and 55.
103 *Confessio* §37: Hood (ed. and trans.), *Saint Patrick*, 30 and 48.
104 *Epistola* §12: ibid., 37 and 57.
bers.\textsuperscript{105} But Patrick seems never to have blamed or condemned the Irish at home for any of his suffering; rather he regarded them as the people among whom he had been called to spread the Gospel and, in the process, to redeem himself for past sins.\textsuperscript{106} Though extremely close to his family,\textsuperscript{107} he chose to follow through with his calling. At one point he prayed never to be separated from this remote and foreign people,\textsuperscript{108} and even saw himself as one of them.\textsuperscript{109} Any bitterness was aimed instead at those of his fellow-Britons who, in his view, had hindered his mission.\textsuperscript{110}

The beginnings of Irish Christianity were not considered in any detail by Gildas or Bede, nor are any independent near-contemporary accounts available from Gaul, where Palladius, the first and papally-sanctioned bishop in Ireland, may have lived prior to his appointment.\textsuperscript{111} Another source appears to confirm that Patrick did not convert or expel every pagan in Ireland: if we accept a contemptuous reference in AD 655 by the ‘Irish Augustine’ (in his work \textit{De mirabilibus sacrae scripturae}, ‘On the miracles of holy Scripture’) to druids of his own day teaching about some form of transmigration of souls,\textsuperscript{112} we must acknowledge that pre-Christian belief was still alive and reasonably well even two centuries after Patrick.

I turn now to highlight some examples of how outsiders’ accounts can complement the Irish sources and so deepen our understanding of the latter. These occur mostly in the form of incidental comments: for instance, Patrick’s allusions to underkings and female slaves in fifth-century Ireland,\textsuperscript{113} whom he seems to have treated with equal respect,\textsuperscript{114} as well as an earlier episode in which Irish sailors asked Patrick to suck their nipples before they would allow him

\textsuperscript{105} Historia ecclesiastica I.14: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), \textit{Bede’s Ecclesiastical History}, 48–9.

\textsuperscript{106} Confessio §28: Hood (ed. and trans.), \textit{Saint Patrick}, 28 and 47.

\textsuperscript{107} Confessio §43: ibid., 31 and 50.

\textsuperscript{108} Confessio §58: ibid., 34 and 53.

\textsuperscript{109} Epistola §16: ibid., 37 and 58.


\textsuperscript{111} For connections with Gaul see Charles-Edwards, ‘Palladius’, 5.


\textsuperscript{113} Confessio §42: Hood (ed. and trans.), \textit{Saint Patrick}, 31 and 50; Epistola §12: ibid., 37 and 57.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid.
onto their boat in his escape from slavery.\footnote{Confessio § 18: ibid., 26 and 44.} Patrick stated that he had refused this offer because they were gentes, ‘pagans’,\footnote{Ibid.} implying that this was a standard gesture of supplication or submission for slaves, or perhaps some kind of religious ritual.\footnote{Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?*, 19–20.} Sacrifices and of course resistance to Christian teaching are highlighted by Patrick;\footnote{Confessio §§ 35–7: Hood (ed. and trans.), *Saint Patrick*, 29–30 and 48.} such happenings are only sporadically mentioned in Irish sources (and those sources are of much later date).\footnote{Cf. section 2, above.} Bede is informative on Irish monastic generosity in hosting and educating Anglo-Saxon and other foreigners, for instance, Oswald,\footnote{Oswald was subsequently king of Northumbria and became a martyred saint; see *Historia ecclesiastica* III.9: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, 240–5.} Agilberht,\footnote{Agilberht was a Gaul who arrived in southern England via Ireland, but who was later effectively dismissed from his episcopal see because his barbara loquella, ‘barbarous speech’, was almost incomprehensible to the English; see *Historia ecclesiastica* III.7: ibid., 234–5.} and Ecgbhere\footnote{Egbhere was highly praised by Bede for his piety and learning; see *Historia ecclesiastica* III.4 and III.27: ibid., 224–5 and 312–15 respectively.}.

But Ireland was, at the same time, in Bede’s eyes, a hotbed of potential heresy.\footnote{For contrasting views see D. Ó Cróinín, “‘New Heresy for Old?’ Pelagian Heresy in Ireland and the Papal Letter of 640’, *Speculum* 60 (1985), 505–16 at 515–16; and Thacker, ‘Bede and the Irish’, 38–43. For further discussion see section 4, below.} Unconventional behaviour on that island carried over into Irish intellectual activity in his own land.\footnote{See section 4, below.} Bede demonstrated knowledge of natural disasters like plagues in Ireland,\footnote{*Historia ecclesiastica* III.27: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, 312–13.} as well as providing some place-name evidence important for his relatively early date.\footnote{For example, Rathmelsgi; *Historia ecclesiastica* III.27: ibid., 312–13; Inisboufinde and Mag éo; *Historia ecclesiastica* IV.4: ibid., 346–7. Cf. Plummer (ed.), *Venerabilis Bedae Opera*, II, 196 and 210.} An Anglo-Saxon raid into Ireland in 684 was documented in Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica* as well as by Irish chroniclers:\footnote{Ibid., 260; *Historia ecclesiastica* IV.26: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, 426–9; Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill (eds and trans.), *The Annals of Ulster*, 148–9 (684.2).} this attack, expansively criticised by Bede,\footnote{*Historia ecclesiastica* IV.26: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, 426–9 (where he made brief mention of the rightful imprecations of this friendly and harmless race).} may reveal
new information about Hiberno-Northumbrian relations at that time, pending final determination of the identities of the Irish involved.

Regarding further incursions from abroad, one foreign tidbit offers further insight into the nature of Viking activity in ninth-century Ireland: an entry for 847 in the Carolingian ‘Annals of Saint-Bertin’ records that Viking raiders had turned the Irish into *tributarii*, ‘regular tribute-payers’. This is not admitted in surviving contemporary Irish records, and appears to add considerably to Irish chroniclers’ (often terse but terror-laden) descriptions of Scandinavian plunder. Another entry in the ‘Annals of Saint-Bertin’, for the following year, notes a request by an Irish king for an alliance with Charles the Bald: this needs further investigation but appears to confirm that at least one Irish leader solicited Continental involvement in Irish political life (and thereby to illuminate Irish depictions of the event).

Still on the theme of longer-term effects of Christian conversion, outsiders’ comments on the nature or sophistication of known Irishmen’s education and learning as received at home make for a more rounded picture of Ireland. The most detailed (though questionable) example of this is St Columbanus’s broad education as described by his Italian hagiographer, Ionas; his ‘Life of Columbanus’ was written a generation after the holy man’s death at his monastery at Bobbio. In his youth at Bangor, Columbanus studied the Gospels, grammar, rhetoric, and geometry among other pursuits. We are told that he had resisted worldly temptations earlier in life in order to concentrate on

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133 Irish chroniclers rather emphasised concern at the the conflict with Scandinavians in this period; see also, for example, an entry in the ‘Annals of Ulster’ for 849, in which groups of foreigners in Ireland attacked each other: Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill (eds and trans.), *The Annals of Ulster*, 308–9 (849.6).
these more important matters.\textsuperscript{136} Given Ionas’s emotional closeness to his subject – despite his lack of personal acquaintance with Columbanus – his work has been afforded more credence than those of most mediaeval hagiographers. But his agenda and his distance from Ireland render his anecdotes on Columbanus’s early life rather suspect.

A century after this saint’s floruit, the Anglo-Saxon bishop and scholar Aldhelm (d. 709) concerned himself with Irish education in two of his letters.\textsuperscript{137} Aldhelm may have been taught by an Irishman,\textsuperscript{138} although I regard the argument for Maeldub as his teacher as somewhat flimsy,\textsuperscript{139} his work had close affinities with Irish stylistic features. But it is not always clear whether he meant this as sincere tribute to, or mocking parody of, Irish style.\textsuperscript{140} To his student Wihtfrith,\textsuperscript{141} who was planning to study in Ireland, Aldhelm wrote a lengthy warning against the considerable dangers of going there to learn, especially the pre-eminence of ‘pagan’ mythology, which (along with the widespread practice of prostitution in everyday life) indicated a moral turpitude most distasteful and undesirable for a young and eager student:\textsuperscript{142}

Absurdum enim arbitror, spreta rudis ac veteris instrumenti inextricabili norma per lubrica dumosi ruris diverticula, immo per discolos philosphorum anfractus iter carpere seu certe aporriatis vitreorum fontium limpidis laticibus palustres pontias lutulentasque limphas siticulose potare, in quis atra bufonum turma catervatim scatet atque garrulitas ranarum crepitans coaxat,

‘I think it absurd to spurn the inextricable rule of the New and the Ancient Document and undertake a journey through the slippery paths of a country full of brambles, that is to say, through the troublesome

\textsuperscript{136} Vita sancti Columbani §3. Text: Krusch (ed.), Ionae Vitae Sanctorum, 155; translation: de Vogüé (trans.), Jonas de Bobbio, 105.

\textsuperscript{137} For discussion of Aldhelm’s views on Irishmen studying in his own homeland, see section 4, below.

\textsuperscript{138} Andy Orchard, The Poetic Art of Aldhelm (Cambridge, 1994), 2–4; Lapidge and Herren (trans.), Aldhelm, 6–7.

\textsuperscript{139} O’Leary, Trials and Translations, 125–9.


\textsuperscript{141} Rudolf Ehwald (ed.), Aldhelmi Opera, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctores Antiquissimi XV (Berlin, 1919), 479–80; Lapidge and Herren (trans.), Aldhelm, 154–5.

\textsuperscript{142} Ehwald (ed.), Aldhelmi Opera, 479, lines 7–11; Lapidge and Herren (trans.), Aldhelm, 154.
meanderings of the (worldly) philosophers; or surely (it is absurd) to
drink thirstily from briny and muddy waters, in which a dark throng of
toads swarms in abundance and where croaks the strident chatter of
frogs, when there are clear waters flowing from glassy pools.’

These problems he attributed to the influence of Classical mythology, which
has never been shown to be prominent in seventh-century Irish schools or
literature, 143 so his claims must be regarded with scepticism.

Aldhelm’s other addressee regarding Ireland, Heahfrith, was told of the
problems with Irish education and its troublesome products at Canterbury.144
Heahfrith had (by contrast with Wihtfrith) already studied for almost six years
in Ireland, probably at Mayo.145 Aldhelm addressed the young man as a pro-
spective advanced student of considerable ability, strongly advising him to
pursue his studies in England, where the educational system was far superior.
Aldhelm appeared not only resentful but baffled at the popularity of Ireland as
a destination for English students, in the light of the (more than star-studded)
education available in England:146

Britannia … verbi gratia ceu solis flammigeri et luculente lunae specimine

143 Cf. ibid., 139–40. For discussion of mediaeval Irish engagement with Classical
literature, see W. B. Stanford, ‘Towards a History of Classical Influences in Ireland’,
Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy, 70C (1970), 13–91; idem, Ireland and the Classical
Tradition (Dublin, 1976); Fergal McGrath, Education in Ancient and Medieval Ireland
(Dublin, 1979), 76–7; B. Ó Cuív, ‘Medieval Irish Scholars and Classical Literature’,
L. Hillers, The Medieval Irish Odyssey Merugud Úilixis meic Leiritis (Ph.D. dissertation,
Harvard University, 1997); and Michael W. Herren, ‘Classical and Secular Learning
among the Irish before the Carolingian Renaissance’, Florilegium, 3 (1981), 118–57;
reprinted as article I in idem, Latin Letters in Early Christian Ireland (Aldershot, 1996);
for further discussion on Aldhelm see section 4, below.

See also G. T. Dempsey, ‘Aldhelm of Malmesbury and the Irish’, Proceedings of the
Royal Irish Academy, 99C (1999), 1–22; L. Bieler, ‘Ireland’s Contribution to the Culture
of Northumbria’, in Gerald Bonner (ed.), Fammulus Christi: Essays in Commemoration of
217; D. R. Howlett, ‘Aldhelm and Irish Learning’, Archivum Latinitatis Medii Aevi, 52
(1994), 37–75; and A. S. Cook, ‘Who was the Ehfrid of Aldhelm’s Letter?’, Speculum,
2 (1927), 363–73.

145 Cf. Lapidge and Herren (trans.), Aldhelm, 145.

146 Ehwald (ed.), Aldhelmi Opera, 492, lines 15–17, and 493, lines 1–2; Lapidge and Herren
would be very interesting if it were not almost unintelligible through the writer’s
puerile pomposity.’
potiatur, id est Theodoro infula pontificatus fungenti ab ipso tirocinio rudimentorum in flore philosophicae artis adulto necnon et eiusdem sodalitatis cliente Hadriano dumtaxat urbanitate enucleata ineffabiliter praedito!

‘Britain… possesses, for example, the luculent likeness, as it were, of the flaming sun and the moon, that is, Theodore, who discharges the duties of the pontificate and who was from the very beginnings of his apprenticeship mature in the flower of the arts of learning, and his colleague of the same sodality, Hadrian, equally endowed with ineffably pure urbanity.’

Aldhelm could not fathom why a serious student should consider anywhere but England for the very best instruction. In conclusion, he claimed unconvincingly that his remarks on ‘Irish savants’ were made in jest and with the intention to praise scholars in England rather than abuse the Irish.\(^{147}\) Some Irishmen were admired for their ability to surmount their barbarian origins and the perceived inadequacy of an Irish education. John Scottus Eriugena, for instance, had done very well considering that he must have received an inadequate training in Ireland, according to the papal librarian Anastasius.\(^{148}\)

The opinions of St Bernard of Clairvaux on Irish education are found in his ‘Life of St Malachy’ (d. 1148), his friend and a man who holds a significant place in the development of Irish Christianity as it attempted to make the transition to a streamlined, Continental model of ecclesiastical governance.\(^{149}\) Bernard left no doubt as to his view, from the very opening of his work:\(^{150}\)

Malachias noster, ortus Hibernia de populo barbaro, ibi educatus, ibi litteras edoctus est. Caeterum de natali barbarie traxit nihil, non magis quam de sale materno pisces maris. Quam vero suave, quod inculta


\(^{148}\) Cf. section 4, below.


nobis barbaries tam urbanum protulit civem sanctorum, et domesticum Dei!

‘Our Malachy was born in Ireland of a barbarous tribe; there he was brought up and educated. Yet he betrayed not a mite of his rude origin, any more than a fish of the sea preserves a salty savour. How delightful it is that crude barbarism should have given us so worthy a man, a fellow-citizen with the saints and a true member of the House of God.’

It is clear that Malachy had to overcome a significant disadvantage. For instance, an Irish teacher of high renown displayed *lenitas*, ‘a certain light-mindedness’ by playing with a shoemaker’s awl; Malachy was a serious student and took offence.\(^{151}\) Later, himself a teacher and peacemaker, he helped to remedy the problems of secular and ecclesiastical governance, despite suffering persecution and abuse.\(^{152}\)

4 Perceptions of Irish Christians Abroad

My next historical theme is perceptions of Irish Christians in other lands (especially in the so-called ‘Golden Age’).\(^{153}\) This is the most attractive issue among scholars who have considered outsiders’ views of the Irish.\(^{154}\) Not


\(^{152}\) *Vita sancti Malachiæ* §§38–43. Text: PL CLXXXII, cols 1095–7; translation: Meyer (trans.), *Bernard of Clairvaux*, 34–5. For the views on Ireland of twelfth-century church reformers, see section 5, below.


all Irish Christians left their homeland intending to “save civilisation”: the circumstances in which Irish people undertook foreign travel varied as widely as did their reception in foreign parts. The Latin term *peregrinatio*, usually translated as ‘pilgrimage’,\(^{155}\) is interpreted by some as the exclusive concept behind Christian missionising. But that can be misleading for two reasons. First, conversion of pagans was by no means the only (or even usual) intention of Irish Christians when they sailed for foreign lands. More often they were going in pursuit of spiritual exile but nonetheless ended up as missionaries, as did St Columbanus.\(^{156}\) Secondly, as Thomas Charles-Edwards has demonstrated, for the Irish, *peregrinatio* took various forms, some of which did not include overseas travel, and it is found (among other genres) in early mediaeval Irish laws and penitentials as a punishment for crimes or sins (frequently taking the form of banishment or exile to another region within Ireland).\(^{157}\) Although not all emigrants, therefore, were necessarily dedicated Christians or even well-behaved men and women, it is the deeds of Christian travellers which provide us with most of the concrete evidence for mediaeval Irishmen abroad. The exile of St Columba to Scotland could have resulted from accusations that he had triggered a divisive battle;\(^{158}\) but we do not have the full story since we rely on Columba’s principal hagiographer, who glossed over the details.\(^{159}\)

Irishmen’s contribution to script styles in Anglo-Saxon and Continental manuscripts is well known;\(^{160}\) but it is the extant opinions of witnesses,
observers and recorders in the various adopted homes of those Irishmen which reveal a question even more complex. Naturally, their opinions varied widely, so at this point let us examine the ‘foreign’ accounts, comments and anecdotes – the good, the bad, and the complicated.

Let us begin with the complicated, since Bede’s position defined and set the scene for the others. How Bede perceived the Irish in general – especially the Christian immigrants – has been a difficult and even controversial issue. Of course, he was not primarily concerned with Irish matters; and his portrayals can, on the surface, seem contradictory. Many of the views presented in the ‘Ecclesiastical History’, in particular, are expressed through the mouths of others, some of whom lived long before Bede’s own time. In dealing with the question of his views of the Irish, let us consider two separate themes: how he regarded Irish Christianity generally as it manifested itself in Britain; and his descriptions of individual Irishmen living and teaching there. His first specific attribute to that island’s learning was that scrapings from Irish manuscripts placed in water which was then drunk could cure snake-bites. But pervasive among his more general reports, quotations and observations lurk the dark issues of schism and heresy, tendencies which arose in Ireland itself but had had profound bearing on Ireland’s contribution to Anglo-Saxon Christianity. In the ‘Ecclesiastical History’ he quoted a mid-seventh-century papal letter to Irish Church-leaders accusing the Irish of recently reviving the 300-year-old Pelagian heresy. Since Bede did not offer criticism, clarification or contradictory evidence for this part of the papal letter, we may deduce that he saw some validity in this accusation. Bede condemned the heresy of the late fourth-century British monk, Pelagius, and his ‘poisonous’ teachings on, for

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163 This is usually interpreted as veneration of Irishmen’s writings, which nonetheless seems to contradict many of Bede’s other allusions to their earlier activities in Britain; *Historia ecclesiastica* I:i: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, 20–1; Plummer (ed.), *Venerabilis Bedae Opera*, II, 10–11. Cf. n72, above.
165 *Historia ecclesiastica* II:19: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, 200–1.
instance, the issues of free will and predestination.\(^{166}\)

Jerome, a contemporary of Pelagius, had referred to him as *Scotorum pul-
tibus praegravatus*,\(^{167}\) ‘weighed down with Gaelic porridge’, a description which was positively contemptuous as well as anti-heretical. There is no evidence to demonstrate a revival of Pelagianism in Ireland in the seventh century,\(^{168}\) although the Pope’s appointment of Palladius could have resulted from its spread in Britain (and perhaps to Ireland) two centuries earlier.\(^{169}\)

An even greater departure from mainstream Christian practice was the well-documented refusal of a great many churches in Ireland and North Britain to accept the Roman method for dating Easter, as well as other customs, for instance monastic tonsure and rules.\(^{170}\) The Easter-issue was viewed by both camps as fundamental to Christian worship, and Irish correspondence and synodal decrees demonstrate the high profile and divisive nature of that controversy, especially in the seventh century.\(^{171}\) By Bede’s own time the question had largely been resolved, but he spared no effort in highlighting just how traumatic it had been in Anglo-Saxon England. The papal letter I have mentioned,\(^{172}\) as quoted by Bede, also alleges that the Irish who celebrated Easter on the wrong day were guilty of Quartodecimanism, a heresy which involved Easter Sunday coinciding with the Jewish Passover.\(^{173}\) Bede took care to reinforce, following that quotation, that only certain of the Irish were thus accused.\(^{174}\) More importantly, he quoted an early eighth-century letter from a

\(^{166}\) *Historia ecclesiastica* II.19: ibid., 200–1; for discussion of the Pelagian heresy, see, for example, B. R. Rees (trans.), *The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* (Woodbridge, 1991), 1–25, and Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?*, 52–5.

\(^{167}\) *Commentarii in Jeremiam Prophetam*, Prologus. Text: *PL* XXIV, col. 682; translation: Dumville, *Three Men in a Boat*, 20–1. Thompson, *Who Was Saint Patrick?*, 53: ‘Unfortunately the saint forgot to tell us whether there was some connexion between the Briton’s taste for Irish porridge and his interest in free will’.

\(^{168}\) Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 206–7; Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, 201n4.


\(^{171}\) Hughes, *The Church*, 103–20; Maura Walsh and D. Ó Cróinín (eds and trans.), *Cummian’s Letter De controuersia paschali and the De ratione computandi* (Toronto, 1988), 18–25. See also Plummer (ed.), *Venerabilis Bedae Opera*, II, 25 (on the controversy over Easter-dating), and 133 (on Irish church-organisation).


\(^{173}\) Cf. Ó Cróinín, ‘New Heresy for Old?’ especially 506–8 and 515.

\(^{174}\) *Historia ecclesiastica* II.19: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History*, 200–1.
since deceased abbot of his own monastery to the king of Picts, condemning outright (as Pelagian heretics) those among his people who followed the Irish Easter-dating.\textsuperscript{175} Also discussed here is tonsure or monastic hairstyle, another controversial difference between Gaelic practice and the Roman norm;\textsuperscript{176} this too is couched in heretical terms, alleging that the style was in imitation of the evil biblical druid Simon Magus and was therefore a Gaelic form of the sin of simony.\textsuperscript{177} As regards Easter-dating, Bede was passionately in favour of the Roman method, and he made this more than obvious in his ‘Ecclesiastical History’.\textsuperscript{178} The differences would, of course, have had particularly telling effects in his own kingdom of Northumbria, where both the Gaelic and Roman forms had been well established.\textsuperscript{179}

But when he came to discuss particular Irish Christian missionaries in his country, whose contribution he certainly acknowledged,\textsuperscript{180} how did Bede reconcile with this his poor view of some of their customs? He did not hesitate to offer high praise to the most prominent Irish churchmen in Britain, no less so than to their English counterparts. The three highlighted are Columba (founder of Iona),\textsuperscript{181} Aidan (also of Iona), Irish bishop of the Northumbrian community with his see at Lindisfarne,\textsuperscript{182} and the renowned visionary saint, Fursa.\textsuperscript{183} With regard to Columba and Aidan, the Easter-question is tackled directly in the midst of this high praise; and Bede did his best to rationalise,\textsuperscript{184}

\textsuperscript{175} Historia ecclesiastica V.21: ibid., 532–53, especially 544–5.
\textsuperscript{177} Historia ecclesiastica V.21: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), Bede’s Ecclesiastical History, 548–9.
\textsuperscript{178} For example, Historia ecclesiastica III.17: ibid., 264–6, regarding St Aidan.
\textsuperscript{181} Historia ecclesiastica III.4: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), Bede’s Ecclesiastical History, 220–5. He may not have been aware of his (probably older) contemporary Adomnán’s ‘Life of Columba’: ibid., 225n2; cf. D. N. Dumville, Derry, Iona, England, and the Governance of the Columban Church’, in Gerard O’Brien (ed.), Derry and Londonderry: History and Society (Dublin, 1999), 91–114 at 93: ‘one senses that Bede might have wished to be ignorant of Columba’s merits’.
\textsuperscript{182} For instance, Historia ecclesiastica III.15–17: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), Bede’s Ecclesiastical History, 260–7.
\textsuperscript{183} Historia ecclesiastica III.19: ibid., 268–77.
indeed to excuse, the holy men’s mistake over this central element of their faith. Having praised Aidan’s many virtues, he continued:  

Haec in praefato antistite multum conplector et amo, quia nimirum haec Deo placuisse non ambigo. Quod autem pascha non suo tempore obseruabat, uel canonicum eius tempus ignorans uel suae gentis auctoritate ne agnitum sequeretur deuictus, non adprobo nec laudo. In quo tamen hoc adprobo, quia in celebratione sui paschae non aliud corde tenebat, uenerabatur et praedicabat quam quod nos, id est, redemptionem [sic] generis humani per passionem, resurrectionem, ascensionem in caelos meditoris Dei et hominum hominis Iesu Christi.

‘All these things I greatly admire and love in this bishop and I have no doubt that all this was pleasing to God. But I neither praise nor approve of him in so far as he did not observe Easter at the proper time, either because he was ignorant of the canonical time or because, if he knew it, he was compelled by the force of public opinion not to follow it. But, nevertheless, I do approve of this, that in his celebration of Easter he had no other thought in his heart, he reverenced and preached no other doctrine than we do, namely the redemption of the human race by the passion, resurrection and ascension into heaven of the one mediator between God and men, even the man Christ Jesus.’

He played up the issue in his dramatic account of the Council of Whitby of 664, but when he wished to discuss it in relation to the otherwise flawless devotion of an individual, he understated it to considerable, and even moving, effect; this despite his earlier hint of possible heresy on Aidan’s part when he echoed the Pauline dictum about those who had zeal for God but not according to knowledge. Bede’s account of Irish Christianity and its role in Britain

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187 *Historia ecclesiastica* III.3: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical
has been the focus of more discussion (in Irish and British historiography) than that of any other mediaeval outsider,\(^{188}\) indeed one could focus entirely on that question. Reading his ‘Ecclesiastical History’, at least, leaves no doubt that the development of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England, and in north Britain, owed a considerable debt to the Irish both at home and abroad.\(^{189}\) I think that Bede did not express any demonstrable ill-feeling towards the Irish except in their early manifestation as heathen butchers,\(^{190}\) and indeed that he was favourable towards them, downplaying their flaws even on his pet issue of Easter dating.\(^{191}\)

I turn next to another prolific, but more difficult, English cleric. Aldhelm held offices in the south of England,\(^{192}\) by contrast with Bede, who worked in the north at a slightly later period. As we have seen,\(^{193}\) he was a complex character with obvious concerns about Irish education. In his letter to Heahfrith, Aldhelm added to his remarks on the superiority (over Irish schools) of the education available in Anglo-Saxon England,\(^{194}\) by describing the contribution of Irish students to Archbishop Theodore’s classroom at Canterbury.\(^{195}\)

\begin{quote}
Theodorus summi sacerdotii gubernacula regens Hibernensium globo discipulorum, ceu aper truculentus molosorum catasta ringente val-latus, stipetur, limato perniciter grammatico dente iactura dispendii carens rebelles falanges discutit et utpote belliger in meditullio campi arcister legionum falangibus saeptus aemulorum spissis: mox nervo-sis tenso lacertorum volis arcu spiculisque ex faretra exemptis, hoc est chronographiae opacis acutisque syllogismis, turma supercilii tyfo turgens amissa ancilium testudine terga dantes latebras antrorum atras triumphante victore praepropere petunt,
\end{quote}

\(^{188}\) See section 4, above.
\(^{190}\) Cf. section 3, above.
\(^{192}\) Lapidge and Herren (trans.), Aldhelm, 8–10.
\(^{193}\) See section 3, above.
\(^{194}\) See section 3, above.
\(^{195}\) Ehwald (ed.), Aldhelmi Opera, 493; Lapidge and Herren (trans.), Aldhelm, 163.
‘although Theodore[,] who pilots the helm of the high priesthood, be hemmed in by a mass of Irish students, like a savage wild boar checked by a snarling pack of hounds, with the filed tooth of the grammarian – nimbly and with no loss of time – he disbands the rebel phalanxes; and just as the warlike Bowman in the midst of battle is hemmed in by a dense formation of enemy legions, then, when his bow is tensed by his powerful hands and arms and arrows are drawn from the quiver, that is, from the obscure and acute syllogisms of chronography, the throng, swollen with the arrogance of pride, their shield-wall having been shattered, turn their backs and flee headlong to the dark recess of their caves, while the victor exults.’

This obviously reflects the two-way intellectual migration between England and Ireland in his own time, and the competition among schools to attract able students. Theodore’s Irish pupils were clearly eager to learn, but were misguided on the Easter-dating issue, as well as arrogant, argumentative and therefore irksome. Aldhelm, it seems, held a very grudging tolerance of these young men and their background. This is curious if not contradictory in the light of his own probable Irish influence and his literary affinity with Hiberno-Latin models.

In the mid-ninth century we find a similar reaction to the most remarkable Irish scholar abroad – John Scottus Eriugena. We know Eriugena for his learning in Greek as well as Latin and for his outstanding contribution to Western philosophy. In a letter by the papal librarian, Anastasius, to King Charles the Bald in March 860, there is almost nothing but emphatic praise for Eriugena’s work: *Mirandum est quoque quomodo vir ille barbarus (qui in finibus mundi positus, quanto ab hominibus conversatione, tanto credi potuit alterius linguae dictione, longinquus) talia intellectu capere in aliamque linguam transferre valuverit. Joannem innuo Scotigenam virum, quem auditu comperi per omnia sanctum,* `It is a wonderful thing how that barbarian, living at the ends of the earth, who might be supposed to be so far removed from the knowledge of this other language as he is from the familiar use of it, has been able to comprehend such ideas and translate them into another tongue [Greek]: I refer to John

196 See section 4, above, with regard to Bede’s angle on the same topic.
197 See section 3, above.
Scotigena, whom I have learned by report to be in all things a holy man’.\(^\text{199}\)

In this way Eriugena’s achievement was all the more praiseworthy, given the librarian’s opinion of Ireland’s educational offerings and even her people.\(^\text{200}\)

Now we come to more endearing portraits of the Irish,\(^\text{201}\) starting with that painted by Charlemagne’s later biographer, Notker ‘the Stammerer’.\(^\text{202}\) In this passage the exuberance of the Irish ‘peddling their wisdom’ at court is infectious: *Si quis sapientiae cupidus est, veniat ad nos et accipiat eam; nam venalis est apud nos*, ‘If anyone is eager for wisdom, let him come to us and receive it; for it is wisdom that we have for sale’.\(^\text{203}\) I take the piece as indicative of how the Irish character was viewed by some, even though the episode itself is presumably unhistorical. Foreign descriptions of Irish pilgrimage refer to Irishmen’s fearlessness in crossing the sea.\(^\text{204}\) For instance, the ninth-century Heiric of Auxerre, in his ‘Life of St Germanus’, held Irish scholars’ wisdom and persistence in very high regard: *Quid Hiberniam memorem contempto pelagi discrimine paene totam cum grege philosophorum ad littora nostra migrantem. Quorum quisquis perditor est, ultero sibi indicit exilium, ut Salomoni sapientissimo famuletur ad votum*, ‘Why should I speak of Ireland when almost all its people, contemptuous of the dangers of the ocean, have migrated to our shores with their crowd of philosophers? The more learned of them are more apt to exile themselves in order to serve the wishes of the most wise Solomon.’\(^\text{205}\)

An entry for 891 in the ‘Anglo-Saxon Chronicle’ described three Irishmen in a boat who neither knew nor cared where their pilgrimage was going:\(^\text{206}\)


\(^{200}\) Cf. Kenney, *The Sources*, 582: Anastasius gave ‘high praise to the work of Eriugena’.


\(^{204}\) Cf. the early Celts: section 1, above.


The Heretic and the Hibernophobe

In a boat without any oars three Gaels came to King Alfred from Ireland, which they had left secretly because they wished for the love of God to be in foreign lands, they cared not where. The boat in which they travelled was made of two and a half hides, and they took with them enough food for seven days. And after seven days they came to land in Cornwall and went immediately to King Alfred. Their names were Dubsláine, Mac Bethad, and Mael Inmain.

Finally I shall deal with the negative views. It is in the context of controversy that we should consider St Columbanus, who flourished about a century before Bede. As a highly learned, articulate man founding churches in Frankia, he was both vigorous and stubborn in defending his native customs, including the traditional method of Easter-dating. Therefore he was bound to get into trouble with all forms of authority. On a local level he was banished from his diocese by more than one bishop, and he was frequently threatened with trials and possible imprisonment. In his letters he even vehemently confronted Pope Gregory the Great: for example,

Quare ergo tu, tam sapiens, nimirum cuius clarissimis per urbem, ut antiquitus, sacri ingenii diffusa sunt flumina, Pascha tenebrosum colis? Miror, fateor, a te hunc Galliae errorem acsi scynthenium iam diu non fuisse rasum; nisi forte putem, quod vix credere possum, dum eum constat a te non fuisse emendatum, apud te esse probatum,

‘Why then, with all your learning, when indeed the streams of your holy

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207 Cf. section 3, above.
wisdom are, as of old, shed abroad over the earth with great brightness, do you favour a dark Easter? I am surprised, I must confess, that this error of Gaul has not long since been scraped away by you, as if it were a warty growth; unless perhaps I am to think, what I can scarce believe, that while it is patent that this has not been righted by you, it has met with approval in your eyes.’

Even from Columbanus’s own works, therefore, we gain a strong sense of how he was regarded in various quarters of western Europe. In more recent times he has, however, been hailed as a paragon of European unity.211

I turn next to the work known as *Laterculus Malalianus*, likely to date from late seventh-century England according to Jane Stevenson, who has persuasively argued for an attribution to Archbishop Theodore himself.212 It offers two jibes at learned Irishmen. The first is a throwaway comment regarding their chronography: *In sex milia autem annorum concordant omnes apparuissis Dominum; quamuis Scotti concordare nolunt, qui sapientia[m] se existimant habere, et scientiam perd[i]derunt*, ‘However, all agree that the Lord appeared in 6,000 years – though the Irish do not wish to concur, who judge themselves to have wisdom, and [so] lose knowledge.’213 This seemed to be applied to all Irish scholars, for reasons broader than the author was willing to admit; in this way it can be regarded as prejudicial. It is ironic that some should have denied Irishmen the very qualities for which others praised them so highly.214

The other mention of the Irish is a more general criticism: *Iam ne nos fallant multiloquio suo Scottorum scolaces, ipsa se nobis veritas liquidissimus labiorum promat nectareis, ut omnem a nobis amaritudinem tollat aliene doctrine . . .*, ‘Lest the twisty reasoners/whelps of the Irish deceive us with their verbiage, let truth disclose herself to us with the most liquid nectar of the lips, so that she may take away from us all the bitterness of strange teaching . . .’215 Theodore’s ‘Hibernophobia’ (if he was the author) may imply that his Irish students were

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211 For instance, Tomás Ó Fiaich, *St Columbanus in His Own Words* (Dublin, 1974), 170: ‘St Columban is the patron saint of those who seek to construct a united Europe’ – Robert Schuman (1886–1963), French statesman and Foreign Minister, 1948–52.


213 Stevenson (ed. and trans.), *The ‘Laterculus Malalianus’*, 124–5.

214 For a summary of this author’s attributes see ibid., 10–11. One of Jane Stevenson’s (perhaps less watertight) reasons for arguing an Anglo-Saxon origin for this text is that, in the late seventh century, only the Anglo-Saxons were sufficiently concerned about the Irish to display ‘Hibernophobic sentiments’: ibid., 99.

215 Ibid., 120–1.
annoying in the sense of loud and talkative (although at least he did not accuse them of laziness).\textsuperscript{216} The in-joke was directly echoed by Aldhelm, when he focused on their babbling ignorance and possibly their foreign accents or pronunciation.\textsuperscript{217} Clearly, however, Theodore and Aldhelm were willing to teach and associate with them: rather than turning away their business, they may have enjoyed exchanging good-natured banter, only later using these (probably young and intense) Irishmen as rhetorical fodder.\textsuperscript{218} The Carolingian anecdote about Eriugena at table,\textsuperscript{219} and his ‘biting epitaph’\textsuperscript{220} for Hincmar – though almost certainly later inventions – show that this particular Irishman was perceived as self-confident to the point of insolence; like Theodore’s students, perhaps, he was a barbarian too big for his boots.

The Life of St Wilfrid, bishop of York,\textsuperscript{221} who died in the same year as Aldhelm and was inextricably involved in Anglo-Saxon politics, includes an interesting reference to the Irish. Wilfrid, like Bede, was not favourable to ‘Irish’ Easter-dating or other customs, but was far more direct than Bede in showing it; this despite the benefits of an Irish education at Lindisfarne.\textsuperscript{222} The author, Stephen of Ripon (709 x 731), reported the bishop’s self-defensive speech at a council in 703 in which he defiantly listed his achievements for Northumbria:\textsuperscript{223}

\begin{quote}
Necnan et ego primus post obitum primorum procerum, a sancto Gregorio directorum, Scotticae virulenta plantationis germina eradicarem; ad verumque pascha et ad tonsuram in modum coronae, quae ante ea posteriore capitis parte e summo abrasa vertice, secundum apostolicae sedis rationem totam Ultrahumbrensium gentem permutando converterem?
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{216} On possible word-play behind \textit{scolaces} see ibid., 163n2.

\textsuperscript{217} Cf. section 4, above.

\textsuperscript{218} Theodore seems to have been favourable to Irishmen who conformed with Romanist views: Bieler, ‘Ireland’s Contribution’, 214.

\textsuperscript{219} \`O Cróinín, \textit{Early Medieval Ireland}, 227.

\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 228. This was outwardly more negative than the papal librarian Anastasius’s remark on Eriugena’s own learning prowess: cf. section 4, above.

\textsuperscript{221} Bertram Colgrave (ed. and trans.), \textit{The Life of Bishop Wilfrid by Eddius Stephanus} (Cambridge, 1927).

\textsuperscript{222} Irish monastic education seems to have had a more positive influence on other well-known Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastics, for instance SS Oswald and Cuthbert. Cf. \textit{Historia ecclesiastica} V.19: Colgrave and Mynors (eds and trans.), \textit{Bede’s Ecclesiastical History}, 518–19, and Bieler, ‘Ireland’s Contribution’, 213.

'Was I not the first, after the death of the first elders who were sent by St Gregory, to root out the poisonous weeds planted by the Scots? Did I not change and convert the whole Northumbrian race to the true Easter and to the tonsure in the form of a crown, in accordance with the practice of the Apostolic See, though their tonsure had been previously at the back of the head, from the top of the head downwards?'

The Irish contribution is dismissed as a strange, peripheral element leading the faithful astray, and which would have continued to do so but for Wilfrid. It is striking to note the contrast between his temperament here and his logical eloquence at the Council of Whitby as portrayed by both Stephen and Bede. (Curiously, the council where Wilfrid defended himself is not mentioned at all in Bede’s ‘Ecclesiastical History’.) How much of the nastiness and anti-Irish sentiment is due to Wilfrid himself, and how much to his hagiographer, we cannot be sure.

Another seemingly negative view appears in the correspondence of the Anglo-Saxon missionary, Boniface (d. 754). He had emigrated to spend his best years reorganising the church in Frankia; and his work gives us an almost Patrician sense of how difficult it was to preach in an alien environment.

One of his difficulties originated with Virgil of Salzburg, who may have been Irish; Boniface became so frustrated that he accused Virgil of heresy before the Pope. This action, I think, indicates not anti-Irish sentiment, but rather Boniface’s dogmatically anti-heretical views, which are clearly visible elsewhere in his work. Having said that, there seems to have been a general decline of

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225 W. F. Bolton described Wilfrid as ‘one of the most colorful, and at the same time one of the most unattractive, figures of the Anglo-Saxon Church’: *A History of Anglo-Latin Literature 597–1066*, volume I: 597–740 (Princeton, NJ, 1967), 66.


Irish influence by the mid-eighth century: as George Greenaway put it, ‘the time was long since past when free-lance preachers of the Irish type could hope to achieve lasting results.’ In his attempt to chart a chronological process of Irish scholarly influence (as distinct from others’ perceptions of the Irish), Dáibhí Ó Cróinin has suggested that Irish influence had declined by the ninth century.

Despite the appreciation for Irish scholarship and teaching in the Carolingian world, some views of Irish court scholars were very critical. Most famously, an attack on one Irishman was made by the bishop of Orléans, Theodulf: in a celebratory poem including description of Charlemagne’s royal circle, this Spaniard unleashed his sarcasm on the seemingly blameless Cadac-Andreas (of whom little else is known). He accused him of ignorance and stupidity rather than a specific offence, and the episode resulted in no known charges. The tone of the attack could suggest wholesale anti-Irish sentiment on Theodulf’s part, as well as relentless showing-off in word-play and other rhetorical skills. On the other hand, we should remember that Theodulf’s bitter sarcasm was aimed not exclusively at this Irishman but at scholars of other foreign origins also. (Theodulf was himself, of course, a foreigner in Frankia.) It is clear that verbal sparring was an intrinsic element of Carolingian intellectual culture.

As Anthony Harvey has persuasively argued, the Irishman may have tried to

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impress his hosts by attempting, and failing, to speak as they did. At around the same time (the end of the eighth century), the Anglo-Saxon Alcuin, cleric and intellectual at the Carolingian court, expressed dissatisfaction with Irish educational practices in Frankia, making a clearly disparaging reference to the Irish and their ‘Egyptian boys’ engaging in erroneous methods of computus. Whether Alcuin was criticising all Irish scholars, however, is doubtful.

There is no more entertaining encapsulation of all mediaeval outsiders’ criticisms of Ireland than the Norman-Latin poem *Moriuht* by Warner of Rouen, who satirised a probably fictional character whom he presented as an Irishman. This erudite but often obscene work, set in the Viking Age, depicts the ugly, stupid and pompous ‘hero’ Moriuht. The author was sufficiently knowledgeable to invert the positive attributes for which Irishmen had been familiar on the Continent, as well as the most traumatic events of Irish history prior to the Norman conquest; in this way he exposed and savagely mocked the man’s helplessness in the face of adversity. Expertise on Irish history and social custom was unusual for an outsider, but the focus on an individual Irishman was not, especially from a Continental perspective. Although many of its sources are obscure, its antecedents in subject and tone are easily found. In his condescending depiction of the laziness, religious ignorance and promiscuity of the Irish, Warner foreshadowed many of the Norman colonist viewpoints:

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239 Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland*, 221–2: following brief consideration of Alcuin and Theodore, he has remarked that ‘such anti-Irish sentiment was the exception, not the rule’ (222).


241 In a separate article I hope to demonstrate the extent to which Warner utilised the work of Persius, the satirist of the Stoics, especially in his condemnatory ‘mock-penitential’ towards the end of *Moriuht*: McDonough (ed. and trans.), *Warner*, 104–5, lines 465–72.

242 Ibid., 74–5, lines 29–32; cf. section 5, below.
Solis in occasum iacet insula Scottia dicta,
Fertilis, a populo non bene culta suo;
Vt dicunt plures, hanc gens si gnara teneret,
Vinceret Italiam fertilitate sua,

‘Where the sun sets lies an isle, called Ireland, a fertile (land) though not well tended by its inhabitants. Many people say that if this (island) was occupied by a nation of any skill, it would surpass Italy in its riches.’

He also echoed those of St Jerome:243

Hi sibi concessis, pressa quoque mente sub artu
Quantum per habitum sectantur corpore scortum!
Est mihi perlatum: more cubamt pecudum;
Non braccas portant, ueneri quia semper adherent,

‘Though these things have been granted to them, in addition, under the frame of their body, their mind is crushed. They are also unaware of the light of God enthroned on high. How much they run after prostitutes with their bodies, aided by their mode of dress! Word has been brought to me: they couple like animals; they do not wear trousers, because they are constantly locked in sexual activity.’

The plot is structured around this monstrous character’s search for his abducted wife, which brings him from Ireland to the Northumbrian trading centre of Corbridge, and eventually to Rouen.

Moriuht sees himself as a scholar, a grammaian and a poet, but his ‘talent’ is sarcastically attacked by Warner, who shows him to be more drawn to sexual promiscuity than to scholarship.244

Hic Moriuht stultus, de mortis origine dictus,
Tali gente satus, stat sibi grammaticus.
Grammaticus, rethor, geometra, pictor, aliptes,
Omnia sit uobis; est caper ipse mihi,

243 Ibid., 74–5, lines 37–42; cf. section 1, above.
244 Ibid., 74–5, lines 49–54.
'This slow-witted Moriuht, named from the origin of death, is sprung from such a race and in his own eyes lives as a grammarian. Scholar, rhetorician, geometer, painter, scribe – let him be all things to you; for me he is Caper himself!'

Later in the poem a supposed quotation of his shamefully poor verse adds to Warner’s merciless mockery. He is in particular subjected to constant humiliation; for example, Vikings whip him and urinate on his bald head. He is sold into slavery for the apt sum of one counterfeit denarius; and his sexual conduct is deviant even within marriage.

All this illustrates Warner’s inverted history of Ireland, his knowledge of trading customs including slave-trading; the poem is in effect an expanded version of Theodulf’s attack on Cadac-Andreas, in its elements of mocking a self-styled poet and wholesale humiliation. Among the extant views of Irish Christians abroad, there was a good deal of negative opinion; however, these attacks were usually aimed at individuals (historical or otherwise) or triggered by a particular event or doctrinal issue, rather than stemming from generalised anti-Irish sentiment.

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246 For example, McDonough (ed. and trans.), *Warner*, 92–3, lines 299–300.


249 Ibid., 102–5, lines 455–72.

250 Cf. section 1, above.

251 See section 4, above.


253 For seventeenth-century works comparable to *Moriuht* (by John Taylor the Water-Poet), see Snyder, ‘The Wild Irish’, 176.

254 Following brief consideration of the issue, Ludwig Bieler correctly acknowledged that Irish scholars abroad had gained a reputation for learning and that ‘tribute, if sometimes grudgingly, was paid to them by their continental colleagues’: ‘Christian Ireland’s Graeco-Latin Heritage’, *Studia Patristica*, 13 (1975), 3–8 at 7.
5 Norman and English Colonists’ Perceptions of Ireland and the Irish

The prospect, and later the reality, of the colonisation of Ireland brought about a new literary relationship between the two islands, from which the works of Gerald of Wales and others emerged. Yet in many respects Cambro- and Anglo-Norman perceptions of Ireland were based on those of the ancient world. It is interesting also to compare the Irish with the Welsh and other potential ‘conquests’ as portrayed by Norman writers. Warner’s attack on Moriuht had obviously illustrated (Continental) Norman attitudes also, at an earlier time and without the element of conquest.

From Anglo-Norman England in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, Lanfranc and subsequently Anselm, archbishops of Canterbury, called for church reform, addressing the Irish political leadership directly. Lanfranc, imbued by Pope Gregory VII with ‘apostolic authority’, addressed Irish marriage-customs and erroneous practices in the consecration of bishops. We can see in this way a clear interest and agenda relating to Irish churches (though without specific information), the Irish were seen as inferior Christians and therefore targets for reform. I have discussed elsewhere the probable role of the legend of Mog Ruith, the Irish druid and supposed executioner of St John the Baptist, as an instrument of reform-measures in 1096.

By the first third of the twelfth century, William of Malmesbury (in a combination of new ideas and revived Classical views) was condescending towards ‘barbarous’ nations, including the Irish; as John Gillingham has argued, they were seen as not simply unChristian but more significantly undeveloped in terms of (Romanised) industry, cultivation and commerce. This tendency to

describe the Irish as ‘barbarous’ had been used much earlier also, for instance by the ninth-century papal librarian Anastasius as a weapon against Irish education at home. Many educational, social and other ‘deviations’ remained on the minds of outsiders writing about Ireland in the twelfth century, for instance Bernard of Clairvaux and Gerald of Wales.

In praising his friend Malachy’s achievements, Bernard took several jibes at Irish ecclesiastical irregularities, especially regarding consecration to and succession of bishoprics. The overall effect was as follows: dissolutio ecclesiasticae disciplinae, censurae enervatio, religionis evacuatio: inde illa ubique, pro mansuetudine christiana, saeva subintroducta barbaries, imo paganismus quidam inductus sub nomine christianum, ‘a total breakdown of ecclesiastical discipline, a relaxation of censure, a weakening of the whole religious structure. Hence cruel barbarity was substituted for Christian meekness; as a matter of fact paganism was brought in under the label of Christianity’. Clearly Bernard was highlighting the concerns and reforming ideals which he himself held in common with Malachy.

All these events preceded the Norman ‘conquest’ of Ireland in the 1160s, which was immediately prompted by the document known by its opening word, Laudabiliter. This papal bull, in which the English pope Hadrian IV requested of King Henry II that Irish churches be reformed, was in effect a pretext for Norman intervention. This move was also presaged earlier in the century by William of Malmesbury and by John of Salisbury, as is evident from their remarks on the Irish and other peoples.

The evidence is closer to Ireland, and even clearer, with regard to Norman colonists themselves. Gerald of Wales presented his views on Ireland in two works, including a great deal of material on the people’s character and social

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261 Cf. section 4, above.
262 Cf. section 3, above, for Bernard’s views on Irish education.
265 For background to Laudabiliter (including an English translation), see Sheehy, When the Normans Came to Ireland, 9–16.
266 Ibid., 15–16; see also Hadfield and McVeagh (eds), Strangers to That Land, 7–9 and 25–9; and Muldoon, Identity, 72–4.
Travelling extensively in Ireland but writing from his ‘civilised’ Norman perspective, he appeared to deplore the Irish character, drawing special attention to alleged outrageous sexual practices. 

Like many of the Classical and early-mediaeval works, his opening description in *Topographia Hibernica* focused on the natural environment. Similarly to Bede, he noted in particular the absence of snakes:

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\text{Nec mihi mirandum videtur, quod vermium istorum, sicut et piscium, avium, et ferarum quarundam, naturalem defectum terra patitur. Sed hoc stupore dignum occurrit, quod nihil venenosum aliunde adventum unquam continere vel potuit vel potest,}
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‘I do not think it remarkable that the country should not have these reptiles, just as it has not got certain fish, birds, and wild beasts. It is a natural deficiency. But this fact is truly astonishing, namely, that if a poisonous thing is brought here from elsewhere, the island cannot, and never could, endure to keep it.’

This illustrates the beauty, and perhaps the quaintness, which he saw in Ireland’s landscape, but also serves to highlight his exasperation at the Irish people’s behaviour. On their general character, he was unimpressed to say the least: *gens silvestris, gens inhospita; gens ex bestiis solum et bestialiter vivens*, ‘They are a wild and inhospitable people. They live on beasts only, and live like beasts’.

Significantly, they seemed unable to exploit natural resources due to their barbarity and laziness: for instance: *Vacat arborum virtus invita, dum et optimis agris desunt agricultae*, ‘The wealth of the soil is lost, not through the fault of the soil, but because there are no farmers to cultivate even the best land’. The natural brilliance of the resources, and the fact that they were being wasted, made the Irish natural indolence far worse.

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268 James Dimock (ed.), *Giraldi Cambrensis Topographia Hibernica et Expugnatio Hibernica* (London, 1867); John J. O’Meara (trans.), *Gerald of Wales: The History and Topography of Ireland* (London, 1982); Scott and Martin (eds and trans.), *Expugnatio Hibernica*.


270 *Topographia Hibernica*. Text: Dimock (ed.), *Giraldi Cambrensis Topographia*, 151 (III.x); translation: O’Meara (trans.), *Gerald of Wales*, 101 (§93). Cf. the Classical references and Bede’s remarks, section 1, above – Gerald provided a new spin on old ideas.

Their other main characteristics were promiscuity\(^{272}\) and even bestiality.\(^{273}\) On their treachery, Gerald wrote that *Fidei et sacramenti religionem, quam sibi observavi summotepere volunt, alii praestitam quotidie violare nec verecundantur nec verentur*, ‘They do not blush or fear to violate every day the bond of their pledge and oath given to others – although they are very keen that it should be observed with regard to themselves.’\(^{274}\) This is similar to, and an expansion of, Warner’s portrait of the Irish character.\(^{275}\) In the north-west they engaged in barbarous rituals to inaugurate kings,\(^{276}\) in Gerald’s exaggerated version of a possible earlier custom. With regard to Irish Christianity, the people were ignorant and the clergy seriously flawed;\(^{277}\) to illustrate the problems as he saw them, Gerald reported an exchange between himself and the archbishop of Cashel.\(^{278}\) In essence the Irish were inferior Christians, who had no martyrs; the latter was a well-founded charge but Gerald displayed little understanding of its background. The Irish also learned foreign deceit and took it out on others;\(^{279}\) they always carried axes, a custom borrowed from the ‘Ostmen’ or settled Vikings;\(^{280}\) they lived in another, outdated world with regard to fashion, battle customs, commerce, and cultivation of crops.\(^{281}\)

In a rare departure, he complimented the Irish on their musical ability, indeed their only useful quality. But even here we find a sting in the tail: by

\(^{272}\) *Topographia Hibernica*. Text: Dimock (ed.), *Giraldi Cambrensis Topographia*, 164–5 (III. xix) and 181–2 (III.xxxv); translation: O’Meara (trans.), *Gerald of Wales*, 106 (§98) and 117–18 (§109).


\(^{275}\) Cf. section 4, above.


\(^{279}\) *Topographia Hibernica*. Text: Dimock (ed.), *Giraldi Cambrensis Topographia*, 186–7 (III. xliii); translation: O’Meara (trans.), *Gerald of Wales*, 122 (§117).

\(^{280}\) *Topographia Hibernica*. Text: Dimock (ed.), *Giraldi Cambrensis Topographia*, 165–6 (III. xxi) and 186–7 (III.xliii); translation: O’Meara (trans.), *Gerald of Wales*, 107–8 (§100) and 122 (§117).

Gerald’s own time the Scots had outstripped the Irish by their industriousness: *Multorum autem opinione, bodie Scotia non tantum magistram aequiparavit Hiberniam, verum etiam in musica peritia longe praevalet et precellit. Unde et ibi quasi fontem artis jam requirunt.* In the opinion, however, of many, Scotland has by now not only caught up on Ireland, her instructor, but already far outdistances and excels her in musical skill. Therefore people now look to that country as to the fountain of the art.\(^2\) Most of these charges are also evident in the ‘very spirited’\(^3\) illustrations in one manuscript: Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS. 700 (formerly Phillipps 6914).\(^4\)

In the conclusion to his more overtly political work on Ireland, *Expugnatio Hibernica* (‘The Conquest of Ireland’), Gerald explained how Ireland should be conquered and then governed,\(^5\) having already set out in his *Topographia* why Ireland needed to be conquered. He did not neglect to attack some Normans here also; as he had made clear earlier in the text,\(^6\) he thought that the ‘conquest’ had been far from immediate or successful thus far.

Like Aldhelm five hundred years earlier, Gerald seemed to be strongly influenced by practices he professed to despise early in the *Topographia* in his case Classical perceptions of Ireland. Although the question remains as to whether the more extensive ethnographical accounts were available or known in this period,\(^7\) the influence of the geographical descriptions is obvious: Gerald cited Solinus and similar works, which were a significant part of the background to his own writing.\(^8\) Graeco-Roman writers however, had had far less knowledge (and no known first-hand experience) on which to build their accounts or to form judgments; for Gerald there was no such excuse. If we take his accounts at face value, evidently his experiences in Ireland only served to repel him from almost every aspect of the island. It may be more sensible to regard his *Topographia* as tongue-in-cheek provocation than the naive recycling of ‘tall tales’ by an outsider. At any rate, his sentiments were

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283 Ibid., 17.
284 For instance, the harp: ibid., 103; axes: ibid., 107; deformities: ibid., 73 and 118; and sexual practices: ibid., 75 and 76. Cf. ibid., 16–17 at 17; and M. Brown, ‘Shaping and Mis-shaping: Visual Impressions of Ireland in Three Manuscripts’, in Vera Kreilkamp (ed.), *Éire/Land* (Boston, MA, 2003), 41–5.
286 For example, *Expugnatio* §34; ibid., 230–3.
neither new nor unusual in the late twelfth century; as John Gillingham has shown, Gerald was merely committing to writing the prevailing views of his time.289 Gerald wrote in similar vein (but less vehemently) about the Welsh; like Geoffrey of Monmouth, he was neither anti- nor pro-Welsh.290 As James Muldoon has argued, these ‘conquerors’ were in the process of creating new identities on the Irish frontier and elsewhere.291 Gerald’s agenda of ‘civilisation’ became standard currency for at least five centuries, some highlights being the fourteenth-century *Polichronicon* by Ranulph Higden292 and the later works of Edmund Spenser293 and Barnaby Rich.294

The moniker ‘the wild Irish’ indeed became a staple description of the island’s people in English works; it spanned hundreds of years and clearly encapsulated the superior perspective of the coloniser. The fact that many of these authors were born or resident in Ireland in no way differentiated them from those without such an Irish connection. This ‘wildness’, attributed with scorn and prejudice to all Irish people,295 became a self-propagating fashion and was eventually expanded into ‘pan-Celtic’ prejudice, to include all Scots and Welsh as well as the Irish.296

Edmund Spenser’s work prompts an especially interesting connection to early-mediaeval outsiders’ perceptions of Ireland, despite the chronological gulf and the vast political changes which had taken place within England, and in its relationship with Ireland, by the late sixteenth century. There are striking parallels between his own Irish experience and that of St Patrick; yet the written results could scarcely be more different in respect of the Irish people. Spenser provided in his ‘A View of the Present State of Ireland’ a thoroughly detailed account, focused mainly on Irish laws, social customs and religious belief; but it was as though he were describing a remote and alien people, rather than fellow-residents in Munster. He expressed disgust (more so than Gerald had

289 Gillingham, ‘Images of Ireland’ (an extremely useful analysis even without footnotes).
294 Harrington (ed.), *The English Traveller*, 81–90.
296 Ibid., 151–2: this began with Gerald (although his attacks on the Irish and the Welsh were separate) and was continued by William of Malmesbury, who included Scandinavians in his insults (152), so that such ridicule crossed the North Sea also.
done) that so many of the ‘Old English’ had grown to love the language and customs of Ireland more than their own.\textsuperscript{297} Of course he must have witnessed traumatic events,\textsuperscript{298} but his attitude towards all native Irish people (insofar as they were relevant to his work) was one of utter contempt: these were people from whom he could not wait to escape.\textsuperscript{299} In Spenser’s view, native Irish laws covered up criminality,\textsuperscript{300} as did the mantle and the glib or forelock,\textsuperscript{301} and Irish Christianity had from the very beginning lacked understanding and even real priests.\textsuperscript{302} On Patrick’s mission, Spenser wrote that, following the failure of Palladius’s papally-sanctioned mission, ‘he [Pope Celestine] afterwardes sent over, St Patricke beinge by nacion a [B]ryton, who converted the people beinge then infydells from paganisme and christyned them: [i]n which Poopes tyme and longe before, yt is certene that religion was generallie corrupted, with theire popishe trumperie: Therefore what other could they learne, then such trashe as was taught them, and drincke of that Cupp of fornication, with which the purple harlot had then made all nations drunken’.\textsuperscript{303} His duties of mapping the territory, as a representative of ‘conquest’, presumably created little engagement with people; his only commitment was to officialdom. Having no connection with, or objective in relation to the Irish, and without an inner drive to propel or even sustain him among these foreigners as St Patrick had had in his mission to spread the new message of Christianity in fifth-century Ireland, Spenser was unable to conceive of any positive outcome to his exile. The literary product of his time on the neighbouring island was seen as so


\textsuperscript{298} Harrington (ed.), \textit{The English Traveller}, 59–60.

\textsuperscript{299} Ibid.; Snyder, ‘The Wild Irish’, 158.


\textsuperscript{301} Hadfield and Maley (eds), \textit{Edmund Spenser}, 56–9; Harrington (ed.), \textit{The English Traveller}, 63–6.

\textsuperscript{302} Ibid., 66–8; for a variant text see Hadfield and Maley (eds), \textit{Edmund Spenser}, 153–4.

\textsuperscript{303} W. L. Renwick (ed.), \textit{A View of the Present State of Ireland by Edmund Spenser} (London, 1934), 110; Harrington (ed.), \textit{The English Traveller}, 66; cf. Muldoon, \textit{Identity}, 90. Hadfield and Maley (eds), \textit{Edmund Spenser}, has a more moderate version of this passage which mentions SS Patrick and Columba: ibid., 153–4. The passage on Patrick is also not included in the list of Ware’s omissions: Appendix II, ibid., 170–6. Could this variant reading have arisen from the nature of Spenser’s remarks, or his factual error in stating that Patrick was sent to Ireland by the Pope? I hope elsewhere to analyse in detail several provocative reinterpretations of early Irish Christian history; for John Wesley’s remarks on St Patrick’s mission and achievement, see Hadfield and McVeagh (eds), \textit{Strangers to That Land}, 20.
inflammatory that it was not published until 1633, almost forty years after its composition, by which time the political issues had escalated still further.\footnote{W. Maley, ‘How Milton and Some Contemporaries Read Spenser’s View’, in Brendan Bradshaw et al. (eds), \textit{Representing Ireland: Literature and the Origins of Conflict, 1534–1660} (Cambridge, 1993), 191–208 at 191–2; Hadfield and McVeagh (eds), \textit{Strangers to That Land}, 12–13.}

Like Gerald (a major influence), Spenser was unafraid to criticise his colonising predecessors and contemporaries. He reckoned that Ireland and its people needed subjection since the Norman attempt at conquest had ultimately failed: the Irish were ‘a people very stubborne, and untamed, or if it were ever tamed, yet now lately having shooke off their yoake, and broken the bonds of their obedience’.\footnote{Hadfield and Maley (eds), \textit{Edmund Spenser}, 14; Harrington (ed.), \textit{The English Traveller}, 61; cf. Coughlan, ‘Ireland and Incivility’, 56.} Patrick’s dealings with the authorities of his own country had been – like Spenser’s – very strained as the prelates had (according to himself) failed to promote him or even to recognise his achievement. His task in such an alien land was extremely difficult; yet he eventually came to regard himself as Irish.\footnote{See section 3, above.} Possibly as a consequence of failed ambition, Spenser’s relationship with Ireland (if it can be so called) was expressed in tirades of bitterness and disappointment.

6 ‘Ill-wishers of Ireland’?

Before Ireland became an entity known to people in other lands, and several centuries prior to Irishmen’s arrival on the Continental European stage showcasing their intellectual talents, many of those at the centre of Graeco-Roman civilisation demonstrated their curiosity (laced with hearsay) about Celts, with an occasional reference to the cold faraway island which eventually might have helped to bolster the Roman hold on Britain. It did not seem important or urgent enough, however, to form any more than a possible uncomplicated encounter in Agricola’s mind.

Although many, especially Norman, views seem prejudicial in that the views are applied across the board to all Irish people, this is not the dominant picture among foreigners who wrote about Ireland in the period up to around 1200. Attention was drawn to differences rather than similarities, as we would expect. We certainly see the recurrence of negative attributes such as promiscuity, bellicerence, laziness, ignorance, and even heresy. But Irishmen were also noted
for their wisdom, generosity, and devotion to God. Irish ecclesiastics abroad were exporting their traditional ideas and customs, and forceful personalities like Columbanus did not easily assimilate into new cultures. Sometimes they were viewed as a threat even though it was not necessarily their intention to be so: for instance, regarding the issue of Easter. The virtue of lively intellectual debate could turn into vicious personal attack, as we have seen from Theodulf and Warner. Certainly the papal librarian Anastasius, and perhaps even Archbishop Theodore himself, used Irishmen’s erudition as a weapon against them, and Bernard of Clairvaux used Malachy’s learning to attack Irish churches generally. This was presaged at the Carolingian court, where the prestige granted by Irishmen’s patrons may have influenced others to envy them.307 Such an international milieu forced people to compete for recognition, but some may have struggled to adapt and succeed; this could have given rise to tension and/or conflict. In works such as Aldhelm’s correspondence, it can be hard to distinguish between plain nastiness and good-natured banter: the Irish too had a robust sense of humour and, had Moriuht existed, I think that he would have given as good as he got.

To turn Ireland into a useful colony was an aspiration from the first century AD, ultimately fulfilled by the English. In this discussion we have seen a great many ‘outsiders’ looking in from different perspectives and eras, each with his own concerns and interests. There were several different types of experience, varying levels of understanding and, to paraphrase John P Harrington, many degrees of bewilderment.308

Later colonists’ accounts of Ireland were in effect perpetuating many of the Classical perceptions, especially of the character of Ireland’s people. It is difficult to pinpoint the precise origins of each author’s remarks (positive or negative) but on the whole Classical views appear to have prevailed. Acquaintance with Ireland grew but engagement or understanding did not greatly increase. Apart from any problematic scholarly or commercial contacts, the earlier unpleasant views were perhaps transmitted through Jerome,309 and accepted uncritically by the uninformed. In the eleventh century, Warner probably encountered Irishmen on the Continent and was generally well-versed on Ireland; yet Moriuht showed very little engagement with the Irish or consideration of them as fellow-scholars. Like Gerald of Wales, Spenser

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307 For remarks on some Irishmen’s successful adaptation in the Carolingian world see Dumville, *Three Men in a Boat*, 39.
309 See section 1, above.
liked to display his general familiarity with Classical literature but took an approach towards the Irish which was more akin to Graeco-Roman speculations than perhaps he realised.

For most of these ‘foreigners’ it was naturally the Irish who were on the outside – as far as it was possible to go before falling off the world’s edge. As St Patrick put it, ‘areas beyond which there was no-one’; this speaks to his loneliness and alienation; yet he meant well and was in effect speaking from within. Bede too endeavoured to investigate and demonstrate the Irish traditional approach to Easter-dating, resulting in a thorough and balanced treatment of Ireland’s religious contributions and problems (mostly as these applied to Northumbria and to the broader Anglo-Saxon world). Bede described Aidan, Colman and others as though they were his fellow-teachers and even friends, even though they had been active a century earlier. In his understanding that the Irish in no way subscribed to any convention of their own peripherality, Bede was virtually alone among foreigners writing about Ireland.

Geoffrey Keating responded vehemently to English attacks, in his *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn*, known as ‘A History of Ireland’ and completed around 1634; but in the Middle Ages Irishmen appeared unmoved by what others wrote about the island, be they admirers or ‘ill-wishers’. This Irish example of indifference was clearly not followed by those from other lands: Ireland was, unquestionably and increasingly, noticed and remarked upon from Antiquity onwards, and the impact of the Irish (particularly those who had left the island) was deemed more worthy of attention than that of their Anglo-Saxon and other contemporaries. Such reactions (or lack thereof) to foreign intellectuals’ attacks may have contributed to the increased denigration of Ireland by colonisers who had little understanding of the island’s earlier history or

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314 We are at least fortunate in the extent of our surviving evidence for mediaeval Ireland; for discussion of more truly ‘marginal’ groups see Michael Goodich (ed.), *Other Middle Ages: Witnesses at the Margins of Medieval Society* (Philadelphia, PA, 1998), especially 2–7.
contemporary culture;\textsuperscript{315} the implications that Ireland had failed to accomplish
the proper standards of ‘civilisation’ showed that foreigners’ engagement with
the Irish had significantly and gradually regressed since the early Middle Ages,
despite many writers’ considerable experience of Ireland. As Robin Flower
put it, however, Irish Christians abroad (and presumably those at home) car-
ried on undeterred: ‘[t]he Irish religious made the whole world of Europe in
their day into their monastery … [b]ut … change altogether they could not, for
in their life’s beginning the destiny of their minds was determined’.\textsuperscript{316}

\textit{University of Aberdeen}

\textsuperscript{315} Issues in need of further exploration include the development of successive ‘discourses
of colonisation’ from earlier mediaeval Ireland (for example, Anglo-Saxon and
Scandinavian residents) to colonial Ireland from the eleventh century onwards: cf.
Edith Hall, \textit{Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy} (Oxford, 1989),
47–50; to what degree English colonists writing about Ireland were familiar with the
Classical views they helped to perpetuate; and the ways in which they misinterpreted
mediaeval Irish history and culture.

\textsuperscript{316} \textit{The Irish Tradition}, 66.