

The World of the Galloglass

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A review of

Seán Duffy (ed.), *The World of the Galloglass: Kings, warlords and warriors in Ireland and Scotland, 1200-1600*

(Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2007) ISBN: 978-1-851-82946-0 (Hardback), xv, 219 pp., £47.00.

Although published over five years ago, *The World of the Galloglass* remains the most recent study of West Highland Scottish mercenaries fighting in Ireland.

While this movement of troops was at times reciprocated by Irishmen fighting in Scotland – most notably during the Scottish Wars of Independence – the perceived large number of Scots regularly crossing the Irish Sea to pursue a military profession requires academic consideration of this phenomenon.

Originating as they did in ‘Innse Gall’ (the Scottish Hebrides) – as Duffy himself argues (p. 1) – these warriors offer an exciting opportunity to study the ties that bound medieval and early modern Scotland and Ireland. Based on a collection of papers presented at a conference designed to celebrate the launch of Trinity College Dublin’s *Galloglass* project, this work goes some way to providing that detailed historical analysis of this phenomenon.

Although not split into separate sections, the volume follows a largely chronological approach. The first few articles deal with the early years of Scoto-Irish military co-operation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Seán Duffy presents a very interesting discussion of possible West Highland mercenaries’ involvement in Irish conflict in the period before the first ‘official’ use of the term *galloglass* in Irish sources in 1290. His analysis provides a detailed depiction of inter-familial links that spanned the Irish Sea and which led to a situation in which, as he argues, Scottish *galloglass* were ‘by 1247, a quotidian feature of warfare in the northwest of Ireland’ (p. 16). Alasdair Ross sets out to debunk

some perceived myths regarding the rebellious MacWilliam family within Scottish history, and their apparent links with Ulster. Although focused largely on events in Scotland, Ross's article provides evidence of the extent to which Ireland was a natural outpost for those who challenged centralised Scottish authority, even if Ulster was not necessarily the *principle* redoubt of the MacWilliams until after 1202 (p. 38). The ease with which, in this case at least, the MacWilliams appear to have involved themselves in Irish affairs, and made use of Irish troops in their rebellions in Scotland, demonstrates once more the close links that existed across the Irish Sea.

Such links are examined further by R. Andrew McDonald in his essay on the kings of Man and their own naval and military activities in the Irish Sea world. Calling on some of the same historical examples that Duffy uses in his survey of the *galloglass*, McDonald focuses on the Manx involvement in Welsh, English, Scottish and Irish political affairs, primarily through use of their naval and military resources. He emphasises the importance of the Manx kingdom within this maritime world and the need for its greater inclusion within medieval British, Irish and Scandinavian historiography. By focusing also on the military capabilities of the kings of Man, McDonald also highlights the interconnectedness of those whose lands were bordered by the Irish Sea and the possibilities that existed for service in the fleets and armies of others from the same region even before the apparent advent of the *galloglass*. Also referring to evidence presented in Duffy's opening article, Alex Woolf undertakes some historical detective work in attempting to identify the mysterious 'Mac Somhairle' killed in battle at Ballyshannon in 1247. The impressive consideration of both the history and historiography of this incident leads to a possible identification of this individual

as Dubhghall mac Ruaidhri, once again demonstrating – if correct – the personal links and physical interaction between West Highland nobles and Irish affairs.

The collection then moves into the later medieval and early modern periods with the article by Kenneth Nicholls on Scottish mercenary kindreds in Ireland, encompassing the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. Although genealogically complex, Nicholls traces involvement of *galloglass* kindreds in prolonged service in Ireland. Focusing in particular on Clann Suibhne and Clann Somhairle, the author is able to provide a large amount of detail on the involvement of these military kindreds in Ireland's inter-familial and inter-cultural wars. He is also able to provide good evidence of the extent to which such kindreds settled in and became part of the fabric of later medieval Ireland. This is emphasised by the nature of their military service and the fact that these *galloglass* families retained their allegiances, 'established soon after their arrival, largely intact' into the sixteenth century (p. 104).

Katharine Simms continues the exploration of Clann Suibhne in her survey of bardic poems relating to this *galloglass* kindred. Although largely introductory in nature, highlighting the richness of what exists in unpublished form and the need for its modern editing and reproduction, this article nonetheless provides an important link to a type of source that is at times under-utilised. Further into the volume, Wilson McLeod picks up some of these threads when discussing the description of *galloglass* in later Irish bardic poetry. The fact that Scottish warriors were the subject of Irish bards is clear and of importance within this wider study. Of particular interest is the suggestion that some poets saw these warriors as essentially Irishmen ('These Hebrideans are Irishmen indeed', p. 184),

whose ancestors left for Scotland centuries before, but who would return one day to their familial home.

Use of alternative, and indeed non-written sources, is taken further in David Caldwell's paper which focuses on the military and naval capabilities of West Highland warriors. Following on in part from McDonald's discussion, Caldwell analyses the naval capabilities of the West Highland *birlinn* before utilising various material culture sources to discuss the arms and armour of these warriors. His argument that the innate conservatism of these men's military equipment was as much a practical decision as it was a stubborn refusal to adapt to modern armaments is a sound conclusion based on detailed evidence across a long period of time. Finally, the important relationship between Scotland's kings and Ireland is highlighted in two papers. Alison Cathcart focuses on the sixteenth century and the role Ireland played in the game of Anglo-Scottish politics during the 1530s. The possibility – and in some cases reality – of Scottish forces participating in Irish rebellions against Henry VIII is a useful example of the continued ease with which West Highland forces involved themselves in Irish affairs, although in this case with possible royal backing. That James V was offered the kingship of Ireland by some of these rebels does indicate very close links between Scotland and Ireland. Indeed the level of communication between the Scottish king and men like Magnus Ó Domhnaill and Conn Ó Néill is suggestive of very personal associations that extended to the upper levels of Scottish and Irish political society. David Edwards places such links in a wider 'British' framework in relation to the Jacobean succession and the importance of Ireland to James VI before and after he became James I of England and Ireland. His detailed investigation of the career of James Fullerton provides a final demonstration of

the interconnectedness of Scotland and Ireland up to and perhaps beyond the point at which the ‘national outlook’ changed with the Union of the Crowns in 1603.

As a collection, *The World of the Galloglass* provides an exciting starting point from which it is to be hoped much additional research will follow. The release of the *Galloglass Database* – the construction of which was heralded by this volume – will hopefully add to the academic interest in this subject more widely in the years to come.