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Oisín Plumb, *Picts and Britons in the Early Medieval Irish Church: Travels West Over the Storm-Swelled Sea* (Brepols: Turnhout, 2020). Print, 204 pp., €55.00, ISBN 9782503583471.

Review

Where the first volume of the new Brepols series, 'The North Atlantic World: Land and Sea as Cultural Space, AD 400–1900', *What is North?* took a big-picture view of this region through a diverse collection of essays, this second volume zooms in to a more narrowly defined cultural, chronological, and geographical subset of the broader scope of the series. Adapted from Oisín Plumb's 2016 Edinburgh doctoral dissertation, *Picts and Britons in the Early Medieval Irish Church* has two aims: "to consider the evidence for migration from northern Britain to the Irish Church, in particular that of British and Pictish individuals ... [and] to examine how such migration came to be perceived in later times" (p.165).

Structurally, *Picts and Britons* has a two-part introduction, a three-part reflection and conclusion, with the meat of the investigative work sandwiched in between. In the first chapter, Plumb provides his broad definition of migration as encompassing both "movement resulting in prolonged residence" and "less permanent relocation ... resulting ... in an extended period of residence in Ireland" (p.19). He very briefly discusses both secular and ecclesiastical accounts of migration and travel between Ireland and Britain, illustrating the importance and prevalence of travel between these societies. On a side note, the theme of royal and secular exile, briefly introduced here, plays but a minor note throughout this book. The second chapter provides an excellent and measured summary of the primary sources that form the basis of his research; that is, those annals, chronicles, martyrologies, *vitae*, histories, and other written sources from medieval and early modern Britain and Ireland relevant to its

ecclesiastical history. These two chapters will be highly beneficial for those readers less familiar with the early medieval period and some of the problems with its sources.

Chapters three, four, and five present the evidence for historically detectable individuals of northern British origin who travelled to Ireland between the fifth and eighth centuries. Respectively, Plumb considers a cluster of fifth-century individuals who were thought in the medieval sources to have had a familial relationship with Patrick; the enigmatic sixth-century Uinniau; and a group of seven probably Pictish 'brothers' who all travelled to Ireland around the late seventh and eighth centuries. One of the most interesting conclusions Plumb makes here is that within the Irish sources, Britain was increasingly being cast as a sort of 'hagiographical Eden' (pp. 82, 138, 160, 166), or idealised place of origin. Given the focus of this work on the physical movements of individuals from the north of Britain to Ireland, it is a shame that the only map is relegated to a single footnote referring the reader to the second appendix, following the extensive (though not exhaustive) bibliography. This map plots the likely locations in Ireland associated with the 'seven brothers', though it could have benefitted from an overlay with contemporary political boundaries of the seventh and eighth centuries so that Plumb's argument that the 'group of four' "demarcate the widest possible expanse of [Uí Néill] territory" (p.136) is thus more readily apparent. However, despite appearances, these chapters are not entirely comprehensive. The most obvious omission is that of Patrick. He is referred to throughout *Picts and Britons*, but beyond a single footnote where Plumb condenses the debate about his place of origin to stating that "[t]here has been little consensus beyond the likelihood of a western British location", Plumb's attitude is that "[g]iven the volume of discussion that exists on Patrick, consideration of his own historical career has been avoided" (p.57). This may have been an expedient course of action for Plumb's dissertation, but for a book of this scope, the lack of discussion is a jarring note. Especially since, as Plumb points out, all of the other named individuals within chapter three are defined in the sources by their perceived relationship to Patrick. A different discrepancy between the dissertation and *Picts and Britons* is in the omission of 'Ailbe', who has a

substantial discussion in the former and not a single reference in the latter, despite numerous (admittedly contradictory) sources providing him with a British origin.

The final two chapters and conclusion of *Picts and Britons* provide the most amount of excitement in the book, as it is here that most of his synthesis of ideas is demonstrated. In chapter six, Plumb steps back from the accumulated evidence and assesses geographic ‘channels of migration,’ which consist of the broad stretch of northern Britain from Galloway to Lothian, the area of Columban influence, generally centred on Iona, and the far northern Hebrides and Orkney Isles. this latter ‘channel’ remains detectable in the face of both the absence of a charismatic figure like Columba or Uinniua, as well as the significant disruptions to society that resulted from the incursion of the Norse from the turn of the ninth century onwards. Lastly, in chapter seven, Plumb considers how the idea of these figures having a British origin changed over time, arguing for the eighth century being the turning point after which time “Irish hagiographers began to view British identity as a useful device in the depiction of the early Church.” (p.163) An interesting observation, but one which could have been developed much further and taken *Picts and Britons* to another level. Ecclesiastico-political tensions between the Columbans and the Patricians are frequently mentioned, but not as motivating factors for this shift in the presentation of the origins of early members of the Church. Contemporary flashpoints such as the Easter Controversy and the fallout of the Synod of Whitby in seventh-century Northumbria are but briefly alluded to. Moreover, the early eighth-century *expulsio familiae Iae*, arguably a fundamental trigger (not to mention it also being a source of actual migration) for the hagiographical shift Plumb identifies, is similarly only mentioned twice in relation to not being an indication of a severing of communications with the far northern Pictish zone and Ireland (pp.143, 145–6). Does Plumb consider there to have been a direct relationship between this event and both the hagiographical shift and the continued migration he identifies with the far north? It is hard to tell.

Plumb does not mention why his focus does not extend past the eighth century. Of course, the Scandinavian incursions were deeply disruptive to both Irish and northern British society during the course of the ninth and tenth centuries, and arguably were irrecoverably so for Pictish society, allowing for an opportunistic 'Scottification' of the political vacuum in the far north. This undoubtedly must have disrupted ecclesiastical patterns of life and 'channels of migration', yet Plumb avoids the issue altogether, with just a small note on the inclusion of St Magnus in the *Aberdeen Breviary* (p.162). It would have been a valuable expansion of this book's general thesis, and thereby have differentiated itself from Plumb's dissertation, had it explored how these channels were altered after the Scandinavian incursions (and indeed conversions), or alternatively to have noted that the paucity of the evidence was such that firm statements on its state could not be comfortably made.

There are a few methodological aspects related to study's parameters that troubled me. First is the decision to limit his sources to literary texts, as it is only in passing that Plumb acknowledges non-manuscript written evidence for a Pictish presence in, or connection to, Ireland, such as with the inscription within the tomb at Knowth which likely contains the Pictish name *Talorc* (p.25), or the ogham-inscribed spindle whorl from From Buckquoy, Orkney (p.149). This is somewhat surprising given that, again in his dissertation, there is much more attention given to the evidence from sculpture and inscription. Equally important and equally under-utilised is a more detailed role given to linguistic evidence. Ecclesiastical Early Irish was arguably greatly indebted to British, and Plumb does mention when discussing personal names that "British influence has been argued for some of the processes of creating hypercorisms in Irish, such as the borrowing of *-oc* from British *awc* and the voicing of consonants." (p.39) However, British influence upon early Irish was far greater than this. As Inge Genee ('Latin Influence on Old Irish?', 2005, p.41; after Jackson (1953) and McManus (1983)) noted, "the majority of Latin loans in medieval Irish had a pronunciation that was based on British Latin: lacking their own habits of speaking Latin, the Irish resorted to adopting the pronunciation of the British clerics who

introduced many of these words.” These ‘British clerics’ may not have survived to be identifiable as historical individuals within the surviving sources, but their numbers and importance must have been as great as the small number who did. With Plumb’s focus on recovering firm evidence for the existence of historical *individuals*, it is arguable that he somewhat loses sight of the bigger picture; in identifying individual specimens, it is hard for the reader to get a sense of how great the metaphorical forest of British ecclesiastics within Ireland must have been. However, on the other hand, to extend this metaphor a little further, Plumb’s great attention to detail, his singling out of individual saplings and mature trees, has brought these individuals out from a blurred and anonymous forest and allowed us to acknowledge and identify them, in some cases, for the first time in many centuries.

Ultimately, the question is – is *Picts and Britons* a useful work? The answer must be an emphatic yes, given that it fills an important *lacuna* within scholarship. The aims of this work have been clearly articulated and met, and though the reader is left wishing that the study could have been both broader in scope and bolder in asserting its conclusions, this does not detract from the inherent importance of this research.

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