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The Anglo-Saxon and the Irishman

Ever since the Venerable Bede wrote warmly of the Irish in his *Ecclesiastical History* (c. 731), scholars have been interested in relations between the peoples of Ireland and Britain. Bede emphasized the role of Irish missionaries in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity and their subsequent intellectual contribution. Not surprisingly, scholarly studies of early Anglo-Irish contacts have followed along the lines laid down by Bede. Historians and literary critics have emphasized political or intellectual issues, particularly the Irish contribution to devotional and judicial literature, while art historians have been concerned more with stylistic borrowings and interpretation. Their research has been aided by the contribution of the archaeologists who have produced material remains from some likely and unlikely places. This scholarly interest has been continued with *Anglo-Saxon/Irish Relations before the Vikings*. The papers in this volume (with one exception) were presented at a joint meeting of the British Academy and the Royal Irish Academy in October 2005. The eighteen papers are divided into two sections: history, law, language, and literature in the first part; and art history and material culture in the second, with a concluding addendum.

While the chronological range of the papers theoretically could extend from the fifth century (or even the fourth century if one wanted to make an argument for direct cooperation during the Pictish Revolt) to the late eighth century, the bulk of the discussion is con-

centrated on the period from the mid-seventh to mid-eighth century. Reasons for the popularity of this period are not hard to find, and they speak volumes about the herd instincts of scholars. On the one hand, Anglo-Saxon researchers have the comforting figure of the Venerable Bede to provide guidance. His work so dominates the academic horizon that several historical documents in translation are gathered in a popular book with the title *The Age of Bede* (1998). Irish scholars, on the other hand, have the comparative plethora of Irish legal and devotional tracts from this era, which underline the western island's influence on its eastern neighbor. The borrowing is visible in works such as Bede's *De natura rerum*, influenced by the Irish scholar known as Pseudo-Augustine, or the Irish presence in art that persisted for decades after the Synod of Whitby oriented the Northumbrian church towards the continent. The so-called Golden Age of Northumbria would not have been so bright without an Irish influence at even the most basic intellectual level, as Patrick O'Neill demonstrates in his investigation of orthography in "The Irish Role in the Origins of the Old English Alphabet: A Re-assessment."

Ecclesiastical contact provided the arena for a trade in ideas within the framework of a shared belief between the Irish and Anglo-Saxons. Evidence from the scriptorium is discussed in Roy Flechner's "An Insular Tradition of Ecclesiastical Law: Fifth to Eighth Century" and Diarmuid Scully's "Bede's *Chronica Maiora*: Early Insular

History in a Universal Context. While those intellectual contacts are properly emphasized in this volume, they were important because the Irish and Anglo-Saxons were not that dissimilar in their basic organization, thus sharing many of the same problems and concerns. Because they did not have the pleasure of occupation by the Roman Empire, neither the Irish nor the Anglo-Saxons had been forced to accept the social structures of the Mediterranean area that accompanied the northward expansion of Rome. Among both peoples, the inhabitants lived in kingdoms of small farmers who dwelt in farmsteads or scattered villages. When they converted to Christianity, the urban framework of their new faith gave them the task of integrating the physical structures of belief—the church building and its appendices—into their landscape, a point discussed by Tomás Carragáin in *Cemetery Settlements and Local Churches in Pre-Viking Ireland in Light of Comparisons with England and Wales*. Another physical aspect was the practical arrangements for contact or the pathways used by people in order to come into contact with each other. Fiona Edmonds's *The Practicalities of Communication between Northumbrian and Irish Churches, c. 635-735* is an important blending of geography and history that offers a fresh appraisal, with a concentration on the sadly neglected areas of Cumberland and Westmoreland.

Contacts between the Irish and the Anglo-Saxons were varied enough to include both trade and immigration. Not all the metalwork was necessarily destined for religious houses, any more than one royal court was the sole buyer of secular pieces, as is demonstrated in Ragnall Floinn's *The Anglo-Saxon Connection: Irish Metalwork, AD 400-800*. The familiarity brought about by these ties led to interesting results. When Colmán, the unsuccessful Irish advocate at the Synod of Whitby, and his mixed Irish and Anglo-Saxon community left Britain, it is instructive that they initially settled in a place that was almost as far as they could go, on an island off the west coast of Ireland, before the Anglo-Saxons were resettled at Mayo. The subsequent legend is investigated by Maire Mhaonaigh in *Of Saxons, a Viking and Normans: Colmán, Gerald and the Monastery of Mayo*. The variety of these associations helps to explain why the Irish are still found in Anglo-Saxon kingdoms after the Synod of Whitby. Irish clergy remained among the Anglo-Saxons for centuries, yet not everyone shared Bede's benevolent attitude. While opposition might be tied to intellectual orientation, as Jennifer O'Reilly argues in *All that Peter Stands For: The Romanitas of the Codex Amiatinus Reconsidered*, the possibility of pique at competition could also be part of it. In 816, the Coun-

cil of Chelsea's strictures against *Scoti* administering the sacraments shows that the Irish were numerous and influential enough to attract the attentions of a major ecclesiastical meeting (to be fair, a similar statement had been issued a few years earlier at the Council of Chalon-sur-Saône). In the ninth century there were Irish pilgrims who insisted on visiting King Alfred and afterwards, in the tenth century, Irish scholars educated St. Dunstan at Glastonbury.

As in any collection of studies, there are some variations in theme. Several of the essays are not about relations between the Irish and the Anglo-Saxons as such; rather they are about traces of their separate activities in areas such as Wales or the Isle of Man. Some of the studies claim that they are merely a review of past work, which is a tribute to former scholarship, but curious in a volume produced by internationally known scholars under the auspices of two of the world's leading scholarly bodies. Other than Eogan Wamers's essay *Behind Animals, Plants and Interlace: Salin's Style II on Christian Objects*, there is little evidence that the contributors are aware of scholarship outside the English-speaking world. This is unfortunate as some of the essays on sculpture, for example, would have benefitted from the studies on dating monuments and identifying individual carvers carried out in Sweden by Henry Freij and Laila Kitzler Ahfeldt, while researches of Scandinavian and German archaeologists on the physical aspects of trade exchanges have led to the development of some innovative methodologies in connection with the contacts between different groups of peoples. An additional aspect of Irish and Anglo-Saxon contact omitted from this volume (no doubt for the sake of good fellowship) is the warfare that accompanied the expansion of the Irish and Anglo-Saxon colonists. Both peoples were successful predators, so it is not surprising to find that they were warrior-oriented communities. Their hunting grounds occasionally overlapped, as in the clash between Áedan mac Gabráin of Dál Riata and Aethelfrith of Northumbria at the battle of *Degsastan*, when Irish and Anglo-Saxon expansion collided. They were also united in their continuation of the ideals of pagan virtues that continued after their conversion to Christianity. The similarities between the Irish Cú Chulainn and the Germanic Beowulf have been noted by scholars, especially James Carney.

The contributions to *Anglo-Saxon/Irish Relations before the Vikings* are informative and provided with numerous and helpful illustrations. These essays demonstrate how much has been accomplished in early Irish and Anglo-Saxon studies and offer directions for future investigations.

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