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The Chronicle of Ireland (review)

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## Reviews

T. M. Charles-Edwards (trans.), *The Chronicle of Ireland*, Translated Texts for Historians, Volume 44. Liverpool University Press: Liverpool, 2006. Vol. 1: xiv + 349 pp., vol. 2: 192 pp. £70 hardback. ISBN 0 85323 959 2

This major two-volume work contains a translation of the section of the Irish chronicles covering the period A.D. 431-911, when a text known to modern scholarship as the 'Chronicle of Ireland' forms the basis for most of the annalistic material relating to Ireland and Scotland. Thomas Charles-Edwards's stated aim of the translation is 'to present the evidence for the Chronicle of Ireland' (Vol. 1, p. 1) and 'to make early Irish history more accessible' (Vol. 1, p. xiv). These words are equally applicable to Scottish history, since the Irish annals also form the main basis for constructing the history of the Picts, Gaels and Britons of northern Britain for most of this period. While editions and translations of the Irish chronicles do exist, they vary considerably in quality, and often lack the introductory matter or notes which would help scholars to use these texts in a sophisticated manner. In particular, it is to be suspected that the annalistic form, and the large number of surviving versions, have been significant barriers to the analysis of the Irish chronicle evidence. Charles-Edwards's work is divided into two volumes, the first with the introduction and translation, the second containing a glossary of chronicle terms, a bibliography, indices and maps. Each section is given sufficient attention for them to be worthwhile, although maps of peoples and places in northern Britain, in addition to those of Ireland, would have been welcome. Overall, it fits well into Liverpool University Press's Translated Texts for Historians series, which has provided useful translations with substantial discussions, placing the texts securely in their contexts. It is to be hoped that this volume of the series will bring the Irish chronicles to a wider audience, outwith the community of early medieval Irish and Scottish historians, but the decision to publish this as a hardback at such a high price (£70), will clearly deter many people from purchasing this publication.

The introduction, which is fifty-nine pages in length, is excellent in many ways, covering most aspects of the Irish chronicles that someone should consider before using the translation. It is written in a clear and accessible manner, helping non-specialists to understand most of the issues surrounding these texts. In itself it is also a significant contribution to the scholarship of the Irish annals, since it contains research not produced elsewhere or only dealt with briefly in Charles-

Edwards's *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000), to which this is in some respects a companion-piece. In particular, the overall reasons for the maintenance of the annals have not been considered in as much depth as in this introduction (Vol. 1, pp. 24-33). His main hypothesis on this subject is that the chronicles were partly designed to assist intercessory prayers for the dead through the inclusion of vocabulary: people were ranked from the blessed (usually clerics) who 'rested' on their deaths, down to those probably beyond help through prayer, who were killed outside battle. This interpretation does explain some of the variety of vocabulary employed in the annals and the focus on death in the Irish chronicles to a greater extent than in other European chronicles. However, the idea that those who were killed outside battle were probably damned, which is based on Charles-Edwards's analysis of Adomnán's views on this matter, is more questionable; Charles-Edwards himself (Vol. 1, pp. 27-8) admits that annalists in some periods probably did not believe this. While this deserves further study, it is good that the chronicles are not presented by Charles-Edwards as merely a list of names and dates, without any ideological considerations underlying their creation and maintenance, but as sources which themselves can enhance our understanding of the communities which created them.

Other important parts of the introduction, which provide the basis for the translation, are the studies of the development of the chronicle's textual history up to 911 (Vol. 1, pp. 7-15) and of the chronologies of the Annals of Ulster (AU), Annals of Tigernach (AT) and *Chronicum Scottorum* (CS), the main surviving Irish chronicles. This is an area fraught with academic controversy, with many different theories still in academic currency, but, overall Charles-Edwards is justified in much of his analysis (in the reviewer's opinion). He follows the view that there was a common source underlying AU, AT and CS up to 911, and that before then there was a single centre of chronicling at any one time, with an 'Iona Chronicle', begun in the late sixth century, being transferred to a pro-Patrician centre somewhere in Brega in eastern Ireland c.740. The exception, according to Charles-Edwards, is that another Columban chronicle was combined with the 'Iona Chronicle' in the late seventh century, which explains the chronological dislocation the author perceives at c.642. While this dislocation may not be as large as Charles-Edwards perceives it, the combining of two sources is a plausible explanation for the discrepancy. However, the idea that otherwise there was only one source is not certain; in particular there are differences between the record before c.740 for Ireland and northern Britain noted by John Bannerman (*Studies in the History of Dalriada* [Edinburgh, 1974], p. 20). The argument that the chronicle was only kept in Brega (probably either Lusca or Treóit) from c.740 to 911 (Vol.

1, pp. 9-15), rather than Armagh or Clonard, as previous scholars have proposed, is well-made, although it would be useful if a more detailed study going through the evidence more comprehensively, covering all the annalistic record, were also available elsewhere. The study of the locations and textual history of the chronicle overall (with a few quibbles) is a reliable guide to the reader.

A significant section of the introduction is the detailed chronological study (Vol. 1, pp. 35-57), which is necessary in the light of articles produced in the last thirteen years by Daniel McCarthy. These articles have used the chronological data in the annals as the basis for radical re-interpretations of both the chronology and textual history of the annals. Charles-Edwards's analysis is largely a refutation of McCarthy's overall argument that the ferial data in AT and CS from 431 to the mid-seventh century are survivals from the original chronicle and can be used to reconstruct the chronology (see McCarthy, 'The Chronology of the Irish Annals', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 98C [1998], 203-55). Charles-Edwards's study of the ferials and dateable events locatable to the year in the Irish annals and external sources provides conclusive evidence that the ferials in AT and CS were not part of the original chronology. He also uses this evidence to identify places in the late seventh- and early eighth-century sections where years were lost or added by 911, providing a basis for a comparison of the Irish chronicle dating evidence with other sources. Perhaps wisely, given the degree of uncertainty over chronology that still remains, the dating of the translation is done according to the edition of the Annals of Ulster by Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill (*The Annals of Ulster (to A.D. 1131)*, Part I. Texts and Translation [Dublin, 1983]), even though that text does not always accurately retain the chronology of the 'Chronicle of Ireland'. However, sources such as Bede's *Chronica Maiora* and the 'Chronicle of Marcellinus', which were used by Irish annalists before 911, could allow the chronology of the section of the 'Chronicle of Ireland' before 730 to be the reconstructed. Although they are discussed in the introduction (Vol. 1, pp. 51-7), these sources could have been used more to resolve some of the chronological differences between the surviving texts in the section before the mid seventh century.

The introduction's discussion of the nature of the Irish chronicles provides a solid basis before someone starts to use the translation itself. The translation is organised in a very user-friendly way, using indentations, italics and different types of brackets to indicate whether the text is from both AU and the Clonmacnoise group (AT and CS) or is only found in one of these groups. From looking at sample sections (431-50, 580-600, 680-700, 725-35, 890-911) compared with the texts of AU, AT and CS, the translation seems to generally stick more

closely to the Latin or Gaelic original than the Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill translation of AU, although there are a few places where the text is quite interpretative. For instance, 685.2 has ‘The English lay waste the plain of Brega, including many churches, in the month of June’, whereas the original text in AU 685.2, CS 681.2, AT 685.3, has ‘*Saxones Campum Bregh uastant et aecclesias plurimas in mense Iuni*’, making it not completely clear whether the ‘many churches’ were in the plain of Brega. It would have been better to retain the ambiguity of the original here, since Charles-Edwards gives no indication of the wording of the original Latin text. Another minor problem is that epithets are not dealt with in a completely consistent manner; for example 690.4 has ‘Findguine Fota’ translating into Old Irish from the Latin ‘*longus*’ (found in AU 690.3 and CS 686.3), while in 697.2 Charles-Edwards has ‘Ferchar the Tall’ where AU 697.2 and AT 697.2 have ‘Ferchar Fota’.

In addition to this there are some mistakes which reduce the reliability of the text. The most significant I have found is that AU 692.2, ‘*Obsessio Duin Deauę Dibsi*’ (perhaps Dundee) is missing, although the lack of CS 696.3 (equivalent to 700 in the text) on the freezing of lakes and rivers, could be another instance. However, there are quite a few cases where the information about which manuscripts contain a particular item is not correct: for instance, 436, 731.3 occur in AU and CS or AT, so, according to Charles-Edwards’s system, should not be indented; 588.3, 684.3, 689.5, 690.3, 694.2 are not found in AT, CS (or the Annals of Inisfallen) so should probably be indented; 690.2 is only found in AT and CS, so should be indented and italicised. The latter item is significant since it was included in the Clonmacnoise group after 911 along with a sequence of extracts from Bede’s *Chronica Maiora*, all of which are included too early by over ten years. These mistakes in presentation reduce the ability of scholars to use the text to reconstruct the contents of the Chronicle of Ireland (one of the stated aims, see vol. 1, p. 1) through a study of the characteristics of material shared by AU and the Clonmacnoise group or unique to one textual group.

This drawback is exacerbated by the decision not to state whether text unique to the Clonmacnoise group was found in both AT and CS, or just one of these. The other main possible members of the Clonmacnoise group (the Annals of Clonmacnoise, Annals of the Four Masters and the Annals of Roscrea) are potentially unreliable as supporting evidence, since their textual histories have not been studied in detail; they may also have had a source closer to AU than AT or CS (which is certainly the case with the Annals of the Four Masters). Not stating whether material was present in both AT and CS or in only one of these means that the probability that it came from the ‘Chronicle of

Ireland' cannot be assessed adequately, leaving the reader to consult the editions to try to find the relevant items.

Another important problem with the text is that there is inconsistency in how the items from the Clonmacnoise group should be dealt with. This would seem to stem from an overall lack of clarity regarding the exact purpose of the translation overall; is it a reconstruction of the 'Chronicle of Ireland', or intended to be inclusive so that people can judge for themselves? Either of these two approaches would be legitimate (although in the latter case the title *The Chronicle of Ireland* for the book could be considered erroneous), but the policy seems to vary; sometimes material only found in the Clonmacnoise group is admitted and sometimes it is not. Unfortunately, the selection methods employed are not explained thoroughly enough in the introduction. From comparing the translation with its sources, where AU disagrees with AT and CS the translation in most cases represents the text of AU, which, given the tendency for later alteration to have affected the Clonmacnoise-group texts, would seem to be a sound policy.

However, sometimes these differences are not indicated in the translation or in the footnotes. For instance, both AT and CS (but not AU) describe Dúnchad of Muireasc as *rí Connacht*. This is not included in 683.1, but the succession of Fergal of Aidne, only found in AT (but not AU or CS) is present. Since Dúnchad's title is found in both AT and CS, there is a fair chance that it was omitted during AU's transmission. In contrast, most of the succession items for Irish provincial kingships, like that for Fergal, only occur in AT, making it unlikely that they were present in the 'Chronicle of Ireland'. The policy for inclusion here does not seem to reflect the probability that the text was part of the 'Chronicle of Ireland'. Elsewhere, Dúnchad's succession item (only present in AT 682.2) is not included in the new translation, but similar entries at 581.3, 589.5, 591.2, 598.5, and 696.2 are. Variation in treatment also occurs with the Clonmacnoise group's extra items from Bede's *Chronica Maiora*. One large extract is included at 685.4 (although it should be placed at 686.1; Stokes's edition placed it in the wrong year), but other extracts from *Chronica Maiora* at AT 683 and AT 693 are not. The issue here is consistency rather than whether such items were part of the 'Chronicle of Ireland' (although they are very unlikely to have been); it is not possible to assess accurately these particular corpora of items if only some of them were present.

It could be interjected here that these are only difficulties to be faced by the scholar conducting research on the Irish chronicles, who will be using the original texts anyway. While this is partially valid, it would have been beneficial if all those who used the book could gain as

accurate an initial impression of the date and reliability of this material as possible. The danger with an inclusive approach is that all the text will be regarded as equally reliable, although this would be dispelled by those who had read the introduction in volume 1. It would also have been very beneficial to have included footnotes where text was only found in either AT or CS (where one of these was not lacunose). It should be noted, however, that the material relating to Scotland is less affected than the Irish record by these types of problems, since there were generally fewer late alterations or additions made in Ireland to items concerned with northern Britain.

These negative aspects are, however, balanced by some very positive features in the two volumes. The main strength of the translation is that it is accompanied by a supporting apparatus well-designed to help the reader navigate around the translation and gain as much as possible from the text. There are many footnotes, explaining who people were and the context of events, providing cross-references to duplicates of the same item or other events about the same dynasty, and references to texts and academic work. This covers both the Scottish and Irish material, illuminating the significance of the text and allowing readers to conduct further research. The second volume is also extremely useful. It contains a glossary discussing the meaning of key vocabulary in the text, and a bibliography of primary texts, scholarship on the annals and a general bibliography. The only obvious omission from the bibliography of secondary material on the annals is Colmán Etchingham's *Viking Raids on Irish Settlements in the Ninth Century. A Reconsideration of the Annals* (Maynooth, 1996), although those wanting a more detailed general bibliography are directed to Charles-Edwards's *Early Christian Ireland*. There are three indices: of persons; of places, dynasties and peoples; and a general index, consisting mainly of subjects of entries and annalistic vocabulary. Overall, then, most methods of searching the translation are covered in the text, and it is often possible to discover more about something noticed in the text, whether other items containing related information, the context of an event in the chronicle, the meaning of a term, or the location of a place.

The *Chronicle of Ireland*, then, is in many respects a very important addition to scholarship on the Irish annals. It will enable people to utilise the chronicles before 912 in a more effective way, since much of Charles-Edwards's knowledge and research on the early medieval British Isles, Ireland in particular, are reflected in this work. However, it is unfortunate that the text contains a few errors, and displays an inconsistency which reduces its reliability. Since the differences in the surviving versions are often not indicated in the text or footnotes, the likelihood is that some mistakes or alternatives will go unnoticed by those using this book, especially those who assume

(despite Charles-Edwards's introductory warnings) that this actually is the 'Chronicle of Ireland', and that no further study is necessary. This new publication will be excellent as a means of introducing the Irish chronicles to students of Irish and Scottish history; it is to be hoped that, after some of the problems are removed, it will appear in the future in a more affordable paperback form to give it the audience it deserves.

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*Landscape and Environment in Dark Age Scotland*, ed. Alex Woolf, St John's House Papers no. 11: St Andrews, 2006. 90 pp. £10 pbk. ISBN 095125736 6

This volume, published by The Committee for Dark Age Studies at the University of St Andrews, consists of five contributions, four of which were presented at The St Andrews Dark Age Studies Conference held in February 2003. The conference was dedicated to environmental history and deals with a passage of time relatively understudied compared to its earlier prehistoric and subsequent historic counterparts. As Woolf states in his introduction, each paper demonstrates a different approach to understanding the landscape history of Dark Age Scotland.

Strat Halliday (Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland) considers whether there is a seamless join or dislocation moving from the Roman Iron Age into the early medieval period. After drawing on archaeological evidence from eastern Scotland, he concludes that there is no neat evolution. There appears to have been a complete dislocation of the Iron Age settlement pattern in the third century AD and there appears to be no tangible medieval landscape as such either.

Richard Tipping and colleagues (University of Stirling) present some selected pollen data from two sites in northern Scotland. Although evidence for woodland management is difficult to identify based solely on pollen data, they interpret the increase in *Quercus* (oak) pollen at both sites as a result of selective establishment and maintenance of woodland between cal AD 250 and cal AD 600. Tipping and his colleagues argue that oak was never a significant component of Holocene woodlands in northern Scotland yet at both sites *Quercus* pollen percentages increase. Despite the *Quercus* pollen percentages never exceeding 10%, these higher percentages represent a ten-fold increase. Their favoured explanation is that oak was managed as a cash crop for timber, paralleling similar practices common in medieval and later times. This is a plausible working hypothesis.

Anne Crone (AOC, Scotland) presents dendrochronological data derived from oak found in buildings in Scotland. The age distribution of these data highlights an anomaly in the tree-ring record between the