

Ireland and Scotland) at Birr (in modern Co. Offaly) in 697 to adopt and ‘guarantee’ its implementation. It certainly wasn’t an obstacle to Adomnán’s ambitions for the ‘Law’ that his fellow Donegal man and distant relative, Loingsech mac Óenguso, was king of Tara at the time.

James Houlihan’s book puts all these matters in context. He compares Adomnán’s text to similar European enactments and movements – all of them much later. Innovatively, he draws parallels for instance between Adomnán’s Law – which had been characterised by other authors as a precursor of the Geneva Convention – and Henry Dunant’s work which led to the establishment of the Red Cross in 1863. As a lawyer himself Houlihan is able to analyse Adomnán’s text for its legal content, both in terms of its own time and in comparison with its later international analogues – up to and including the handling of the atrocities during the Vietnam war.

Perhaps of more local interest, Houlihan’s book makes very clear the difference between Adomnán’s original text of 697 and the later version which has come down to us in the only two surviving manuscript copies. One of those – now preserved in Brussels – was made in 1627 by another Donegal man: the famous Mícheál Ó Cléirigh, the leader of the so-called Four Masters. That manuscript includes the original Law and list of its ecclesiastical and royal supporters, but these are embedded in and heavily encrusted with much later textual additions which derive from what was called the ‘Old Book of Raphoe’. In fact, this embellished version of the Law was probably composed in Raphoe (or, at least, on behalf of Raphoe) about the year 1000. It would have been used to bolster pilgrimage to – and with that ‘income’ for – the church in Raphoe at the time. Houlihan makes the distinction between the 697 text and that of c.1000 extremely clear.

Adomnán, who among many things was the ninth abbot of Iona, was an extraordinary Donegal man. But his

reputation is often overshadowed by that of Colum Cille. Ironically, the main cause of that was because of the celebrated book he himself wrote about the founder of Iona. That book, the *Vita Columbae* has been available in modern translations since the 1960s. Unfortunately, the translator (and annotator) of the most popular version of it, Professor Richard Sharpe, died earlier this year.¹ His death is a great loss to scholarship, including that of medieval Donegal. *Ar dheis lámh De go raibh a anam uasal.*

This new book by James Houlihan, about another text originally composed by Adomnán, is also a major milestone in terms of the scholarship relating to Donegal’s medieval heritage. It sets out not only the local and national importance of Adomnán’s ‘Law of the Innocents’ but places it, for the first time, in its true international significance.

Brian Lacey

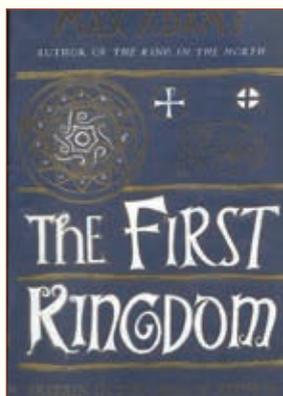
- 1 A short commemorative ceremony including appropriate readings and songs was organised as a memorial to Professor Sharpe in the ruined chapel at Churchtown, Gartan, on 9 June, 2020. Because of the government Covid 19 restrictions, only six people were in attendance.

The First Kingdom, Britain in the Age of Arthur

Max Adams, *Head of Zeus*, 2021, ISBN 9781788543477, pp 491, £30.

The author of a new publication, Max Adams, is well known to students of early British history with his two best-selling books, *The King of the North* (2013) and *In the Land of Giants* (2015). From the opening pages of the latest *magnum opus*, the reader is alerted to the fact that “the past lies in fragments”. Undaunted, the author divides his study into three sections: ‘The End of History’, ‘After History’ and ‘The First Kingdom’.

In the first section, he presents a fascinating perspective of Roman Britain. All life is there, from the elites of the great towns to the lower ranks struggling to make a living. Traditionally, the writings of monks such as Gildas (*De Excidio*) in



the sixth century and Bede (*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*) in the eighth were among the main written sources of information. Recently, other disciplines such as archaeology and geography have been given a salient role in decoding the past. For example, archaeologists have provided vital clues from the temples and spas beloved of the Romans, e.g. at Bath; geographers have examined rural lifestyles, place names, landscapes and estate boundaries. The Western Roman Empire collapsed around 400 AD and therein lies the challenge facing the modern historian and archaeologist seeking to cast some light on a 'dark' period in British history.

Settlements such as West Stow, Suffolk, established in the fifth century, have provided archaeologists with a miscellaneous collection of artefacts which contribute to the reconstruction of everyday life: pottery, pins, tools, buckets and jewellery. The inhabitants were largely craftspeople and farmers. So much for the living but what of the dead? It is even more difficult for archaeologists to establish where the inhabitants came from. One thing is certain: by the end of the fifth century, a Brexit-like fracture took place between Britain, a Roman colony, and its continental overlords. For a contemporary appraisal of the fifth century, the story of St Patrick is regarded as one of the most reliable accounts.

In the second section of the book, there are fascinating clues about the

origins of England's first kingdoms and their formation into larger units. In the Tribal Hidage manuscript in the British Library, the smaller kingdoms that formed a multi-lingual Heptarchy in the seventh or eighth century are listed: Mercia and Northumbria being two. Peoples and lands were measured in hides exacted as a form of tribute to an overlord. By comparison, in Ireland, the territory of Magh Tóchair in Inishowen, Co Donegal is typical of small lordships, marked by its High Crosses, hill forts, court tombs, standing stones, mounds, monasteries, graveyards and burial chambers.

In the third section of the book, Colmcille features prominently both as kingmaker and overlord. He plays a pivotal role in the linkages between Iona, Lindisfarne monastery and Bishop Aidan. Further interesting comparisons are noted between the development of the concept of kingship on either side of the Irish Sea. In Ireland, over 100 petty kingships competed or grafted for the honour of holding the Seat of Tara in County Meath.

The book is a remarkable tapestry in which are woven the diverse threads of archaeology, topography, folklore, linguistics, and culture to create a panorama of Early Medieval Britain and its place in the context of European history. The illustrations showing the "fragments" are enlightening such as the drawing on the third-century lead tablet excavated in Gloucestershire in 1978. The five maps of sites in Early Medieval Britain and the Appendix of the Tribal Hidage are particularly helpful for an understanding of the period. Apart from the scholarship evident in the pages, the fluidity and clarity of the presentation add to the sheer enjoyment of this remarkable contribution to our understanding of the complex political and religious forces that operated in the early medieval western world.

Seán Beattie