



Richard II and the Irish Kings

Darren McGettigan

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Review by: David Green

Richard II and the Irish Kings. By Darren McGettigan. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2016. ISBN 978-1-84682-602-3. 232 pp. £17.50.

The dramatis personae at the centre of McGettigan's book are three late medieval Irish kings: Art MacMurchadha Caomhánach (1375–1416/17), Niall Mór Ó Néill (1364–97), and Niall Óg Ó Néill (1397–1403). These men, rulers respectively of the Irish of the Leinster mountains, of Tyrone, and high-king of Ireland, were among the most successful monarchs during the so-called Gaelic resurgence of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Nor was their political significance confined to Ireland given that they were the focus of Richard II's ill-fated campaign of 1399 that played a significant role in his deposition.

The book forms part of what is now a long-standing historiographical trend to draw together both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish sources and perspectives to present a more holistic picture of events in later medieval Ireland. This approach has been pursued by scholars such as Robin Frame, Seán Duffy, Brendan Smith and Peter Crooks (works by the last of these is rather under-represented in the sources consulted by the author in this book).

McGettigan's work also follows in the path of studies that have paid particular attention to Richard's expeditions across the Irish Sea—those by James Lydon and Dorothy Johnston are among the most notable. Given this, the book would benefit from further consideration of Richard's 'imperial ambitions' in Britain and Ireland. These are mentioned early in the book (34) but rarely explored. More detailed comparisons with other military expeditions would also have been useful given that they would indicate how Plantagenet priorities across the Channel measured against those over the Irish Sea.

The evidence at the author's disposal is extensive. It includes the chronicles of Jean Froissart, Adam Usk and Henry Knighton, as well as Jean Creton's metrical history of Richard II, Henry Cristede's famous testimony of his life in Gaelic Ireland, and a vitage (Catalan for 'journey') by a Catalan nobleman, Ramon de Perellós. Irish sources are also plentiful in the form of bardic poetry and assorted annals, both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish. Administrative and financial records concerning Richard's expeditions are also available in some quantity. Some of these may now be accessed with ease because of the splendid Irish Chancery Rolls Project (CIRCLE).

Following a discussion of such sources in the Introduction, Chapter 1 offers a brief overview of Richard II's reign (1377–99), and a description of the socio-political conditions he discovered in Ireland when he launched his first campaign in 1394. This confirms a now well-established impression of the Anglo-Irish lordship. It shows the English/Anglo-Irish settler communities broadly in retreat in the face of pressure from families such as

MacMurchadha, Ó Mórdha, Ó Néill, Ó Tuathail, and Ó Broin. In Chapter 2, the focus begins to narrow on the kingdoms of Tyrone and Leinster, and on the customs and culture of the late medieval Irish population. This includes thoughts on clothing, buildings and agriculture, and consideration is also given to military tactics and weaponry. Chapters 3 to 5 bring us to the political core of the book, to Richard's campaigns (1394–5 and 1399), and the connection and conflict between the gael and the gall—the Gaelic Irish and the English. In these chapters, in addition to descriptions of the expeditions themselves, the author considers qualities of Irish kingship, such as military prowess, the submission of nobles, wealth, patronage of the Church and of learned men and poets. There are also insightful comments on the use of the Ulster Cycle of legends for royal propaganda by Aodg Reamhar Ó Néill, king of Tyrone (d. 1364) (123).

Famously, Richard sought to secure the loyalty of the Gaelic rulers not only through direct military action but also by binding them to him through ties of chivalry. The occasion Froissart described concerning the knighting of four Irish kings (Niall Óg Ó Neill, Art MacMurchadha Caomhánach, Brian Ó Briain, and probably Toidhealbhach Ó Conchobhair Donn) in the cathedral church in Dublin is seen as, probably, an amalgamation of a number of separate ceremonies (143-5). However it was managed, this event highlights a number of cultural and political differences between English and Irish rulers, some of which McGettigan could have explored at greater length. For example, there is little discussion regarding the significance of knighthood itself. This is something of a missed opportunity, especially given the use of membership of the Order of the Garter by assorted English monarchs to try and secure the loyalty of various foreign nobles and princes, and the latter attempt by Henry V to 'retain' King James I of Scotland (knighted on St George's Day, 1421). Additionally, different attitudes to oaths of homage, which had been so central to the escalation of Anglo-French hostilities (the Hundred Years War), could be further explored. It is noteworthy that even in the second campaign Richard II placed a good deal of unwarranted faith in the oaths the Irish swore to him (173).

With regard to the expeditions themselves, McGettigan points out that the military tactics the English had employed in the Hundred Years War should not have been well suited to Irish conditions. Despite this, in his first expedition, Richard developed an effective strategy for dealing with Art MacMurchadha. The use of *chevauchée* (raiding) tactics to force the Irish into submission proved very successful. Indeed, his easy victory may have misled Richard about Irish military abilities, and he could not repeat the success in the 1399 expedition. This, of course, had a major impact on political destinies in England as well as Ireland.

Aimed at the elusive general reader, the book is chiefly descriptive rather than analytical. There are many and extensive quotations from the chronicles and annals mentioned above, but relatively few conclusions are drawn from these. In a similar fashion, there are numerous references to differences of opinion among “some modern historians” (e.g. 117) but often the author does not venture an opinion of his own or give a clear indication of his own stance on the subject. Despite this, the book provides an instructive and engaging overview of later medieval Irish politics and political geography during a remarkable period in the country’s history. It is nicely illustrated with some fine colour prints and a number of maps and family trees. It is also a relief to see footnotes used in a work aimed at a wider readership.

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