
‘The Irish Annals’ is a title given not to a single set of annals but to a number of different annalistic texts from medieval and early modern Ireland which, however, go back to a common origin. The study under review focuses on the following: the *Annals of Ulster* (AU), *Tigernach* (AT), *Inisfallen* (AI), *Connacht* (CT), *Loch Cé* (LC), *Boyle* (AB), *Roscrea* (AR) and the *Four Masters* (FM); *Chronicum Scotorum* (CS) (alternatively *Chronicon Scotorum*, but ‘chronicum’ is the spelling in Hennessey’s edition); and *Mageoghagan’s Book* (MB), often known as the *Annals of Clonmacnoise*. Most of these texts appear in more than one manuscript. The manuscripts witness directly to a period of active annual chronicling from the late eleventh to the seventeenth century: the earliest section in the Rawlinson manuscript of AI (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson B. 503) is dated to the late eleventh century, and Micheál Ó Cléirigh and his co-authors were writing the autograph copies of FM in the 1630s (though FM’s coverage stops at 1616).

The materials gathered in the manuscripts clearly derive from earlier sets of annals and, in many cases, have passed through complex processes of re-copying, re-compilation and additional composition before and after 1100. There is general consensus that the earliest or almost the earliest layer is a chronicle kept in Iona up to the early or mid-eighth century. From the contents of the annals—the places and people they mention and the signs they give of local interest—one may deduce major stints of annal-composition at Armagh under ecclesiastical auspices in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries and in Connacht and Fermanagh by secular Gaelic historians in the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries, before synthesizing historians such as Ó Cléirigh got to work in the seventeenth. But to tease out the many separate efforts of revision
and addition that lie beneath these broadly-conceived stages and numerous distinct texts is an exceptionally intricate task. Until now the only reasonably comprehensive survey of the relationships between the Irish annals has been Gearóid Mac Niocaill’s invaluable but brief account of 1975 (The Medieval Irish Annals, Medieval Irish History Series, 3 [Dublin: Dublin Historical Association, 1975]). We must be grateful to Daniel McCarthy for undertaking his impressively weighty monograph.

McCarthy is a former Senior Lecturer in the Department of Computer Science and currently Fellow Emeritus at Trinity College, Dublin. His distinctive contribution to the study of the Irish Annals has been his work on their chronology and dating mechanisms which, as a computer scientist, he is perhaps more qualified to comprehend than most historians. As he explains in the preface to the book, his professional interest in annals stems from collaborating with Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (NUIG), initially on an exhibition concerning the history of computing for which he enlisted Ó Cróinín’s help, and then on the analysis of an 84-year Easter Table (Peritia 6–7 [1987–8], 227–42). He went on to construct a synchronisation of the chronologies of the major sets of annals which he made available on the internet at: <http://www.scss.tcd.ie/misc/kronos/chronology/synchronisms/annals-chron.htm> [accessed 30/01/10]. (In the bibliography to The Irish Annals the URL is given as: <www.cs.tcd.ie/Dan.McCarthy/chronology/synchronisms/annals-chron>. This older address is still operational, but should have the suffix ‘htm’.) The detailed comparative work of constructing the synchronisation gave rise to a series of articles on the origins and textual relations of the annals, and the monograph under review recapitulates and extends the findings of these articles.
The book opens with chapters on the character of the sources, the manuscripts, and previous work in the area. It then proceeds to lay out McCarthy’s view of the successive stages of annal-compilation from a foundational world-chronicle assembled in the fifth century through to the seventeenth. This has the advantage of clarity and resembles Mac Niocaill’s approach, though in cases where the same materials have undergone several layers of revision it can make it hard to follow why particular elements are assigned to one layer rather than another. Each chapter ends with a summary neatly listing the dates, places and persons involved. The final chapter considers how the annals can best be used to retrieve an accurate notion of the events of Irish history. There are also an epilogue, a number of useful appendices including a list of all the manuscripts (and not overlooking the late manuscripts) of the major annals, a bibliography and an index.

McCarthy’s most provocative opinions cluster towards the beginning of the book and the earliest periods of annal-composition. At the outset he argues that the origins of the annals lie in a world chronicle constructed by Rufinus of Aquileia in the first decade of the fifth century. This was extended by Sulpicius Severus, or one of his circle, and carried to Ireland in about 425 in association with the introduction of Sulpicius’s eighty-four-year paschal latercus. The grounds on which the world chronicle is attributed to Rufinus were elaborated in an earlier publication (Peritia 12 (1998), 98–152): these include the use of Rufinus’s translation of Eusebius in the world history entries and details of the imperial and Alexandrian episcopal successions. The attribution to Rufinus is plausible rather than conclusive. No such world chronicle by Rufinus is preserved as a discrete work or mentioned by early authors; and if it indeed existed it need not have been compiled by Rufinus himself but only by one of his circle. McCarthy seems to me to have established convincingly, however, that such an early set of world annals did exist, and formed the basis for later Irish chronicling.
Here the mathematician’s ability to handle the complex chronological data is illuminating to those of us who are happier identifying verbal parallels between texts. It has long been known that the Irish Annals share world history entries with Bede’s *De temporum ratione* and *De temporibus*, and it has usually been deduced that the Irish annalists were drawing on Bede (and therefore that their work must postdate Bede’s and fall in the first half of the eighth century at the earliest). However, McCarthy shows that the resolution of certain problems of biblical chronology is not implemented consistently by Bede; he concludes that Bede was following a source rather than constructing a unified chronology of his own. This source is shared with the Irish annals and they preserve elements not found in Bede. McCarthy refers (118) to Morris’s earlier work postulating a shared source on textual grounds (*Bull. of the Inst. of Class. Stud.* 19 (1972), 80–93); the chronological data confirms that theory.

The author’s treatment of the next phase of the Irish Annals, the Iona Chronicle, offers a new angle on a notorious puzzle in early Irish history: the plethora of contradictory dates associated with the life and mission of St Patrick. Looking across the range of chronicle evidence, there are two main dating clusters for Patrick’s death, one around 460 (most of these annal-entries refer to ‘Sen-Phátric’ or ‘Senex Patricius’) and one around 493. Patrick’s arrival as a missionary in Ireland is recorded under 432; the c. 493 death-date comes with a tradition of a long mission (sixty to sixty-nine years) and death at an advanced age (109 to 123). (These matters are usefully discussed by David N. Dumville *et al.*, *Saint Patrick A.D. 493–1993* [Woodbridge: Boydell, 1993]). Thomas O’Rahilly famously proposed that these dates reflect the careers of not one but two missionaries: Palladius, who according to Prosper, Bede *DTR* and AU was sent as bishop to the Irish in 431, and a later Patrick. McCarthy has little time for O’Rahilly’s ventures into the textual history
of the Irish Annals (92–3) but he too sees the later Patrick as the true one. He regards the earlier obit and a series of other Patrician entries coordinated with it—including a birth-date at 336—as the work of an early-eighth-century reviser of the Iona Chronicle. This reviser also introduced a series of entries on the papal succession to 608 (the papal data is in places verbally intertwined with the Patrician material), deleted seven consecutive kalends at 425–31 and a number of non-consecutive kalends in the range 612–64, and added twenty-two entries relating to Anglo-Saxon royalty over 611–718.

The Anglo-Saxon connection in conjunction with the emphasis on the papacy leads McCarthy to conclude, plausibly enough, that the author was Ecgerht of Northumbria, whom Bede credits with converting the Iona community to the Roman Easter in 716. McCarthy suggests that the 432 entry is adapted from an earlier record not of Patrick’s mission but of his arrival in Ireland as a captive; the original date given for the mission was 458 but this entry was converted into an obit. The 336 natus and other earlier dates are based on the chronology in Muirchú’s vita: if born in 336 Patrick would have been 122 in 458, which accords reasonably closely with the Mosaic lifespan of 120 years given him by Muirchú. The obit at c. 493 (491 in McCarthy’s synchronisation) is the real date of Patrick’s death, at the age of about seventy-five if he was sixteen at his captivity in 432. By placing Patrick so early, Ecgerht wanted to emphasise that the saint, whom he associated with papal authority and the Roman Easter, was the originator of Christianity in Ireland. This is in many ways an elegant solution, though it does not account for the title ‘Sen-Phátric’; nor is it clear why, if he was prepared to invent so much, Ecgerht did not find a way to accommodate the sixty-year apostolate described by Muirchú. McCarthy does not address these questions, but he does have an answer as to why Ecgerht did not delete the 491 obit: he wanted to ‘create as much chronological confusion
around Patrick as he could in order to obscure the reality that Patrick was a second-generation Christian missionary to Ireland’ (147); he acted, indeed, in a spirit of ‘malevolence’ and ‘mendacity’ (ibid.). It is surely a more likely as well as a more charitable hypothesis that Ecgberht failed to complete his revision; or indeed that he became somewhat lost in disentangling dates that originally pertained to two different figures. Nonetheless, this is a thought-provoking new tack in the debate over the dating of Patrick.

Another contention that historians should note is McCarthy’s relatively dim view of the usefulness of AU, although he does not deny that AU often preserves an early state of the text, as is suggested by its frequently early linguistic forms. However, its dates are a mess. Much of this goes back to an eleventh-century compiler whom McCarthy identifies with the ‘Cuana’ of the ‘Liber Cuanach’ referred to in AU467.2, 468.2 and elsewhere, and whom he names more precisely as Cúan Ua Lothcháin, “prince poet of Ireland, a great chronicler” (MB, quoted 208), who was murdered in 1064. This compiler attempted to restore 253 years that were believed to be missing between the Hebrew AM 3952 and the Incarnation ‘secundum Dionissium’ (that is, according to the Dionysiac paschal calendar) by placing the birth of Christ in the middle of the third century AD. McCarthy comments: ‘when one considers the controversial character of his pre-Palladian chronology and his revisions to early Irish Christian chronology, it would not be surprising if it were these that precipitated his murder’ (209). The scribe-compiler of the two major MSS of AU also did his bit to introduce confusion. McCarthy argues that Cathal Óg Mac Maghnusa, who is named as the compiler of AU in his obit at 1498, was in fact the patron; the main compiler was Ruaidhrí Ua Caiside, the second of the two scribes. Ua Caiside had an acute interest in matters of dating and chronology, but this was not matched by competence (318); and thus we have the numerous duplicate entries and
emendations that mar AU. For the early years of Irish history McCarthy considers a combination of AT and CS the most reliable guide.

As this last example illustrates, the book offers an extraordinary density of interlocking arguments across all periods of construction of the Irish Annals. This density does have its drawbacks, however, especially as its author often refers back to positions set out in more detail in his earlier articles. The discussion of the Liber Cuanach is a particularly knotty case. Liber Cuanach is referred to in thirteen interjections in AU; all of these McCarthy considers to be the work of Ruaidhri Ua Caiside, concluding that ‘as well as his primary source he had another source that he knew as Liber Cuanach’ and...he was collating the two of these together’ (199). Given that McCarthy clearly distinguishes Liber Cuanach from the primary source, it is initially hard to follow why he calls AU, AI and AB together ‘the Cuana group’ or why he draws on AU so extensively to reconstruct Cúan’s work.

However, if we follow up the footnote reference to McCarthy’s 1998 article ‘The Chronology of the Irish Annals’ (Proc. R. Ir. Acad., 98C [1998] 203–55), we find an argument that Cúan is the main source of at least part of AU. Here McCarthy observes that a gap in explicit references to the Liber Cuanach at AU 490–543 corresponds closely to a period of severely disturbed chronology in AU; he also notes the remark at 602.3 that ‘Everything that has been set down under the following year I have found in the Book of Cuanu to have taken place in this’, indicating that the compiler ‘felt obliged to register his divergence from the chronology of Cuanu [sic]’ (‘Chronology’, 234). (The translation is from Mac Airt and Mac Niocaill’s edition, in which the entry appears as 603.3; McCarthy quotes the Latin). McCarthy’s interpretation is that in collating his two sources the compiler largely followed Cúan for the period 490–543: ‘the differences between the two sources became very much more frequent, so he ceased making acknowledgements to Cuanu but followed it closely,
continuing nonetheless to duplicate some entries from his version of the Iona Chronicle’ (235).

In a more recent article (‘The Chronological Apparatus of the Annals of Ulster AD 82–1019’, Peritia 16 [2002], 256–83), McCarthy identifies Cúan with the similarly distorting ‘Dionysiac Computist’ of the pre-Palladian annals who, as mentioned above, placed the Incarnation in the third century, and who was responsible for constructing a carefully synchronised chronology of kalends, feria and epacts based on the Dionysiac paschal tradition—though unfortunately he also added extra kalends in the following five centuries to reconcile the chronology of the Iona Chronicle with his Incarnation date. Traces of this dating apparatus are also evident in AI and AB (Irish Annals, 11–12 and 217–8). Difficulties in the dating mechanism in AI can be seen as the stumbles of a compiler attempting to eliminate the errors perpetrated by Cúan (‘Annals of Ulster’, 279). In ‘Annals of Ulster’ (278) McCarthy refers back to ‘The Chronology’ for the argument that Cúan also restored five kalends to AU between 573 and 654, and states that this restoration was necessary for the construction of the kalend+epact+feria apparatus. The analysis of the activities of the ‘Dionysiac Computist’ is partially reiterated in The Irish Annals (203–7), but presented as the reconstruction of Cúan’s activities rather than an argument for why they should be associated with Cúan in the first place.

Perhaps it is foolish to complain of difficulty in a book discussing so inherently intricate a subject. However, when one encounters, as from time to time one does, problems of expression and presentation, one may be forgiven a certain tetchiness. Sentence construction sometimes wobbles: ‘This work survives in three MSS, two paper copies from the seventeenth century which were copied by Maurice O’Gorman from the primary MS, a sixteenth-century vellum now RIA 1219 (C.iii.l), and descriptions of this have been published by the Revd O’Conor, O’Curry,
Freeman and Mulchrone’ (44). An editor should have noticed the following: ‘The crucial question that arises is, to whence did they go?’ (168) Quotation from primary sources veers between the original language and translation for no apparent reason (as on 140–1, where successive quotations from AU are in Latin and then English); where the original language is Old Irish, a modern English translation would be especially welcome.

For this is a book of interest beyond the circle of scholars who read Old Irish, and indeed beyond the field of Irish history. It offers a model and a challenge to those working on annals and chronicles from all traditions—a large and lively band, as is illustrated by the series of conference proceedings edited by Erik Kooper (The Medieval Chronicle [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996] and succeeding volumes). McCarthy’s robust insistence on the centrality of the reckoning and ordering of time as the fundamental feature of any chronicle is salutary to those of us whose bent is to investigate the selection of events or rhetorical features; the lists of kalends or feria or AD dates are not a kind of confusing punctuation but the very skeleton of the record. Incidentally, McCarthy’s emphasis on the calculation of time produces a useful contribution to the old question of whether annals originate as marginal annotations in Easter Tables. He does not, in fact, at any point suggest that they so originate; but he sees the production of annalistic chronologies as interdependent with the reckoning of paschal cycles, and he hypothesizes that Rufinus’s world chronicle was transmitted to Ireland alongside the 84-year paschal cycle whose dating style it shares.

As McCarthy points out, there is a pressing need for new editions of the Irish annals. Most are available only in nineteenth-century publications which present many defects; and editors have struggled to disentangle and represent their chronologies. The CELT Corpus of Electronic Texts project based at University College Cork is to be applauded for making many of these publications far more accessible,
but more is needed. The ideal, though funding might be hard to get in the present climate, would be a co-ordinated, collaborative project to re-edit all the major texts. Such a project would build on McCarthy’s findings; it would also be the most searching way to test and evaluate them.

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