

Marie Therese Flanagan, *The Transformation of the Irish Church in the Twelfth Century*. Studies in Celtic History, 29. xii+295pp. Cambridge: The Boydell Press, 2010. £60.00. ISBN 978-1-84383-597-4

If the sixth is the 'lost century' of Irish history, the eleventh and twelfth were, until very recently, the most ignored. Falling as they do between the twin stools of the death of Brian Bóruma (1014 AD) and the arrival in the 1160s of the Anglo-Normans, the twelfth century was treated either as a time of repeated and failed attempts by rulers to regain Brian's position of *imperator Scottorum*, or as the prelude to the long history of English conquest. More recently, however, some scholars have drawn attention to the political, cultural, and institutional transformations of the eleventh and twelfth centuries in Ireland to show how dynamic a period in the country's past it was. The institutions of kingship and the church went through unprecedented change as competition for power at the higher levels of kingship intensified, and more and more power was concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Real power now rested with a handful of provincial kings who competed to extend the reach of their influence over the whole island, and who succeeded in bringing the ideal of a national monarchy beyond an aspiration towards political reality. As the political map was being redrawn, traditional attitudes to kingship fell away as power and resources, as much as ancient rights and privileges, determined who was entitled to call himself a king.

Only this new *realpolitik* can explain King Muirchertach Ua Briain (d.1119) of Munster's casual disdain for the most ancient of royal titles when he expelled Meath's rulers and divided the kingdom. This new attitude is revealed in the actions of Tairdelbach Ua Conchobair, king of Connacht who, in 1144, captured and eventually deposed the king of Meath despite the impressive mass of relics and senior clerics he had gathered around him for protection. No matter how venerable their titles,

the rights of lesser kings were to be subordinated to the ambitions of the dominant dynasties in competition for the kingship of all Ireland.

Marie Therese Flanagan's *The Transformation of the Irish Church in the Twelfth Century* examines how royal ruthlessness in redrawing the political map is paralleled by the leading figures of the ecclesiastical reform movement who, with a similar indifference to ancient vested interests, presented their vision of a reformed church. Gillebertus, papal legate and bishop of Limerick, set down the institutional model for this reformed church in his tract, *De statu ecclesiae*. Flanagan explores this ideal church in which the bishop calls the shots; monks and their abbots are, of course, included in Gillebertus's idealised hierarchy, but at the very bottom of a pyramid that is ruled by the pope, provincial primate and, at the local level, by bishops. There was no place for the ecclesiastical confederations whose founding saints were commemorated from the middle of the seventh century in sophisticated Lives and who were always (except for St Patrick) monks. The Irish church was to be divided into territorial dioceses and the ancient, dominant monastic centres had to fight to reprise their authority in this new diocesan landscape.

Flanagan sheds considerable light on the careers of these saints and career-minded ecclesiastics who embraced the ideals of reform with the enthusiastic support of the more powerful Irish kings, who threw the weight of their authority and resources behind them. The book lays to rest finally the supposition that the reform was essentially an attempt to replace a monastic with an episcopal church, and an exercise in asset-stripping the old foundations to support the newly constituted dioceses. It reveals in great detail the extraordinary range of influences — patristic, early Irish, English, and continental European — that shaped the new models of episcopal authority, with its emphasis on pastoral responsibility. If the significance of a book is measured by its capacity to

change how scholars view the subject, *The Transformation of the Irish Church in the Twelfth Century* is an important publication that will itself transform how the reform and the literature of reform are interpreted, by showing the extent to which European developments and models of ecclesiastical organisation influenced Ireland. In this broadening of the interpretative context, Flanagan pays particular attention to Máel Máedóc Ua Morgair, or St Malachy, the formidable bishop of Armagh and leader of the reform in Ireland, whose *Life* was written by the dominant and domineering St Bernard of Clairvaux who portrays him as a reformer intent on bringing the most peripheral church in Christendom into line with the emerging European norms. Bernard drew on the ancient rhetoric of civility versus barbarity in his negative portrayal of the Irish, but Flanagan argues that when one pushes beyond that rhetoric, it is possible to recognise in his *Life* of St Malachy the very model of a modern reforming bishop intended to guide the path of reform. A great deal has been written about the course of ecclesiastical reform and the agenda of the reformers in articles by Irish historians and scholars. But this is the first book that explores these events, texts, and personalities, and addresses the gap in the history of the period as only a monograph-length study can.

A major drawback to investigating the history of the twelfth-century reform of the Irish church is the dearth of Irish sources that would reveal the course of the reform, the agenda of the reformers, how resources were transferred from the monastic foundations, and the instruments that gave legal effect to the reform programme. The records that survive of the councils and synods (Cashel I, Ráith Bressail, Cashel II, Inis Pátraic, Kells, Dublin) are patchy and/or late. Not a single episcopal register has survived, and just a few episcopal *acta*. As Professor Flanagan observes, there is actually less material surviving for

the Irish church in the twelfth century than for the seventh and eighth. These issues are addressed in the first chapter.

Problems caused by the lack of surviving native sources, and problems in the interpretation of what does survive, led Flanagan to look to continental material. The literature and records of the long-lived Schottenklöster (monasteries founded by the Irish in the Germanic lands in the later Middle Ages) preserve information on Ireland from a continental perspective. Flanagan uses such information to reveal the external influences that shaped the progress of reform in Ireland. She explores the twelfth-century Lives of saints whose foundations were endorsed as episcopal sees to reveal how older material was reworked to promote episcopal leadership. The great strength of Professor Flanagan's book is to turn this paucity of Irish source material into a virtue for, in relying on the continental, English, and earlier Irish vernacular and Latin material, and by locating what survives of the sources of the Irish reform in such contexts, the book is rigorously comparative in its interpretation.

In the second chapter, Flanagan takes account of recent research into the role and status of bishops in the early Irish church, and tackles older perceptions of the reform as a movement that took the church out of the hands of the monasteries and the entrenched non-clerical dynasties, and put it squarely under the control of bishops and their dioceses. Bishops in the early Irish church were never mere liturgical technicians or 'sacramental functionaries', and never functioned as alternatives to the *principes/airchinnigh* (non-clerical rulers). The issues were more nuanced than much of the existing scholarship allows, and the task of the reformers, insofar as the episcopacy was concerned, was to free the bishops from secular control. Flanagan argues that the real problem was the phenomenon of unstable and changing spheres of episcopal jurisdiction caused by the institution's lack of continuous territorial definition and interrupted succession. She looks specifically at

the work of Gillebertus of Limerick and his schema of church grades. His attempt to present these grades with parallel secular rankings has similarities with English, and continental, literature, but also with earlier Irish vernacular law. Aspects of Gillebertus's works show, according to Flanagan, parallels with reform literature from late-eleventh-century Normandy, a region concerned to promote 'authentic Roman practice and proper liturgical order'. She draws attention to the meeting Gillebertus had with St Anselm at Rouen (and shows that Spring of 1106 was the probable date of this meeting) to argue that the influences on Gillebertus's thought should be sought beyond the Anglo-Norman realm, and that his work reflects the broad thrust of the European reform movement.

For all the attention that has been paid to the high politics of the reform, Flanagan argues that Gillebertus's concern was pastoral, and that he believed a functioning parish unit was needed for the priest to fulfil his pastoral obligations. Her comparison with continental material makes her argument particularly compelling. This concern to improve clerical morals and performance at the local level was also central to the decrees of the recent council of Clermont (1095), which is remembered more for Urban II's proclamation of the Crusade than as an important stage in reform history. These concerns, she argues, influenced the synod of Cashel of 1101 which saw the first formal attempt to set the process of reform in train, and are vital to understanding Gillebertus's agenda. The establishing of a strong central authority was seen as essential to the reformers' strategy for overhauling the way the church exercised its mission. The arrangements for primacy proposed at the synod of Ráith Bressail are explained by Flanagan in such a context. The decision to create two archiepiscopal sees is described as a reflex of the Ps-Isidorian canon collection, for Armagh required at least one other archbishopric that recognised its primacy for it to claim primatial status.

While Gillebertus provides an insight into the theoretical framework of the reform movement, the figure most associated with the practicalities of advancing reforming measures in the Irish church is St Malachy of Armagh, who is the central figure of this history. We are again forced to rely on a continental writer for a sustained account of his life and mission, in this case the redoubtable Bernard of Clairvaux. Flanagan emphasises that Bernard's intention was to present Malachy as a 'mirror and model' (*speculum et exemplum*), but even this idealised portrait can be invaluable in determining the aims of the reformers in Ireland. Bernard portrays Malachy as an exemplar of the *vita apostolica*, imbued with unpretentious simplicity and humility, who shunned private wealth in favour of the *vita communis*. Flanagan sees here the influence of Sulpicius Severus's formative Life of St Martin of Tours. While it is true that Martin was the shining example of the bishop imbued with monastic selflessness, it is also true that the Life of Malachy raised a broader issue, for the problem of the relationship between the prelatial authority of the bishop and the charismatic authority of the holy man or monk was debated from the earliest days of Christianity.

Columbanus and Adomnán of Iona wrote in the seventh century and left little doubt about the superiority of the monastic over the episcopal. The monk was a promoter of charity and a preserver of peace. Bishops brought strife and division with their debates about Christ and their squabbles over Easter. The answer to this tension caused by different visions of ecclesiastical authority — one institutional and the other charismatic — proposed by the earliest Irish writers (including Columbanus and Adomnán) was the humble bishop whose humility showed that he had no selfish intentions, and whose poverty showed that he placed the interests of his flock before his own, and those of his family. This is how Sulpicius portrayed Martin, and how Muirchú portrayed Patrick — both bishops imbued with these monastic ideals.

Bernard, too, stood in this tradition in how he portrayed Malachy. In the context of twelfth-century Ireland, however, where ecclesiastical temporalities were in the hands of the unordained hereditary *airchinnig* who were very obviously in the game for their own gain, this portrayal of the apostolic reformer had an added piquancy.

In the fourth chapter, Flanagan explores Malachy's role in the introduction of the new monastic orders into Ireland. Because of their focus on individual houses and orders, 'inter-monastic and inter-institutional currents have tended to be underplayed' by historians, she argues, even though they were crucial in the dissemination of the ideals of reform. Personal contacts and visits to the sites and personalities associated with the new trends in monasticism facilitated the spreading of these movements and, in this, Malachy's continental journeys and the network of contacts he established are typical of mid-twelfth-century monastic reform initiatives. She considers recent scholarly developments in the study of the emergence of the Cistercian order. Too much stress should not be placed on the colonising activities of the Cistercians in Ireland. Very often, their foundations incorporated existing pre-reform institutions. In 1199 the Cistercian community of *Rosea Vallis* sought permission from the Cîteaux general chapter to celebrate the feast of St Éimíne, illustrating perfectly the principles of reform: the promotion of the new ideals of monastic order, the recovery of the pure charism of the original foundation, and all done with the permission of the central authority.

This incorporation of existing communities and loyalties was itself, Flanagan asserts, 'a reformist strategy' (134). She also examines Malachy's role in the promotion of the Augustinian rule and Arrouaisian observances, and interprets the presence of Arrouaisian canons at episcopal sees in Ireland as a means of ensuring that property vested in episcopal sees would not be alienated. Since a key aim of the reformers

was the securing of episcopal property for the church, and tying the hands of rapacious bishops who might seek to alienate it, the promotion of such communities by Malachy fits in well with the reformers' aims. Flanagan cites the case in 1102 of Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury, writing to bishop Samuel Ua hAingliu of Dublin reminding him that the books, vestments, and ornaments given by Lanfranc to bishop Donngus were not bestowed as personal gifts; they were to be considered the property of the church of Dublin. It is possible to see here, yet again, the reiteration of principles that are found in the earliest stages of Irish Christianity. Early Irish canon law, the *Collectio hibernensis*, compiled before the year 725, sets out the property that the *princeps* may hold, but how the property of the church he governs is to be overseen by a minister (*CH* 37, 12–13). *CH* 37.39 says that the ecclesiastical leader should not think property given to him in his capacity as *princeps* belongs to him; it is the church's (*De eo, quod non debet princeps putare proprium, quod sibi donatur, sed ecclesiae*). Flanagan draws attention to a similar provision in *CH* 1.21 governing the bishop's entitlements to property, and his duty to act in consultation with his clerics. Far from being a reflex of the backward-looking nature of the reform movement, this was a reiteration of core Christian teaching on property, and on the corrupting influence acquisitive churchmen have on the institution. The improper disposition of church temporalities was, after all, why the reformers felt a radical overhaul of the institution was necessary. In this context, Flanagan's observation (48) that 'the reassertion of ancient truth was itself a reformist strategy' is pertinent.

Other areas explored in this expansive study of the reform movement include the impact it had on features of life and community that can often be overlooked by historians: Malachy's attitudes to female spirituality and his policy for female monastic communities; warfare and reform; the influence of the continental Peace of God and Truce of God

movements on Irish reform (Flanagan's analysis here is intriguing and opens up many possible avenues for future research); marriage, and ecclesiastical attempts to regulate sexual practices; and the dramatic expansion in the potential population of heaven following changes in religious sensibilities of the twelfth century that conceded the possibility that even those not in holy orders can be saved.

This book has the virtue of being accessible; it makes the often dense argumentation of the primary sources intelligible without underplaying their sophistication. However, the approach is thematic and while the reform is always viewed in its political and social contexts, the focus is on the literary sources. It presumes an awareness on the part of the reader of the chronological progress of the reform. Probably for that reason, there is no treatment of the 'English intervention' (what was once called the Anglo-Norman invasion) of the 1160s, and the dramatic impact this must have had on the reform movement. In the introduction, Flanagan expresses the hope that her book will open up paths for future discussion. In expanding the temporal and literary contexts in which the twelfth-century reform of the church in Ireland can be examined, and by providing a methodology for the interpretation of the meagre surviving sources, this book should certainly achieve this aim. Those interested in the period 1000–1200 that witnessed some of the major turning points in Irish history are very much indebted to Professor Flanagan's book.

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