Since their formation in 1976, the Friends of Medieval Dublin have been an active force for public engagement with the city’s medieval past. Their annual springtime conferences, open and free to all, have provided a platform for cutting-edge interdisciplinary research, with a near-heroic publication schedule ensuring that these insights enter into academic discourse almost immediately. Simply put: thanks to the Friends of Medieval Dublin, we know more about the history, archaeology and heritage of Dublin in the Middle Ages than we do about the vast majority of European localities.

Open as its conferences are, they (and especially their proceedings) still maintain the elevated tone one expects of an academic conference. _Tales of Medieval Dublin_ is the product of an inspired decision taken by the Friends to engage even more deeply with the citizens of Dublin through a monthly series of lunchtime seminars, not only open to, but also aimed at the general public. Significantly, these were hosted by the Dublin City Council in its newly renovated Wood Quay Venue, protests against the building of which had prompted the formation of the Friends of Medieval Dublin in 1976. The seminars therefore took place in a highly-significant setting, and against the backdrop of a beautifully-preserved town wall dating to c.1100.

I am happy to report that this new form of public engagement has been accomplished without a diminution of the normal scholarly rigour one associates with the Friends of Medieval Dublin. Instead, subject experts have distilled their research into short ‘tales’, highlighting the diversity of characters who played upon Dublin’s medieval stage from the seventh to the seventeenth century. Taking the collection as a whole, one is able to appreciate not only the evolution of Dublin over a millennium,
but also of the nature of evidence available to those wishing to
reconstruct its past.

The first essay in the collection, ‘The Saint’s Tale’ by Seán Duffy, is
a case in point. Beginning from an evidential base comprising a mere six
words in the Annals of the Four Masters under the year 650: ‘St
Bearaidh, abbot of Duiblinn, died’ (7), Duffy embarks on an investigation
into the identity of Dublin’s first recorded saint. Less a tale about the
saint himself, this is instead a tale of the (often unrecorded) detective
work behind rigorous primary source criticism. As such, it is an ideal
introduction to the tools and methods of the historian’s craft. Moving
away from history, the next chapter, ‘The Skeleton’s Tale’, by Linzi
Simpson, provides an introduction to the archaeology of Viking Dublin,
the study of gravesites in particular. However, while Duffy’s chapter
warns of the dangers inherent in trying to reconstruct the past from
annalistic lacunae, Simpson provides a fascinating account of what can
be learned from the close scrutiny of a burial in context. Through her
study of ‘Eric’ the Viking, she is thus able to suggest a redating of the
first Viking overwintering in Dublin to 841, and that Dublin might have
been a significant part of the insular Viking world from the very
beginning. The interconnectedness of that world is highlighted in Poul
Holm’s ‘The Slave’s Tale’. Using DNA, annalistic and hagiographical
evidence, Holm illustrates the thriving Viking slave trade that helped to
connect Dublin to the world through the story of one slave: the
Leinsterman, St Fintan.

Howard Clarke’s contribution, ‘The Mother’s Tale’, presents a
markedly different picture of Leinster–Dublin interaction by profiling the
life of Gormlaith, a Leinsterwoman and mother of Sitric Silkenbeard, who
married (in turn) the Viking king of Dublin, Óláfr Sigtryggsson, (perhaps)
Mael Sechnaill of Mide, and the famous high king, Brian Bóruma. While
recreating turn of the millennium Ireland, Clarke is more willing than the
previous authors to provide a commentary for his audience on the disparity between medieval and modern Dublin: ‘in those days celebrity arose from social status and from genuine force of personality, rather than being artificially media-driven as it now tends to be.’ With this approach, Clarke uses Gormlaith’s life as a window into the role of women in early medieval Ireland, situated in the context of north-western Europe. (53). In ‘The Farmer’s Tale’, Charie N. Peters does the exact opposite, using what we know about the farming population of eleventh-century Ireland in general to reconstruct the life of a fictional farming couple. In the process, she describes the day-to-day lives of the majority of medieval Ireland’s population. Peters also uses her editorial privilege to draw upon the insights of other contributors to the volume, which strengthens the force of her contribution.

Jumping forward in time a century and a half, our first glimpse of a native-born Dubliner (unless ‘Eric’ the Viking was one) comes in Áine Foley’s ‘The Tax Collector’s Tale’. This tale focuses on the late thirteenth-century tax collector for King Edward I, Thomas de Crumlin (born just outside the walls). Foley’s chapter shows the profound change that the English conquest had on the social structure of Dublin (not to mention the evidential base available to historians) as she weaves together the history of the Crumlin/Russell family in Co. Dublin and Worcestershire, England. Margaret Murphy’s ‘The Archdeacon’s Tale’ focuses on one of Thomas de Crumlin’s contemporaries, Nicholas de Clere, who was archdeacon of Dublin from 1287 to 1303. This is a fascinating chapter which explores the much-maligned office of archdeacon. As Gerald of Wales remarks: ‘the devil steals men’s souls but the archdeacon steals their money’ (85). How appropriate that Nicholas was King Edward I’s treasurer of Ireland from 1285 until 1291, when he was removed (and eventually imprisoned in London) for embezzlement. Another tale showing how entwined the spiritual and secular were in late-thirteenth
century Dublin is Edward Coleman’s ‘The Crusader’s Tale’. Coleman uses the career of the prior of the Knights Hospitaller in Ireland, William Fitzrodger, as a case study in the Irish experience of crusading. Through it we see an order deeply entwined with the colonial administration, and often utilised as the king of England’s soldiers against the Irish. Indeed, it is quite telling that the man Nicholas de Clere (from the previous tale) replaced as royal treasurer of Ireland in 1285 was Stephen de Fulbourn, a brother Hospitaller.

In ‘The Wife’s Tale’, Gillian Kenny interrogates the will of one Giliana de Moenis, who died as the Black Death spread across Ireland in 1348. Kenny combines her analysis with an evocative writing style to bring to life the day-to-day concerns of a fourteenth-century noblewoman. A much different life is sketched out by Michael O’Neill in ‘The Mason’s Tale’, which profiles the Dublin-based mason, John More. This is an exploration of medieval Dublin’s infrastructure, and the level of expertise required to maintain it. O’Neill ends his tale with the intriguing suggestion that a carving of a mason’s head in St Patrick’s cathedral might be a portrait of his subject, John More himself. Moving into the fifteenth century, Caoimhe Whelan’s ‘The Notary’s Tale’ reconstructs the career of James Yonge, a Dublin-based legal professional who, as a notary, witnessed, drafted and recorded legal instruments. Whelan delves into the responsibilities of a medieval notary, but also goes into greater detail about Yonge’s special commission to provide for the earl of Ormond a Hiberno-Middle English translation of the pseudo-Aristotelian treatise on statecraft and ethics (among other things), *Secreta Secretorum*. Whelan shows how Yonge ‘freely adapted the prose to his purpose and his patron’ (130), adding a history of Ireland and a justification for English rule there.

A similar justification for English rule in Ireland is at the heart of Sparky Booker’s ‘The Knight’s Tale’, but by the early sixteenth century
the question of ‘which English?’ was an open one. The knight of the title is Christopher St Lawrence, baron of Howth and author of the famous Book of Howth. Booker uses the Book of Howth, which she shows was an attempt to validate the position of the resident Anglo-Irish settlers as the rightful rulers of Ireland, as a window into the complex world of English identity in the waning of the Middle Ages. St Lawrence, as a member of an ‘Old English’ conquest family, resented the importation of ‘New English’ officials from England to rule. He is portrayed as an unsavoury, yet pitiable character clinging to an old order and identity as both were being challenged. Ireland’s changing political and religious order brought new challenges to the Dublin administration, as Colm Lennon describes in his ‘The Man of Law’s Tale’. Lennon profiles a speaker of the Irish House of Commons, James Stanihurst (father of the more famous Richard), who was faced with pressing conflicts of loyalties during the Reformation and the Kildare rebellion. What emerges is the image of a public-spirited lawyer dedicated to humanistic reform, who ‘believed in the efficacy of learning and education to promote moral and social improvement’ (160).

If the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century crises analysed in the previous three tales were not enough evidence of the profound changes gripping Dublin at the end of the Middle Ages, the topic of Katherine Simms’s contribution, ‘The Poet’s Tale’, certainly is. As Simms herself admits ‘Dublin was the last place in Ireland you would expect to meet a bardic poet’ (163-4). However, the presence of Maoilín Óg Mac Bruidhea at Queen Elisabeth’s new university, Trinity College Dublin (founded 1592) is emblematic of the evolving nature of Irish academia at the turn of the seventeenth century. Simms provides an overview of the lives of bardic poets in the Middle Ages, before exploring the transformations that altered their world. She concludes that Mac Bruidhea ‘was one of an
important group of scholars who bridged the cultural gap and transmitted the learning of the past into our modern world’ (174).

As with all edited volumes, there is the question of how these assembled essays work as a collection. In this regard, the editors (and organisers of the seminar series) deserve high praise for providing fourteen distinct, yet interrelated, ‘tales’ that work well as a whole. Whether a result of editorial guidance, or simply the current direction of medieval studies, each tale addresses the broad theme of change over time while also looking well beyond Dublin for its context. Medieval Dublin is therefore much more alive on the pages of this volume than it might otherwise have been.

*Tales of Medieval Dublin* is therefore a remarkably coherent volume, but there are two minor points of criticism that might be made. The first concerns the tone of the volume. The authors, though aiming at a general audience, have not adopted a uniform voice while doing so. So, while some, such as ‘The Saint’s Tale’, ‘The Tax Collector’s Tale’ and ‘The Notary’s Tale’, would not be out of place in a first-year undergraduate seminar, others, such as ‘The Mother’s Tale’ and ‘The Farmer’s Tale’ are much more informal. Some also assume a degree of knowledge about the Middle Ages, others none. Such is the nature of edited collections.

The second point of criticism concerns coverage. Admittedly, it might be crass to ask for more from so diverse a collection, but for a volume on one of Europe’s key trading centres there is remarkably little on the economy. In this regard, it is a pity that the original seminar series’ ‘The Merchant’s Tale’ could not be included. Had it been, it might have also plugged a gap in the book’s chronology. Although the volume runs from the seventh to the seventeenth century, there is a break in analysis from about 1100 until 1270. This was a highly significant time for the city, when it was elevated to de facto capital of Ireland by competing high kings, conquered by the invading English (who granted it
to the men of Bristol), and established as the centre of colonial rule in Ireland. In a volume which has change as a central theme, it would have been useful to have addressed the period containing what are arguably (from my admittedly biased perspective) the most profound changes Dublin experienced in the Middle Ages.

These minor criticisms are of the sort that can be made of just about any edited collection, and should not detract from what is still a very impressive volume. The contributors are to be applauded for providing such accessible yet scholarly tales to the general public, and Sparky Booker and Cherie N. Peters deserve a great deal of credit for bringing them together as a coherent whole.

Colin Veach
University of Hull
c.veach@hull.ac.uk