

Elva Johnston, *Literacy and Identity in Early Medieval Ireland*, Studies in Celtic History 33. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013. 248pp., £60 / \$99. ISBN: 978-1-84383-855-5

In this fine book, Elva Johnston addresses head-on questions long debated among students of early Ireland regarding the identity of the literate elite responsible for producing the surviving texts from the period. She does so by contextualizing Irish history within the broader world of late antiquity and the early middle ages, thus highlighting features common to Ireland and her neighbours — such as their status as secondary-oral societies — while simultaneously clarifying what was unique about the Irish experience, including the absence of urban infrastructure upon which literacy depended elsewhere. Another important aspect of her approach is that she acknowledges that early Ireland was not the archaic, static society it has sometimes been imagined to have been, but culturally, economically and politically dynamic. In doing so, Johnston demonstrates that the literate elite was not a unified, homogeneous group, but one characterized by variety in origin, composition and outlook. She also shows how members of the group responded to changing circumstances, redefining their roles to meet the needs of the times. The discussion is informed by contemporary theory and grounded in an impressive knowledge of a variety of medieval texts of different genres.

The first chapter explicitly aims to situate ‘Irish literacy in a Late Antique context’, which includes acknowledging that Ireland participated in the processes of romanization and conversion as they played out in areas beyond the borders of the Roman Empire. It introduces themes important for the rest of the book, including the implications of recognizing the secondary-oral nature of early Irish society and the diversity that existed within the learned elite. The following chapters address related themes.

Chapter Two explores Irish responses to literacy from the beginning of the seventh to the middle of the ninth century. It emphasizes the

interconnectedness of Latin and vernacular literacy while highlighting the distinct nature of the relationship of each with the spoken vernacular. Latin was an international language and enabled Irishmen to participate in the wider world of scholarship. Vernacular literacy, on the other hand, bridged the gap between literate and oral communities within Ireland.

Chapter Three is all about social change, including the consolidation of political power and the associated demise of the *tuath*, and the ways in which the literate elite adapted to it. One sign of this was a concentration of literacy into a smaller number of communities of learning based in larger monasteries. Concurrently, the balance between Latin and vernacular literacy altered dramatically, as Irish become the more common language of literate expression. Johnston relates this to the monasteries' desire for patronage, which saw them shift their interests toward genres — and language — of greater interest to the secular political elite. One way they did this was by shaping and articulating social, cultural and political identities on the island, including through the writing down of genealogies that helped justify political power. This argument is pursued further in the following chapter, where focus shifts towards the annals as a source of information. Johnston argues that the annals can offer a perspective on the identities and activities of the learned elite grounded in historical reality, against which we can balance the more theoretical descriptions of their roles provided by legal texts. This argument does not quite fully address the difficulties presented by the annals as sources, but nonetheless offers an interesting complement to other approaches. Much of the chapter is given over to an examination of the titles borne by learned men in the annals: the Latin terms *sapiens*, *doctor* and *scriba* gradually fall out of use over the course of the ninth century, while vernacular terms including *ecnaid* and *fer léigind* begin to appear, a shift Johnston sees as reflecting not simply as semantic or linguistic, but related to historical changes occurring in the communities of learning to which the individuals belonged. She contends that the concentration of ecclesiastical and

political power and the increased desire for patronage precipitated a shift among the literate elite toward new roles more closely engaged with native traditions.

This was facilitated, Johnston argues in Chapter Five, by the existence of a secular literate class, namely the *filid*. These poets and guardians of native tradition operated at the intersection of the oral and literate worlds. They therefore became more visible and prominent in the sources from the ninth century, during which period the sources demonstrate a concern with integrating native tradition with that of the Bible. Citing the historical example of Colmán mac Lénéni and the legendary example of Dubthach moccu Lugair, Johnston argues for the identity of the *filid* as secular members of the learned elite, whose origins lay outside the ecclesiastical sphere but who were linked with it in productive dialogue. They may have been hired by monasteries, she suggests, or have entered monasteries later in life, but their status as *filid* was distinct from that as monks or clerics. Through the production of vernacular texts in various genres, they played a vital role in the construction of secular identities and engaged in a remarkable way with the pre-Christian past. Understanding why they did so, Johnston argues, means looking at the historical context they worked in, rather than searching for theological justifications. This raises once again the importance of recognizing the secondary-oral context within which the literate elite operated in early Ireland, which is the topic of the final chapter. Surviving texts existed within early Irish society, not in juxtaposition to it, and their composition, transmission and performance were shaped by how the aristocratic and literate elite interacted.

In part, this book is responding to the debate within the discipline between positions labelled ‘nativist’ and ‘anti-nativist’. In brief, the nativist position is characterized by the belief that there was a considerable degree of continuity between the learned class of the pre-Christian period and that of the post-conversion era. As a result of the fact that oral traditions

underpin many of the vernacular narrative tales that survive from this period, the nativists believe that these can provide insight into the culture of the pagan period. In reaction to this belief, the anti-nativists have argued that literacy in early Ireland was dominated entirely by the Church, whose thoroughly Christianized personnel were responsible for composing as well as writing down all surviving texts. These therefore offer insight only into the concerns of the ecclesiastical elite and their allies among the secular aristocracy, and not any traditional beliefs. From the outset, Johnston expresses her dissatisfaction with both positions, pointing to what she sees as the irony of the anti-nativists' replacement of a uniquely 'Celtic' Ireland with an alternative that was equally exceptional for the speed and thoroughness of its conversion. Johnston argues for something like a middle ground, according to which literacy was not the exclusive preserve of churchmen, but extended also to secular *filid*, whose origins as a class likely lay in the pre-Christian period but who rapidly won acceptance within the Christian context.

There are aspects of Johnston's approach that might be questioned. For instance, she does not deal in any depth with the written vernacular legal tradition, the early date of which would seem to lend it importance as an early example of vernacular literacy: some of the surviving law tracts date to the middle or third quarter of the seventh century. This is perhaps related to the fact that she draws what is likely too hard and fast a distinction between poetry and narrative literature, on the one hand, and the laws, on the other, and seems to accept the anti-nativist position that the native legal tradition was absorbed entirely by the church while arguing that the *filid* remained distinct. This seems at odds with early references in the Old Irish glossing to the *Senchas Már*, to the role of *filid* as custodians of legal tradition, for example. (Some of the surviving law tracts date to the middle or third quarter of the seventh century.) But it does not detract in any significant way from the value of the work as a whole.

This is an important piece of scholarship that makes many real contributions to the field. It has great value for illuminating an important part of early Irish culture. Furthermore, all who study early Irish history and culture through documentary sources view it through the eyes of the literate individuals who produced the surviving texts. A better understanding of their identity, their changing roles and, above all, the importance of setting them in their appropriate contexts therefore enhances our understanding of the sources upon which so many of us rely.

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