

Eric Haywood, *Fabulous Ireland — Ibernia Fabulosa: Imagining Ireland in Renaissance Italy*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2014. 293pp. €66.95. ISBN 978-3-0353-9847-2

Ireland does not readily spring to mind when the Renaissance is discussed. Indeed, Eric Haywood's first task in *Fabulous Ireland — Ibernia Fabulosa* is to convince us that those in Renaissance Italy knew something about Ireland. The second is to prove that what they thought about Ireland is worth exploring even if many of the intellectuals of the Renaissance were themselves relatively disinterested in the island. One powerful example of Renaissance interest in Ireland comes from Petrarch, the poet known as the 'father of Humanism'. Nicknamed 'Woody' to his friends, on reading in Gerald of Wales's twelfth-century *History and Topography of Ireland* that the island was free from thunder and lightning, the serious astraphobe scribbled in the margins of his book an urgent call to action: '*vade illuc siluane, q[ui] stas*'/'Go there, Woody! What are you waiting for?' (71). Gerald added '*Silvestre*' to his own name (after the prophetic Merlin Silvestre), and although Haywood does not comment on the Tuscan Woody's probable enjoyment of the pun on his name '*Silvane*' or suggest what possible connotations Gerald's depiction of a wooded Ireland with its rural inhabitants shunning cities might have held for Petrarch, the identification of the copy of Gerald's work owned by the poet is valuable.

For Irish medievalists, the interest shown by Petrarch in this important work is perhaps one of the most exciting revelations of the present monograph. When we learn that Petrarch lent the book to his friend Boccaccio, it seems that there may be some good stories to be found in tracing the oftentimes illusive network of book circulation and exploring how Renaissance intellectuals envisaged Ireland. Sadly, in this case, it fails to generate much by the way of direct literary impact. If the great poet did read the loaned book, it does not appear to have stimulated his creative juices. Ireland features just once, briefly, in his epic *Decameron*. Nonetheless, Eric Haywood's book is packed with such curious and

interesting facts, some familiar, others more obscure, and he deftly navigates a vast quantity of sources which illuminate the variety of ways that Italian humanists envisaged Ireland.

The book is concerned with how Ireland appeared to those in Renaissance Italy, how the humanists of Italy learned about the island, and the purposes to which such narratives can be put. Haywood posits that absolute truth is an impossibility: ‘never *about* somebody or something, but always truth *for* somebody or something’ (7). With this in mind, he deals with those conjuring up impressions of Ireland in Renaissance Italy. Haywood describes this process as ‘imagining’ Ireland, noting the frequent flights of fancy undertaken by scholars and writers in relation to the island, and he offers a catalogue of texts and authors in Italy who wrote on the topic, however briefly, from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries.

Haywood is a literary scholar and Italianist, and his previous scholarship on Ireland in both Italian and English literature, makes him well placed to discuss the presence of Ireland in Renaissance Italy. Primary sources dominate the book and offer a grand sweep of both Classical and Renaissance literary sources in Italy. Haywood’s focus is on the impressions conjured up by the words of ancient or Renaissance writers. This is admirable, although a representation of Ptolemy’s map of Ireland at a decent scale would have aided discussion of locations (Nicolaus Germanus’s fifteenth-century map after Ptolemy is rendered too small on the front cover to be useful). Regrettably, primary quotations are translated into English in the text while the original is buried in chapter endnotes. Arguably, this makes the prose more fluid but hinders the scholar. Moreover, the curious clumping of references at the end of a paragraph rather than by sentence, allied to a cumbersome author/date reference system in endnotes, send the reader scurrying to the bibliography and significantly slow down progress through the chapters. There are, however, interesting and innovative structural features in the

book. Prefacing each chapter with a chronological roll-call of the primary sources discussed is particularly helpful. The index division under the headings: 'Authors', 'Fictional and Mythical Characters', 'Historical Characters and Events', 'Ireland', 'Places' and 'Themes', is also useful.

The challenge is to identify and explain what humanist scholars in Italy thought of Ireland or of the various Irelands. With almost ninety primary sources listed in the Bibliography, such variation is unsurprising. Marshalling these sources into a coherent narrative is a feat in itself. Haywood presents the book as a language-game about language-games and describes it as an old jigsaw puzzle constructed over two centuries. Never is this more evident than in the opening chapter which deals with geography, a discipline radically transformed in the Renaissance period. Tracing how the born-again Romans of Italy gaze upon the world with 'imperious eyes' (8) (i.e. seeing the world through the prism of power and empire) Haywood charts how classical authorities influenced Renaissance scholars engaged in cosmography (history of the world), chorography (histories of various regions), as well as a range of other types of written sources, both fact and fiction. Chapters Two and Four touch a little on travel writing and the transmission of knowledge (including the work of Gerald of Wales as well as references to pilgrims and potential pilgrims to Ireland), while Chapters Five and Six focus on how descriptions of Ireland were used for various purposes by individual writers. Particularly interesting is the exploration of how the cosmological enterprises warranted by the discovery of the New World and the struggle for control over rhetoric and truth reveals the imperialist nature of humanism.

As Haywood acknowledges, Ireland has often been considered marginal to Renaissance studies, and few Renaissance intellectuals would argue differently. Haywood has painstakingly collated Renaissance references to Ireland, good and bad, and traced many to the classical authorities which remained important repositories and sources of knowledge for Renaissance intellectuals. There is plenty here to keep one

entertained, if not heartened, regarding the perceived status of Ireland in either classical or Renaissance intellectual thought. Strabo's (c.63 BC–24 AD) dismissal of Ireland in his *Geography* is perhaps the most devastating: 'there would be no advantage in knowing such countries and their inhabitants ... they can neither injure nor benefit us in any way because of their isolation' (36). Pope Pius II, Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini (1405–64), comes a close second with his damning description of *Hibernia* in *De Europa* (1458): '...benefitting from the friendship and the alliance of the Scots, and partly subject to English rule, but since nothing worth remembering has taken place there, we understand, during the period we write about, we hurry on to matters Spanish' (28–9).

Other authors paid Ireland more attention: the Florentine humanist Domenico Silvestri (c.1335–1411) devotes over seven pages to Ireland (comprising five separate entries of marvels heavily reliant on Gerald of Wales) in his work on islands, *De insulis et earum proprietatibus*, which forms an appendix to Silvestri's version of Boccaccio's *De Montibus* (81). The entry on Ireland is superseded in length only by that on Sicily. Haywood paints a complex picture of transmission of knowledge about Ireland from the classical to Renaissance periods. These pen-vignettes of Ireland are oftentimes contradictory, and there is enough contextual information offered about various writers and intellectuals, particularly in the early chapters, to allow those not entirely familiar with the material (and it is vast) to keep pace.

This *longue-durée* approach — from classical to Renaissance literature — helps us to understand how depictions of Ireland developed, but the value of this approach makes the rather cursory overview of depictions of Ireland in Italy from the medieval period rather puzzling. Haywood writes that, apart from St Patrick's purgatory, 'Irish saints and scholars appear to have been erased from the collective memory of Italians in the Renaissance' (16). Yes, Renaissance scholars looked to classical literature for guidance, but the medieval heritage was not obliterated

overnight. Indeed, there are tantalising glimpses of early medieval Irishmen referenced in the book, such as St Cataldus/San Cataldo (St Cathal), patron saint of Taranto in southern Italy, and St Donatus/San Donato, bishop of Fiesole from 826–77. Haywood suggests that the latter was ‘probably the most revered Irishman in Italy?’ (27). Given the lengthy descriptions and context often provided for Renaissance authors only tangentially interested in Ireland, further comment on once prominent medieval Irishmen’s cults and status would not have been out of place. Elsewhere he tells us that St Cataldus was recognised as having come from Ireland but suggests, in the eyes of a sixteenth-century writer, that he has become ‘an *Italian* saint and scholar’ (247): this suggestion of a changing identity is interesting and perhaps deserving of more space for discussion.

As well as focusing on the island of Ireland rather than the Irish, the book is focused firmly on texts and written sources, and this valid methodological approach may have restricted Haywood’s dealings with such medieval cults, traditions, or indeed identities connected with Ireland. The medieval heritage is not entirely ignored, and here he acknowledges the endurance of a number of links between Ireland and Italy. The elements which receive the most substantial attention are the aforementioned text of Gerald of Wales (Chapter Two), and one of the most famous sites of medieval Europe, St Patrick’s Purgatory in Lough Derg (Chapter Four).

Haywood opens the book noting that Italian has the same word for history and story, ‘*storia*’, and in the discussion of the Purgatory he weaves accounts of historical pilgrims and more fanciful accounts of actual pilgrims and armchair enthusiasts from Italy. These range from literal (or imagined) descents into the underworld to fictional nods to Ireland’s main tourist attraction: Ruggiero’s flying horse in the great Renaissance epic of Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* (first published in 1516) carries him over ‘fabulous Hibernia where the little old saint had made the cave [i.e., St Patrick’s Purgatory] in which there seems to be such grace that man

can purge his every wicked sin' (130). A fascinating mix of history and fiction, other Irish aspects of *Orlando Furioso* are worth noting, and a more sustained discussion would have been welcome, particularly in light of Haywood's interest in the stories that people tell and the ways they can alter received narratives. For instance, the portrayal of the earls of Kildare, Ormond and Desmond as Irishmen in the Carolingian period is interesting. Historically, their Anglo-Norman ancestors arrived in Ireland in the late twelfth century and identified as 'English'; they were certainly not the Gaelic men so prominent at the Carolingian court centuries earlier. This pseudo-historical representation of them raises many questions about the author's knowledge of Ireland and her people, past and present, as well as his reliance on medieval sources.

Given the focus of *Fabulous Ireland*, it is not necessary to chart the medieval links between Ireland and Italy, although it seems remiss to overlook both the strong economic links (vibrant trade, banking, etc.) as well as the rich literary tradition beyond St Patrick's Purgatory. Of course, not all of this material could or should be explored in a book examining what Renaissance intellectuals knew about Ireland, but such omissions give a rather misleading perception that presents Ireland as more of an unknown entity than was perhaps the case. Most noticeably, there is a wealth of late medieval literature circulating in Italy which no doubt influenced Renaissance intellectuals' perception of Ireland even if it offers representations of a mythical Ireland for dramatic purposes. Renaissance scholars did not *only* read the classical authors and Gerald of Wales, and they perhaps knew more about Ireland than they bothered to write down. The story of St Brendan's Voyage, hugely popular among Venetians, is mentioned here in passing, but there is no reference to the story of Tristan and the Irish princess Isolde, arguably the most popular story of the middle ages and so popular in late medieval Italy that it spawned hundreds of textual variants and artistic representations of the knight and his adventures in Ireland and with the Irish princess. These include many

vernacular versions of the story in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries in the Tuscan-Umbrian and Venetian dialects. It would have been interesting to hear whether this story had any influence on Ariosto; *Orlando's* hero also travels to Ireland on his adventures. It is worth pointing out that Haywood states that the book will gloss over the multitude of dialects of Italy (a land which did not yet exist as a political entity). Presumably such generalisations are to aid the general or undergraduate reader, but they raise questions about privileging accessibility over accuracy.

Haywood saves one of the most bizarre references to Ireland for his conclusion. He explains that in *Asinus/The Ass*, the play of Giovanni Pontano (1422–1503), travellers from Ireland seek proof that the Pope is indeed a holy father, a fact rather comically confirmed when they learn he is presiding over the wedding of his son and the birth of a daughter. He tells us that the characters debate whether Irish travellers in Naples are ‘*Hiberni*’ (Irish) or ‘*Britanni*’ (British) or ‘*Britannissimi*’ (as Haywood translates it: *über*-Brits) to ascertain how much they will drink. Haywood suggests their discussion implies confusion regarding the identity of Ireland’s inhabitants, but it raises the possibility, surely, that these three options indicates some understanding of the complexity of identity in Ireland where the (Gaelic) Irish, the so-called ‘English of Ireland’, and the ‘English of England’ could be found? Moreover, the use of ‘*Scotia*’ in the play may be a reference to the old name for Ireland rather than evidence that they were confusing Ireland for Scotland and may thus demonstrate knowledge rather than ignorance.

So what did Renaissance-age Italians think of Ireland? According to Haywood, not a lot, generally. He suggests that there is no clear pattern to the way in which impressions of Ireland developed in Italy. The material gathered here presents an array of perspectives and glimpses of Ireland which help to piece together the picture, but we are only peering at fragmentary images. Haywood points out that he is not interested in attempting to verify whether what was said about Ireland was true, and

this does little to detract from his main aim, although some of his interpretations should perhaps be questioned. Nonetheless, even those familiar with some of the sources Haywood explores here are likely to find new information, and it will undoubtedly introduce new sources to many readers, literary scholars and historians with an interest in depictions of Ireland and texts in Italy. Some of the material has been explored by Haywood elsewhere, much of it in Italian, and thus this book opens up that scholarship to the general reader. There are fascinating nuggets of information scattered liberally throughout the book and the early chapters in particular are riveting. Since the publication of *Fabulous Ireland*, other scholars have explored Ireland in the Renaissance more generally, which allow us to paint a more complete picture of for this period. *Fabulous Ireland* explores a treasure-trove of stories and Haywood outlines the influence of classical sources on Renaissance intellectuals well; however, the book would have benefited from engaging more fully with the enduring medieval heritage in order to provide a more accurate picture of Renaissance perceptions of Ireland.

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