
This collection of essays was formed through a conference on Celtic Hagiography and Saints’ Cults held at the University of Wales, Lampeter in September 2000. The majority of these papers were presented at the conference, and the remainder added subsequent to the organization of this publication. Each of these essays presents a case study from a representative sample of the Celtic regions. The collection of fifteen articles visits on various aspects of the cult of saints in Wales, Ireland, Brittany, Scotland and Cornwall. In addition, the historians also shed light on the veneration of local saints and highlight the importance of vernacular hagiography and the cults of universal saints in the Celtic-speaking regions. The book covers a broad range of time, from the mid-fourth century to the early twentieth century, with a focus on the medieval period and the hagiographical texts and traditions of the Celtic saints. While the evidential basis does emphasize the hagiographical documentation, other sources, such as legendaries, native poetry, songs, shrines, relics, holy wells, church dedications, and archaeological and visual evidence are also examined.

Of primary interest, to those keen on any specific Celtic area, is the use of the word Celtic to conjoin different geographical areas through a common cultural inheritance. This is an interesting response to two movements within British historiography. The first movement recognized the Anglo-centric nature of British historiography, which relegated cultures not of Anglo-Saxon/Norman to a secondary role. R.R. Davies was one of the first to suggest that the geographic emphasis on England promoted an imbalanced interpretation of *British* history when it was instead an *English* history. Yet, other British countries do not escape this criticism unscathed, since “Irish, Scottish and Welsh historians seem so often intent on cultivating their own corners, rather than communicating with a wider historical world.” This collection of essays attempts to bring together case studies
from all Celtic areas, and to confront the issue of geographical isolationism and the resultant marginalization of surrounding areas.

This collection also reacts to a secondary debate on the issue of Celticism. Each of these countries are connected through a shared Celtic culture, yet this term has since been attributed a more diverse definition. Romantic medievalism and studies in Arthuriana have both acted to broaden the scope in Celtic studies.

There are four articles which focus on saints’ cults in Wales, including “St. David and St Davids: Some Observations on the Cult, Site and Buildings,” by J. Wyn Evans, “Welsh Hagiography and the Nationalist Impulse,” by Elissa R. Henken, “Twelfth-Century Welsh Hagiography: The Gogynfeirdd poems to saints,” by Nerys Ann Jones and Morfydd E. Owen, and “The harlot and the hostess: a preliminary study of the Middle Welsh Lives of Mary Magdalene and her sister Martha,” by Jane Cartwright. While Wynn Evans confronted the issue of reconciling the disparity between the dates of St. David’s life and the cults, which developed on the basis of various vitae, Henkin focussed more on the connections between St. David Cults burgeoning Welsh nationalism. The issue of nationalism is not distinct to Wales, and can be found within the foundation to various saints’ cults throughout Celtic Britain. Jones, Owen and Cartwright expand their examination beyond Wales to Brittany and universal saints.

Patricius Vitae, and the results of combining their lives into one mythology. O’Loughlin revisits the St. Patrick in the Muichu Vitae within a political context, as well as the interpretive knowledge the vitae presents on pre-Christian Irish culture. Bray’s examination of the earliest Irish Vitae take her out of Ireland and into Merovingian Europe and the hagiographic tropes established there. Wooding’s exploration of the Cult of St. Brendan examines narrative issues in the Nauigatio. The origins of the Culdee sects in later medieval Scotland may be found in this Irish saint’s Vitae.

For those interested in Celtic culture in Brittany, Bernard Merdrignac contributed to this collection “The Process and Significance of rewriting in Breton Hagiography,” in addition to Mary-Ann Constantine’s work on “Saints Behaving Badly: Sanctity and Transgression in Breton Popular Culture.” Merdrignac explores the issues of hagiographic tradition as interpreted in Breton literature, beginning with the etymological and philological origins of hagiography. While Constantine’s work on popular attitudes of Cult adherents to patron saints presents a microhistorical examination that provides scope for further examination outside Breton society.

At this point in the book there has been some reference to Scotland, and Thomas Owen Clancy’s article, “Magpie Hagiography in Twelfth-century Scotland: the case of Libellus de nativitate Sancti Cuthberti,” and an article by Penelope Dransart, “Saints, Stones and Shrines: The Cults of Sts Moluaq and Gerardine in Pictland,” illustrate the closer examination of Scottish saints’ cults. The two articles span the sixth century to the twelfth, and focus on the interconnections between hagiographic tradition and the development of saints’ cults. Interesting, I think, is the representation of Pictish culture and later Anglo-Scottish society.

The purpose of this collection is to examine the interconnections between the hagiography and saints’ cults of various Celtic nations, and I believe that it has, at least in part, succeeded. Though the individual regions are specifically segregated within the collection, there are also many instances where geographical borders are transgressed by hagiographic tradition and the veneration of saints. These practices were
developed in spite of political climate, and sometimes due to political climate. Cartwright’s purpose is admirably met, and the collective effort presents an arguably cohesive presentation of consistent pan-Celtic hagiographic traditions and saints’ cults.

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