Bradley's newest effort provides a welcome addition to the bookshelf of anyone with an interest in Celtic history, theology, or the issues surrounding cultural myth-making. The topic of Celtic Christianity has for centuries attracted considerable interest among diverse groups of people who, as Bradley emphasizes, have tended to be of non-Celtic ancestry and with a set of political and religious agendas that have leaned heavily upon Celtic tradition. In addressing the reasons for this enduring appeal, Bradley identifies six distinct movements of Celtic Christian revivalism, spanning the period from the eighth century to the present. He also detects a number of common themes which link the motivations and aspirations of those most deeply involved in each of the revivals. He does not take up the contentious and ultimately futile debate concerning the definition of Celtic Christianity or the “Celtic Church”, but concentrates instead on tracing the development of these concepts within popular consciousness.

Bradley identifies the fifth to the mid-seventh centuries as the essential core of Celtic Christian revivalism. The founding period of Christianity in Celtic Britain, these centuries witnessed the missionary and evangelizing activities of the early Church in the British Isles. The spiritual vitality which characterized this “age of saints”, combined with a dearth of documentary or archaeological evidence for the period, laid the foundations for a centuries-long pattern of idealization and appropriation of the story of the early “Celtic Church”. The hagiographers of the eighth and ninth centuries were motivated politically to enhance the reputations of the early Celtic saints and, by weaving
fantastic accounts of their sanctity and power, added greatly to
the prestige of the monastic houses which the increasingly-
legendary saints were supposed to have founded, and claimed
monastic origins independent of direct Roman influence. Nostal-
gia for a purer age of great beginnings also contributed to the
high esteem in which these figures were held, and also gave rise
to the enduring popular perception of the early Celtic saint as an
individual in spiritual harmony with the primeval natural world.

Subsequent periods of revival, including the Anglo-Norman
period, the Reformation, the nineteenth century, and two sepa-
rate portions of the twentieth century, are regarded by Bradley
as echoing many of the preoccupations and themes evident in
the work of the early hagiographers. By associating themselves
with the Celtic saints, for example, the Anglo-Norman and
subsequent waves of English immigrants to Ireland attempted to
provide a sense of legitimacy to their occupation of the island,
and to soothe those disturbed by the increasing Anglicization
of Ireland. The Reformers identified the golden-age saints as
"proto-reformers", who had prefigured the independence and
doctrinal assertions of the sixteenth-century Reform movement,
thus removing the taint of foreignness that accompanied the
new religious values to the British Isles. The Romantic move-
ment seized upon Celtic cultural and spiritual traditions and
reinforced the old idealization of the supposedly peripheral,
natural, and spiritually pure character of the fifth and sixth century
Celtic saints.

Bradley argues that the twentieth-century revivals have con-
tinued to co-opt various elements of the native spiritual tradition
in order to further the aims of emerging special-interest groups,
such as environmentalists, feminists and New-Agers, but observes
that this trend has been balanced somewhat by increasing
academic participation in the exploration of Celtic culture.
Although many Christians (and non-Christians) at the turn of
the twentieth century have continued to project their own
spiritual, artistic and social agendas onto the earliest phase of
Celtic Christianity, their motivations seem to have become
somewhat less cynically exploitative than those of their predeces-
sors. Romanticized wishful thinking seems in large part to have
replaced the denominational propaganda that dominated the pre-Victorian revival movements.

Bradley’s careful accounting of the slow accretion of myths and misconceptions to the early history of Christianity in Celtic Britain is of significant value. He clearly demonstrates the extent to which the whole concept of Celtic Christianity, as it has become known to the world, consists primarily of the efforts of non-Celts to project their own ideals and fantasies onto the sparse record of the distant past. Bradley attempts to give equal treatment to the notion of Celtic Christianity as it developed in each Celtic area of Britain; if anything is lacking from his analysis, it is a fuller account of the precise means by which various generations of English propagandists, in particular, have sought to establish links between their own historic religious culture and that of the British Celts. The reader would also find himself more fully satisfied by Bradley’s study if a greater effort were made to illustrate the manner in which native Celts responded to these attempts to appropriate their religious culture. He succeeds, however, in maintaining his scholarly objectivity in the pursuit of a topic that tends to be emotionally-charged. Bradley’s book is rendered particularly useful by his impressive historiographical treatment of his subject, and his bibliography features the key works in the development of the concept of Celtic Christianity as well as a representative sample of the best and most innovative of modern academic treatments of the topic.

Mary E. Jarvis