H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Howard B. Clarke, Ruth Johnson, eds. *The Vikings in Ireland and Beyond: Before and After the Battle of Clontarf.* Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015. xxxiv + 526 pp. Ill. $70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84682-495-1.

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"Come fly with me / come sniff the wind" reads the poem by Seamus Heaney that opens this volume on the Vikings in Ireland and beyond, and this is an invitation likely to be taken up by many in the years to come.[1] The book, which has come out of a conference held in Dublin in 2011, counts no less than twenty-nine contributors who represent a balanced mix of leading scholars and early career researchers, of men and women, and of the various disciplines that concern themselves with the Vikings; these disciplines range from archaeology to art history, from literary analysis to historiography, and from studies of place-names to studies of costumes. Additionally, like the Vikings, these essays cover a wide geographical area between Ireland, the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, and Russia.

The editors of the volume, Howard B. Clarke and Ruth Johnson, not only contributed to it with their own essays, they also wrote an excellent introduction, which gives an overview of the history of the field and provides a solid framework within which all other essays may be placed. They stress, like many authors in the volume, the influence that the first edition in 1867 of the twelfth-century *Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaibh* (The War of the Irish with the Foreigners) had on both the scholarly community and the imagination of the general public. This text creates a propagandistic image of an Irish force bravely fighting off the fierce Vikings, and the authors remark that "the mind-set of a medieval propagandist and his audience was transmitted across the generations with astonishing ease" (p. 4). The introduction also points out how nationalist discourses and the confines of disciplines have influenced our understanding of Viking culture. The authors state, for example, that "in effect a conceptual barrier has been erected between archaeologists and historians that continues to obfuscate any attempt to understand the past on mutually acceptable terms" (p. 19). This may lead to very different results in each discipline, as in the case of the "10th-century hiatus" which seems to be present in the written sources of Ireland but not at all in its archaeology (p. 21). This demonstrates that, if the Vikings are to be studied successfully, an interdisciplinary approach is essential, and the inclusion of such diverse disciplines in this book is a step in that direction. That research on Viking Ireland is not without its dangers is demonstrated by one of the founding fathers of Viking studies, Charles Haliday, who "began to suffer from hallucinations and eventually lost the sight of one eye through excessive study" (p. 3). A useful health warning for those among us prone to overwork.

Chapters that might be particularly interesting to the readers of H-War are those that deal with the weapons and war tactics of the Vikings. Chapter 3, by Emer Purcell, for instance, on Viking raids and Viking bases suggests that Vikings had established bases in Ireland much earlier than previously suggested, based on the fact that they stole cattle on their raids for which they must have been able to provide pastures. While a rather speculative argument, dependent on two very brief annalistic entries, it provides an interesting new viewpoint on the material. Chapter 7, by Linzi Simpson, on a Viking warrior grave from Dublin is an excellently written piece that describes what can only have been the dream excavation of every archaeologist. Simpson focuses on one of the buried warriors and manages to bring the man to life through the results of osteological research and an analysis of the goods placed in the grave. An image emerges of a man whose "large and heavy bones reveal[ed] that he must have been a fearsome opponent in battle" but

who also "appears to have liked expensive and delicate objects" (p. 149). Chapter 8, on the Ballinderry bow, provides a full examination of the weapon for the first time and stresses the unique nature of the bow, which is 190 centimeters in length and may therefore be classified as a very early longbow. However, the author, Andy Halpin, also problematizes the concept of longbow and seems to leave the matter unresolved in the present essay. When considering the politics of war, chapters 14 and 15, by Máire Ní Mhaonaigh and Howard B. Clarke respectively, are not to be missed as they present a careful reading and thoughtful analysis of the available literary and historical material on the Battle of Clontarf and two of the leaders involved in this: Máel Sechnaill mac Domnaill and Sitriuc Silkenbeard. Both articles use a variety of primary sources to create a more nuanced picture of these two leaders, who have often been portrayed in a very one-dimensional way. In chapter 26, Catherine Swift argues that loanwords and the context in which they are used point to a military material culture that was much more mixed Irish/Viking than has previously been assumed, although this argument sometimes seems to be based on a rather careless approach to the primary sources. The excellent final essay, by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, demonstrates how many of the primary sources have generally been read the way people wanted them to be read, while they contain much more information for the careful reader. Of course, the Irish Annals describe many gruesome Viking raids, but they also describe an unbroken succession of abbots who often died peacefully or, if they did not, died at the hands of their countrymen rather than the Vikings. Additionally, there is no break in the production of genealogies or in the study of law tracts at the time of the Viking attacks or thereafter, rendering the idea of the "Great Catastrophe" obsolete.

For those with an interest in other matters relating to the Vikings, the volume has plenty to offer as well. For instance, chapter 4, on the Irish *longphoirt*, or shore fortresses, by Eamonn P. Kelly provides a well-written overview of new material and reveals the exciting new links between recent archaeological discoveries of *longphoirt* and settlements known from historical sources. This chapter also creates an interesting conversation with chapter 6, by Colman Etchingham, who has a different view of the status of the *longphoirt*, and it adds to the value of the book that it presents the reader with different perspectives on a single topic on this occasion and on several others. Chapter 17, by Christina Lee, approaches evidence for the presence of Scandinavian women in the Irish sea region from the perspective of weaving, which was a distinctly female craft. It stresses the nature of this craft, which could be both conservative (passed down from one female family member to another) and innovative (as shown by the culturally hybrid Z- and S-spun fabrics). Chapter 22, by Uaininn O'Meadhra, provides a detailed study of Hiberno-Norse and Scandinavian art that is based on a sound methodological framework. She is also not afraid to tackle bigger problems such as that of chronology and genre in the study of the Hiberno-Norse and Scandinavian material.

The worth of this volume lies in its broad and interdisciplinary collection of topics, each of which is treated in-depth but with a clarity that makes the book accessible to both scholar and interested lay person. The addition of sixteen pages of color plates makes for an infinitely more pleasant reading experience as they provide visual support for abstract descriptions and arguments. Naturally, this review has not been able to discuss all essays in this impressive volume, but this should be seen as an opportunity for readers to take up the invitation and go sniff the wind, to learn of those Vikings, "neighbourly, score-taking / killers, haggers / and hagglers, gombeen-men / hoarders of grudges and pain."

Note

[1]. Seamus Heaney, "Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces," *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975).

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