

Redford has not tried to be a neutral historian, and his work is much the better for it.

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**EARLY IRISH MONASTICISM: AN UNDERSTANDING OF ITS CULTURAL ROOTS** by Catherine Thom T. & T. Clark London 2007, Pp. xxix+226, pbk., n.p.g.

One of the ways that Christianity renews itself is by reflection on aspects of its past, its experience, and its variety over the centuries. For Christians the past is not simply prologue, but a treasure trove of memory from which we formulate and reformulate our identities. One striking area where this process has been occurring in recent years has been the so-called area of 'Celtic spirituality' which, leaving aside the question as to whether it has genuine historical credentials – and clearly many authors in the field have little more than a taste for illuminated manuscripts and a fertile imagination – demonstrates some of those areas where contemporary Christians believe they need to recover insights from the past. It is within this perspective – a work seeking to recover parts of the Christian memory – of studies on the early Irish church that I approach this book.

The monasticism found in Ireland in the early middle ages is apparently well-known: one cannot open a book on Christian art but one sees fabulous images from illuminated manuscripts described as the work of 'Celtic Monks', the Irish tourist industry produces images of round towers in spectacular scenery, while the shelves in religious bookshops bend under the number of books on 'Celtic spirituality.' By contrast, among scholarly works one has to go back to 1931 for the last serious study of Irish monasticism, by John Ryan, a trained historian properly equipped with the auxiliary and, most importantly, the linguistic skills. There have, of course been many scholars since who have approached parts of the monastic legacy, but these have been either specialist investigations (e.g. Rumsey on the Liturgy of the Hours) or studies in related areas which used monastic evidence (e.g. Etchingham on religious organization), rather than surveys of the monasticism as such. This absence of competent work on the monastic legacy is felt in this book. The author frequently resorts to early studies whose underlying assumptions are dated or whose command of the evidence leaves much to be desired. Old translations and editions are used – sometimes even reproduced in facsimile as on p. 187 – without awareness of how the history of liturgy has developed in the intervening period; and, overall, there is an over reliance on secondary materials and translations by others. However, to an extent this is inevitable in any work that wants to survey the whole scene. If nothing else this book should remind us that there is a pressing need for young researchers to open up this field who are competent both in the historical and linguistic skills needed for any study in the early middle ages, but who are also willing to become competent in the twin fields of historical theology and liturgy before they set out to write their dissertations. Monasticism in early Christian Ireland is still a *terra incognita*, and this book unwittingly highlights that fact.

However, no book is written in a cultural vacuum, and Thom's book is written against the continuing fascination among contemporary Christians with the Christianity of the insular region in the first millennium. This fascination – it can be found as early as Renan – has many aspects. The period seems simpler, the Church was not riven into denominations, disputes did not seem to turn on obscure points in academic theology, and Christianity appears as being embraced willingly and joyfully. In these desires we have some of the deepest longings of Christians – and when they can be, or it is imagined that they can be, projected

into an actual period, then that time and place becomes one of pilgrimage. Here lies the interest that has launched a thousand books in the last couple of decades, most of them so ill-informed as to be, optimistically, simply a waste of trees or, pessimistically, down-right confusing or worse.

But this quest for alternatives to the contemporary within our past is a genuine quest – it is a basic form of Christian renewal – and must not be dismissed by historians (for it is not simply an historical investigation) or by theologians (simply because so many of the books are the works of charlatans). When Thom's book is viewed as part of this quest we can say that we have a fine product indeed. She has carefully examined the spirituality of that monasticism and sought a balanced perspective on their lives, values, and achievements. It is written by someone who is sensitive to the monasticism of the period, who has tried to come to grips with the spirituality of the time (I say 'tried to come to grips' as this is all anyone can do: the past, especially of our inner lives, is always a foreign country), and who has used all the evidence that she could lay her hands on and used that evidence to the extent that the current state of scholarship permits. So this is an important work: first, it lays out a balanced and evidenced presentation of a monasticism that many today look to for inspiration; second, it sets questions, through its willingness to examine matters such as monastic discipline and penance, over some of the more sensationalist writing labelled 'spirituality/Celtic'; and third, it points out how few people have taken up the challenge to examine in detail this aspect of Christian history.

THOMAS O'LOUGHLIN

**READING ANSELM'S PROSLOGION** by Ian Logan, *Ashgate*, 2009, pp. 220, £55.00 hbk

Ian Logan's aim is to place Anselm's *Proslogion* historically (he speaks of himself as offering an 'audit trail') and to comment on the worth of its argument. He starts by noting what he takes to be the *Proslogion's* origins, paying particular attention to what we know of what Anselm might have read and to authors such as Augustine and Boethius. Basing himself on part of a text now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford (MS Bodley 271), he then presents a Latin text and translation of the *Proslogion*, the *Pro Insipiente* (Gaunilo's much cited reply to Anselm), and the *Responsio* (Anselm's less cited reply to Gaunilo). Next, he provides a commentary on the *Proslogion* running to around 29 pages. In his remaining chapters we find a discussion of Anselm's *Responsio*, an account and discussion of the *Proslogion's* medieval reception, an account and discussion of the *Proslogion's* reception from the early sixteenth century to the twentieth century, and an account and discussion of how the *Proslogion* has fared at the hands of some contemporary philosophers. Logan concludes his book by remarking on the significance of Anselm's argument. His suggestion, in line with what we find throughout his book, is that Anselm succeeded in doing what he set out to do.

It is unfortunate that what people often think that they know of the *Proslogion* comes from sources which are not to be trusted when it comes to exegesis. Hence, for example, it is commonly and mistakenly said that *Proslogion* 2 and 3 amount to what Descartes argues in certain works and to what Kant attacks in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. A great virtue of Logan's text is that it shows to what extent many have been deceived in their impressions of what the *Proslogion* has to say and how it relates to what others than Anselm have written. Logan's historical approach to Anselm is excellent and much to be welcomed. Having done as good a job as can be done to relate Anselm to his predecessors (here, of course, a lot of guess work is needed), Logan continues firmly and successfully