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Review of: D. McGettigan, *Richard II and the Irish Kings*

Darren McGettigan presents a lively and well-informed account of one of the most interesting episodes in the history of Anglo-Irish relations in the late Middle Ages: the expeditions to Ireland conducted by Richard II in 1394–5, and again in 1399. While his analysis offers no fundamental challenge to existing interpretations, it does provide refreshing perspectives and draws effectively on the unusually wide range of surviving source material relevant to its subject.

McGettigan offers a clear, helpful, guide to these sources in a brief introduction, before embarking on two chapters that provide a useful contextual backdrop to King Richard's first arrival on the island in 1394. The first outlines, on a province-by-province basis, how the English settlement established after 1170 developed in the two centuries that followed in the face of increasing Irish hostility. The second examines the nature of Gaelic society and the ways in which it differed from contemporary north-west European societies. The remaining three chapters, which take up a little more than half of the book, focus on the years 1394–9 and provide a detailed narrative of Richard's actions in Ireland and the responses to them of the leading kings among the Gaelic Irish. In his acknowledgements, McGettigan expresses the modest hope that the reader will think that fulfilling his ambition of writing a book on this topic was worth the effort. This reader believes that it was, and will be, happy to recommend the volume to undergraduates interested in the subject.

The book is not without its weaknesses and peculiarities. The author fails to provide the few words of explanation that would have helped make clear the meaning of words and phrases such as 'instrument', 'black rent', 'coarb', 'erenagh', and 'ollamh'. The footnoting style is decidedly odd and unhelpful: some printed primary sources are italicised, others are not. The decision to group some sources in the 'Manuscript' section of the bibliography under the subheading 'Electronic' is bizarre. Many readers will not realize that the chancery material listed thereunder resides in either the National Archives of Ireland or The National Archives at Kew. In the footnotes, there is no easy way of knowing whether the reference to a particular letter close or patent pertains to the output of the English or Irish chancery.

Turning from presentation to content and argument, at pages 18–19 McGettigan introduces 'the English squire', Henry Cristall, and 'the English earl of Ormond'. While both of these individuals would have identified themselves as English, it might not be clear to the reader without explanation that they were members of the English colonial community in Ireland, rather than inhabitants of England. The author might also have shown rather more scepticism about some of the contemporary observations he recounts. Cristall's assertion to Froissart that the Irish killed their prisoners is not borne out by other evidence from the time: by the late 14th century, captured settler leaders were routinely ransomed by their Irish captors for tidy sums. McGettigan has read widely and cannot be faulted for following the lead on many occasions of Richard's most recent biographer, Nigel Saul. He has done well to consult work as recent as Chris Given-Wilson's *Henry IV* which was published by Yale University Press in 2016. But his analysis would have benefited from a close reading of Christopher Fletcher's *Richard II: Manhood, Youth, and Politics 1377–99* (Oxford, 2008). With more particular reference to Ireland he does not cite some highly relevant articles of recent vintage. Chief among these are two by Peter Crooks: 'The "Calculus of Faction" and Richard II's Duchy of Ireland, c.1382–9',¹ and 'Representation and Dissent: "Parliamentarianism" and the Structure of Politics in Colonial Ireland, c.1370–1420'.²

Consideration of these publications would have added further sophistication to the author's interpretation of King Richard's approach to Ireland. The decision to lead a campaign to the lordship following the death of his wife in 1394 was not the king's first display of interest in the country. Already, in the mid-1380s he had awarded his favourite, Robert de Vere, earl of Oxford, authority over Ireland with the titles marquis of Dublin and then duke of Ireland, while in 1399 it is possible that he intended to crown his nephew, John Holland, duke of Surrey, king of Ireland while in Dublin. Fletcher's argument that Richard chose to campaign against the Irish as a way of marking and broadcasting his transition to adulthood is attractive, as is the view of Saul, Michael Bennett, and others that the king's imperial conception of his authority impelled him to secure the submissions of notional subjects in Ireland who dared to call themselves kings. This, rather than a desire to avenge the death at the hands of the Irish of Roger Mortimer, earl of March (to whom the king was hostile), explains why Richard returned to Ireland in 1399 and why he was obsessed with crushing the king of Leinster, Art MacMurrough.

While McGettigan's approach lacks some analytical depth, it also has important strengths. It is written in good, clear, English and uses quotations from contemporary sources to excellent effect. The accounts of the Leinster campaigns against MacMurrough are vivid and convincing, and include an important vindication of the use of wards (temporary garrisons spread out across the country to hem in the enemy) by the king in Ireland. The intelligent use made of bardic poetry also adds to our understanding of the motives of the Irish kings with whom Richard dealt. McGettigan's conclusions are well argued and reasonable; no more so than when he suggests that the most important legacy of the campaign of 1394–5 was the insight it provided to Richard II into the problems faced by his loyal subjects in Ireland. Not only historians of medieval Ireland, but also of the wider English world, will benefit from reading this book.

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1. Peter Crooks, 'The "Calculus of Faction" and Richard II's Duchy of Ireland, c.1382–9', in *Fourteenth Century England V*, ed. N. Saul (Woodbridge, 2008), 94–115.
2. Peter Crooks, 'Representation and Dissent: "Parliamentarianism" and the Structure of Politics in Colonial Ireland, c.1370–1420', *EHR*, cxxv (2010), 1–34.