

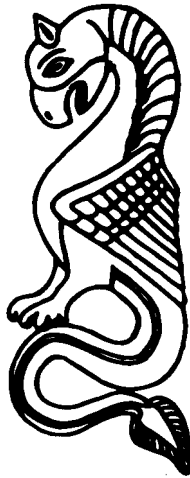
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which was not the Welsh name for the battle of the Winwaed (near Doncaster) or *Campus Gai* in 655, but that of Maserfelth in 642. As for the dating of the tale of Pwyll to about 1018 (p. 471), this faces grave linguistic objections, especially in its use of borrowings from French, such as *pali* ‘brocaded silk’. Anglicists know that French loans in English are rare until as late as the 1130s, the evidence being set out in Alistair Campbell’s *Old English Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 221. Why should we find French loans in eleventh-century Welsh, when they are virtually absent from eleventh-century English?

Nevertheless, anything that prompts interest in the *Four Branches* is to be commended. For that alone, *The Oldest British Prose Literature* thoroughly deserves its prize from the Welsh Arts Council. It is already attracting comment from professional scholars, as in Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* (reviewed below). In short, Count Tolstoy is to be congratulated on having assembled a mass of material for consideration and debate.

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Patrick Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. xii + 425pp. ISBN 978 0 19 958865 7. £65.00

More than thirty years have gone into the making of this book, which has twelve chapters. They discuss Irish influence on the earliest Welsh texts; terms for the Other World; the ‘Slavic antithesis’ narrative technique (with ‘Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it’s Superman!’ as a modern epigone); the riddling ‘watchman device’ on mysterious oncomers; and Irish elements in *Culhwch and Olwen*. There follow four studies on the *Mabinogi* tale of Branwen. They deal with its presentation of Ireland’s geography; Irish royal submission and Henry II; Irish giants; and accounts of a death-trap Iron House, assassins hidden in bags, and the benign severed head. We end with three analyses of Welsh tradition and its supposed allusions to Cú Chulainn, Finn mac Cumhaill and Deirdre, and Irish literary criticism. Much of this material has appeared in books and journals from the 1970s onwards, and its author now brings it together as he approaches retirement.

After nearly four decades in academia, this reviewer has never read a monograph more ambitious in its learning than this. The footnotes are copious. Sometimes they fill more than half a page. The actual text ends on p. 339, with pp. 340–425 (a fifth of the book) devoted to an admirable bibliography and index. In word-count, the references equal what they refer to. Nor has this reviewer found one misprint or misquotation in a volume that embodies a lifetime’s research on Celtic Studies. Normally, one might then welcome it as the definitive statement on matters discussed in Cecile O’Rahilly’s *Ireland and Wales* (London: Longman, 1924) or Proinsias Mac Cana’s *Branwen, Daughter of Llŷr* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1958). This would be especially so, given its sober verdict (p. 339) that scholars have exaggerated Irish influence on Welsh literature, ‘but neither was it negligible’.

Nevertheless, this imposing volume will be controversial. The main reason for that is tucked away at p. 19 n. 105, in the terse comment ‘here may be mentioned the theory that Gruffudd [ap Cynan]’s daughter Gwenllïan [d. 1136] composed *The Four Branches of the Mabinogi*’, citing this reviewer’s *The Origins of the ‘Four Branches of the Mabinogi’* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2009). Professor Sims-Williams’s judgement is, alas, less than his

learning, and his inability to take any account of arguments in *The Origins* is unfortunate. He cannot defend himself on the recentness of its appearance. The case was put in the reviewer's *Medieval Welsh Literature* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), a book that Professor Sims-Williams appears quite unaware of.

Many readers will, therefore, find *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* a curious work. They will think of its author, as Lord Macaulay said of Horace Walpole, that what is great seems to him little, and what is little seems to him great. Throughout the study one encounters, not errors of fact, but errors of judgement, so that readers by the end will feel that they have gone through a gallery of distorting mirrors, which confuse and baffle the visitor. Here are a few instances. *Ynys Wair* (p. 66) is not Lundy or Wight and has nothing to do with *gwair* 'hay'. It is Orkney, by the great bend (*Gwair*) of Duncansby Head. It is inappropriate (p. 119) to spot an allusion to the Song of Songs in words of Branwen, whose story is singularly devoid of scriptural and clerical traits, as one would expect of a tale authored by a layperson. It is a mistake to regard Glewlwyd's boast of being in 'Caer Se and Asse, in Sach and Salach, in Lotor and Fotor' (p. 136) as 'high-sounding' nonsense, when it instead presents corrupt allusions to Syracuse, Arachosia (in Afghanistan), and the river Ottorogora (in south-east Asia). These names appear together in Orosius's *History*, which was a source for *Culhwch and Olwen* (a narrative that does have clerical symptoms, as the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* do not). The date 'tenth-century(?)' for the poem *Armes Prydein* 'Prophecy of Britain' (p. 160) is vague. Professor David Dumville and the reviewer have both published papers allowing a dating to 940, in the immediate aftermath of Wessex's capitulation that year at Leicester to the Vikings. There is no basis whatever (p. 286) to link the tale of Branwen, which is quite secular in its ethos and allusions, with an author amongst the Celtic monks of Ferns in Ireland or Clynog Fawr in Gwynedd.

Despite its ambitious scope and the privileged aegis of a major learned press, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature* will not enjoy assiduous use. As the years pass, it will instead become a seldom-visited monument on the highway of learning. Life will be found in other places, particularly where investigators discuss that question to which Professor Sims-Williams gives the minimum possible attention, as to whether the *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* are, or are not, the work of a female member, active in the earlier twelfth century, of the royal house of Gwynedd.

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Constructing Nations, Reconstructing Myth: Essays in Honour of T.A. Shippey. Edited by Andrew Wawn, with Graham Johnson and John Walter. Making the Middle Ages, 9. Turnhout: Brepols, 2007. 382 pp. ISBN 978-2-503-52393-4. €70.00

This welcome book honours Tom Shippey by presenting a series of investigations into topics close to his scholarly heart. A visual clue to these interests is provided by the fact that the image on the front cover of the Festschrift is not of Shippey himself, but of the Grimm brothers. After reading the warm words of Wawn's introduction, we find that the work consists of sixteen contributions, divided into three sections: 'Nations and Nationalism', 'Philology and Philologists' and 'Myths and Mythology', with Shippey's academic bibliography rounding the work off. The book proper begins (as so much else did) with Ossian. But the citation-heavy