

david r. howlett, *The Celtic Latin Tradition of Biblical Style*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1995. Pp. 400. isbn: 1-85182-143-0. \$49.50.

Celtic vernacular literature is deservedly enjoying great popularity these days, both in translation and, increasingly, in the Celtic languages now being learnt by a new wave of enthusiasts. Celtic Latin literature, however, is virtually unread by non-academics, even in translation, apart from the occasional excerpts of Patrick and Gildas and the Penguin edition of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*. This may change as more scholars turn to these works and expose their hidden charms. The publication in 1985 of Lapidge and Sharpe's *Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature 400-1200 [BCLL]* identified these works for non-specialists and stimulated the publication of new editions. Now, David Howlett has followed his recent book on Patrick's writings (*Liber Epistolarum Sancti Patricii Episcopi: The Book of Letters of Saint Patrick the Bishop*) with an ambitious new study of over fifty Celtic Latin authors ranging from the fifth century to the Norman Conquest. *The Celtic Latin Tradition of Biblical Style* not only draws attention to the talents of these authors, it also reminds us of the powerful influence exerted by the Bible—its content but also its form and expression—on all medieval writers.

Howlett's study is composed chiefly of two parts: his definition of Biblical style and a survey of representative texts from the Celtic-speaking world. The first part will serve as a philological lesson for all but a few specialists in the field. Howlett identifies ten fundamental 'rules' of Biblical style, which include chiasmus, parallelism, and combinations of the two together with alliteration, rhyme, etc. He also identifies five additional 'adjuncts' of Biblical style, which involve cerebral (composition in mathematical forms), aural (rhyme and meter), and visual (decorations for the eye) methods. To illustrate these principles, Howlett examines first how they were used by Hebrew writers of the Old Testament, then how they were recognized and reproduced in subsequent Greek and Latin versions. Finally, Latin texts from Classical and Late Antiquity which specifically address these compositional principles are examined, and some of these texts—Cicero's *De Oratore*, Jerome's Vulgate Bible, Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*—are identified as widely known and influential among writers in the early medieval Latin West.

Howlett has chosen a subset of this group—Latin writers from Celtic-speaking lands—to make his case for the increasing literary influence of Biblical style. In this part of the study, he has divided the Celtic-Latin authors and their works into six categories. First are the 'pioneers'—Pelagius, Patrick, Gildas—who established this trend in newly-Christian Britain and Ireland and provided material from which later Celtic writers would frequently draw. Second are the authors like Columban, Adomnán, and Eriugena who sent polished correspondences to their Roman and Germanic counterparts and carried 'Irish learning' to Gaul. Third are Latin poems and prayers from various Irish, Welsh, and Breton writers, again less well known than their vernacular counterparts. Fourth are the earliest hagiographers and historians, men like Cogitosus, Asser, and 'Ninnius,' the alleged author of the *Historia Brittonum*.

Fifth is the unlikely combination of the Preface to an Irish game board (!) and a piece of prose propaganda from the *Book of Armagh*, both dating to the eleventh century. The sixth category is called 'Wider Horizons,' and includes Peter Abelard's autobiography and Geoffrey of Monmouth's imaginative *History*. Finally, the book concludes with a brief Postscript/synthesis and helpful Indices of Biblical quotations and cross-references to the *BCLL*. The lack of a bibliography is less helpful.

Medievalists and Celticists will find many gems in Howlett's broad study, which is likely to become a useful reference book for non-specialists and companion to the *BCLL*. While most of Howlett's discussion of individual authors and their historical contexts is all too brief, he does share several insights which may change the way some of these authors are evaluated. For example, Howlett reminds us that Gildas identified his *De Excidio Britanniae* not as a history or a sermon, but as an *epistola*—perhaps in imitation of Patrick's—and thus should be treated as such. Howlett also offers an alternative model for the structure of the *De Excidio*, one which will have to be taken seriously by future Gildasian students. Perhaps most fascinating are his insights into the literary styles of the Irish expatriates Columban of Bangor and Cellán of Péronne. Howlett explains Columban's 'provocative, even outrageous' manner toward Pope Gregory the Great (p. 87) and shows that Cellán was not afraid to exchange wit and word-play with the great Aldhelm (p. 112). And Howlett's careful study of Asser's Biblical style may provide heavy ammunition in the still-heated debate surrounding his authorship of the *Life of Alfred*.

Shortcomings in this study are few and far between. It may be nit-picking, for example, to blame Howlett for not showing his awareness of recent Pelagian scholarship, or for calling Ludwig Bieler's 'the most recent edition' of Muirchu's *Life of Patrick* and ignoring that of A.B.E. Hood. Howlett should have acknowledged his great debt to the editors of the *BCLL* and explained his own choices for including and excluding authors from the *BCLL* in his study. Perhaps most noticeable is the general lack of discussion comparing these authors to one another and placing them in a broader context. Howlett never provides an adequate explanation of what defines a 'Celtic' author—one might question his inclusion of Gallo-Roman bishops and Peter Abelard—though he hints at similarities and continuities. His criticism of modern editors and translators of Celtic-Latin texts will undoubtedly make him some enemies, though he rightly takes them to task for underestimating the skills of these writers: 'One needs to understand what an author was trying to do before telling others how well or badly he did it' (p. 392).

In conclusion, Howlett has provided an important and useful study of an under-explored and under-appreciated body of literature. Some may not find all of his explanations convincing—with literary patterns, one often sees what one wants to see—but most will agree that Biblical style was a powerful force exerted on all medieval writers in the Latin West; the Celts, perhaps, practiced it with particular flair.

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