

*The Cult of the Sacred Centre: Essays on Celtic Ideology*, by Proinsias Mac Cana, Dublin 2011: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, ISBN 9-781855-002197, hardcover, vii + 344 pp.

In May 2004, the world of Celtic Studies was greatly saddened to learn of the death of Proinsias Mac Cana. At the time, Professor Mac Cana had been finalising a collection of essays focussing on the question of unity in what might loosely be termed the Celtic nations (a problematic term, as the collection makes clear). Thanks to the generous and careful efforts of Mac Cana's family and a number of distinguished scholars, prominent amongst them Catherine McKenna and Fergus Kelly, the work is now available to the scholarly community.

In the Introduction, Mac Cana lays out the paradox, which he first noticed in print in 1978, of the contrast between Ireland's 'notoriously fissile political organization' and its 'remarkably coherent and uniform culture and ideology' (p. 1). He then frames this paradox of the Irish, and the Celts in general, within debates on the subject of nationalism, pointing out the difficulties created by scholars who do not look beyond the modern, or at best early modern, in the quest to understand the development of nationalism and national consciousness.

This latter point is taken up and explored in detail in the first part of the book, *The Paradox of Irish History*. Here, Mac Cana makes an extremely thought-provoking analysis of Irish revisionist history, giving a detailed description and balanced analysis of each side of the revisionism debate. A recurring theme in the book, introduced in this section, is the interplay between history and myth. Noting the frequent misuse of the term myth to represent the opposite of history (unproven or outright false 'facts'), Mac Cana points out that the interplay of myth and history is both nuanced and beneficial: myth, in the sense used by anthropologists to describe pervasive beliefs that inform behaviours of cultural groups, assists in the understanding of historical events.

Continuing on the theme of nationality and nationalism, Mac Cana thoroughly routs some of the nonsense that has masqueraded as serious scholarly work. Particularly masterful is his dismissal of Hugh Kearney's attack on Brendan Bradshaw's suggestion that early medieval Ireland showed evidence of a national consciousness. Kearney declaimed 'If ninety-nine per

cent of the inhabitants of Ireland in 1014 saw themselves in terms of local, feudal, tribal or social identities, does it make historical sense to speak of “national consciousness”? [...] Robin Dudley Edwards was fond of quoting Michael Oakeshott’s dictum “History is what the evidence obliges us to believe”. We are not obliged to believe in an extended sense of national consciousness in the age of Brian Boru’ (p. 39). Mac Cana responds that ‘this is a very curious passage to place under Oakeshott’s banner of history founded firmly on evidence’; ‘as for [...] the great majority of the population, whatever their precise percentage, we have, unfortunately and *pace* Professor Kearney, very little means of knowing what they thought’ (pp. 40–41). He uses this example to reinforce his point that historical evidence will inevitably ‘oblige’ different scholars to believe different things. It might be added that scholarly rigour should oblige all scholars, when asserting their beliefs, to set out their arguments and the evidence on which they are based as clearly and openly as does Mac Cana.

A fascinating essay on Cultural Diglossia follows, wherein Mac Cana reviews medieval Irish attitudes to language, myth and history, as exemplified in the contrast between the Latin and Irish languages and their uses. It includes a useful discussion of the term *senchas* and its derivatives, of the medieval Irish professional classes who had responsibility for maintaining and transmitting knowledge in its various forms, and of how we should approach these sources for history.

Part II of the book deals with the notion of the sacred centre in Celtic tradition, looking in detail at Ireland, Gaul, Brittany and Wales and drawing on an array of comparative materials. It importantly gives a broader context to such matters as the arrangement of Ireland into four provinces arranged around a central fifth, the ideological centrality of the physical centre, and rituals such as circumambulation.

The third part returns to a focus on Ireland, and on the question of cultural unity, as opposed to political unity. It reviews wide-ranging sources, including the Cycle of Fionn, material concerning the kingship of Tara, literary language, law and onomastics. Here we find the detailed explication of the thesis Mac Cana has advanced early in the book. A close examination of the evidence supports Mac Cana’s persuasive argument that, despite the absence of political unity, early and

medieval Ireland showed every sign of a cultural unity that supported its assertion that it was a single entity, *inse éirenn*. The laws, which allow for some variation in regional practices, express those practices in absolutely consistent language, terminology and style. The language and strict metre of Irish poetry is so consistent between around 1200 and 1650 that Mac Cana is convinced that it can only have been maintained by a conscious effort (and probably synodal meetings) of ‘the poets’ own nationwide fraternity’, whose ideological unity was at odds with the political situation (p. 282).

Part IV returns to the questions posed in Part I, reprising the questions in light of the evidence and arguments of the intervening chapters. Again asserting the pitfalls of identifying national identity or unity with political unity, Mac Cana reviews more recent historiography. He summarises by quoting that other great scholar lost later the same year, Patrick Wormald: ‘The “Men of Art” were not only *part* of Celtic society: they *were* Celtic society, to the extent that they gave it [...] its typically Celtic stamp’ (p. 321).

The book is neatly presented in good-quality binding, and the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies is particularly to be congratulated for maintaining the use of helpful footnotes rather than the endnotes that seem to be increasing in popularity amongst publishers (but not amongst scholars of my acquaintance). The title does not, perhaps, give a very clear idea of what the book contains: the word ‘cult’ may suggest a non-existent emphasis on religion. Rather, the essays canvass much broader questions of Celtic identity over a wide time period. This book will be essential reading for any serious scholar or student of Celtic Studies.

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