

Elva Johnston

Eoin MacNeill's Early Medieval Ireland: A Scholarship for Politics or a Politics of Scholarship?

Abstract: Eoin MACNEILL (1867–1945) was the first academic historian of early medieval Ireland; he is frequently considered to be the founder of the discipline of early Irish history. He was also a prominent nationalist activist, a revolutionary, and a minister in the first Irish Free State government. This paper will consider the shared inspirations for MACNEILL the politician and MACNEILL the scholar. In particular, it will focus on MACNEILL's belief that the medieval past of Ireland was the making of its national character and the foundation of its right to independence from the British Empire. This brought him into conflict with the great unionist historian of Norman Ireland, Goddard Henry ORPEN. Their debate, revolving around contested pasts, proved to be troublesome for later generations of historians who were concerned to write an Irish history free of political bias. But MACNEILL was no mere propagandist. He was passionately devoted to the writing of source-driven history, one reliant upon core research skills in language and palaeography. He believed history should be scientific but not necessarily, or even ideally, value-free. This paper will examine these issues, primarily through the lens of MACNEILL's career up to the formation of the Irish Free State (1922) and subsequent Civil War (1922–1923). It will show the extent to which his disagreements with ORPEN, as well as MACNEILL's efforts to accurately delineate the early Irish past for scholars and, crucially, the wider public, were tied to his conviction that understanding the medieval was always relevant for contemporary societies.

Keywords: Eoin MacNeill, revisionism, nationalism, Irish Manuscripts Commission, tribalism, Gaelic Ireland, Goddard Henry Orpen, Normans, British Empire, presentism, public history

I Eoin MACNEILL: Scholar and Politician

In early medieval Ireland, Fer Dá Chrích, man of two districts, was a common saint's name.¹ It could refer to someone associated with two places or careers. In either sense,

¹ There are at least eleven examples of this name in the medieval Irish martyrologies alone. For convenience, see The Martyrology of Tallaght from the Book of Leinster and MS. 5100–4 in the

Elva Johnston, School of History, University College Dublin, Belfield Dublin 4, Ireland, elva.johnston@ucd.ie

this serves as a metaphor for the complex life of Eoin MACNEILL, one frequently treated as bifurcated between politics and scholarship, for he was a politician and an academic historian. This dual role raises questions about the integrity of academic history and its relationship to political action and even propaganda, one which has proved troubling to later generations of Irish scholars, especially those who identified as ‘revisionists’.² These revisionists consciously argued for a historical scholarship free from nationalist impulses and grounded in historical documentation. The Northern Irish ‘Troubles’, with their heavy confluence of religious, linguistic and ethnic identities, shaped by rival understandings of the past, problematized the role of academic historians; they came to question the primacy of national narratives in shaping scholarship. At the same time, historiographical approaches, which largely emphasized empiricism and the ideal of value-free history, created a seeming division between contemporary scholars and previous generations of historians. History was defined as a science, associated with modernity and progress.³ The scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were sometimes portrayed as slaves to highly presentist and politicized histories, shaped around the ultimate goal of Irish independence from British rule.⁴ Nonetheless, as this paper will show, the debates of former generations, including those engaged in by Eoin MACNEILL, continue to echo in the present.

Eoin MACNEILL’s career was strikingly varied; he was a man of many faces. MACNEILL was a Gaelic revivalist, an Irish Volunteer, a Free State minister, a bureaucrat and an academic, an establishment voice and an insurgent.⁵ He was born in Antrim and died in Dublin, his birth-place divided from the new state by the Border between the Irish State and the United Kingdom. To those outside of early

Royal Library, Brussels, ed. Richard I. BEST / Hugh J. LAWLER (Henry Bradshaw Society 68), London 1931, pp. 28, 44, 47, 63, 67, 69, 77. *Crích* literally means ‘boundary’ (see the ‘electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language’ [eDIL], s.v. *crích*, online: <http://www.dil.ie/12912>; last accessed 15/05/2019), but also commonly refers to the territory incorporated within boundaries.

² The revisionist debate influenced most areas of Irish history. The best introduction is Ciarán BRADY (ed.), *Interpreting Irish History. The Debate on Historical Revisionism, 1938–1994*, Dublin 1994; its influence on early Irish studies is clear in Kim MCCONE / Katherine SIMMS (eds.), *Progress in Medieval Irish Studies*, Maynooth 1996; Jonathan M. WOODING, *Reapproaching the Pagan Celtic Past – Anti-Nativism, Asterisk Reality and the Late-Antiquity Paradigm*, in: *Studia Celtica Fennica* 6 (2009), pp. 61–74, provides useful commentary.

³ See for instance, Robert Dudley EDWARDS, *An Agenda for Irish History, 1978–2018*, in: *Irish Historical Studies* 81(22) (1978), pp. 3–19.

⁴ This gap is very much emphasized in Roy F. FOSTER, *The Story of Ireland: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford on 1 December 1994*, Oxford 1995.

⁵ The best short introductions to MACNEILL’s career are Patrick MAUME, *MacNeill, Eoin (1867–1945)*, in: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), online: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34813> (last accessed 15/05/2019); ID. / Thomas CHARLES-EDWARDS, *MacNeill, Eoin (John)*, in: *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (2013), online: <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a5283> (last accessed 15/05/2019). See also Michael TIERNEY, *Eoin MacNeill: Scholar and Man of Action 1867–1945*, ed. Francis X. MARTIN, Oxford 1980.

medieval scholarship, he is best known for two controversial roles: the infamous Countermanding Order to halt the mobilisation of the Irish Volunteers, which became part of the mythology of the Easter Rising of 1916, and his ineffectual performance as the Free State's representative on the Irish Boundary Commission of 1924–1925.⁶ It had been expected that the Boundary Commission would create more equitable Border arrangements but it dashed these hopes. These disappointed hopes seem to have scarred MACNEILL. Despite urging, his time on the Commission did not form part of the material that MACNEILL dictated for his memoir, although there are other gaps in it as well.⁷ Nonetheless, MACNEILL was one of the most influential cultural politicians of his generation. In particular, his contribution to the founding of the Irish Manuscripts Commission (IMC) in 1928, for which he served as first Chair, was immense.⁸ It was driven by his commitment to making the primary sources of Irish history available.⁹ He envisaged the IMC as an Irish *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, founded in the early nineteenth century and still active to this day.¹⁰ MACNEILL, it seems, was always determined to make the medieval relevant. He believed that the Irish needed to know their own past and that this past put them on a par with the other peoples of Europe.¹¹ Knowing the past was the prelude to, and the shaper of, present actions. Thus, the past was inherently political, in the sense that it could be presented as the fore-runner to current aspirations. For MACNEILL, it never simply existed in its own right.

Despite these intersections of politics and scholarship, there is a limited appreciation of the extent to which they were bound together in MACNEILL's mind. For instance,

6 The standard study remains Geoffrey J. HAND, *MacNeill and the Boundary Commission*, in: Francis X. MARTIN / Francis J. BYRNE (eds.), *The Scholar Revolutionary: Eoin MacNeill, 1867–1945, and the Making of the New Ireland*, Shannon 1973, pp. 199–275; see also Francis X. MARTIN, *Eoin MacNeill on the 1916 Rising*, in: *Irish Historical Studies* 12(47) (1961), pp. 34–40; Enda STAUNTON, *The Boundary Commission Debacle 1925: Aftermath and Implications*, in: *History Ireland* 4(2) (1996), pp. 42–45.

7 Eoin MacNeill: *Memoir of a Revolutionary Scholar*, ed. Brian HUGHES, Dublin 2016, p. xiii.

8 Deirdre McMAHON / Michael KENNEDY, *Reconstructing Ireland's Past: A History of the Irish Manuscripts Commission*, Dublin 2009, pp. 1–94.

9 See for example Eoin MACNEILL, *The Fifteenth Centenary of Saint Patrick. A Suggested Form of Commemoration*, in: *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 13(50) (1924), pp. 177–188; ID., *A School of Irish Church History*, in: *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 21(81) (1932), pp. 1–6.

10 McMAHON / KENNEDY (note 8), pp. 6–7. For the MGH see David KNOWLES, *Great Historical Enterprises*, London 1965, pp. 65–97; Horst FUHRMANN, "Sind eben alles Menschen gewesen": *Gelehrtenleben in 19. und 20. Jahrhundert. Dargestellt am Beispiel der Monumenta Germaniae Historica und ihrer Mitarbeiter*, Munich 1996. Isabelle GUYOT-BACHY / Jean-Marie MOEGLIN (eds.), *La naissance de la médiévisitique. Les historiens et leurs sources en Europe (XIX^e–début du XX^e siècle)* (*École Pratique des Hautes Études, Sciences Historiques et Philologiques 5 / Hautes études médiévales et modernes 107*), Geneva 2015 (on the MGH esp. Gerhard Schmitz, *Les Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, in: *ibid.*, pp. 299–313).

11 Eoin MACNEILL, *Celtic Ireland*, Dublin 1921, repr. Dublin 1981, pp. xi–xv.

MACNEILL's memoir juxtaposes his study of the Irish language, under the direction of the Jesuit scholar Edmund Hogan, with a consideration of the Parnell Crisis.¹² This crisis split constitutional Irish nationalism and created bitterness for a generation. For MACNEILL, neither one can, nor should, be appreciated in isolation of the other. Yet, his scholarly work is frequently treated as the youthful prologue and tired epilogue to the hurly-burly of the nationalist political activism that continues to define his image in the grand narratives of Irish history.¹³ Indeed, these activities were heavily informed by scholarship, one with which few historians of the modern Irish state are deeply familiar. Tellingly, the zenith of his political involvement in nationalist politics, between 1913–1925, was arguably the most creative phase of his career as a historian. This shows, very clearly, the tight connection between MACNEILL the activist and MACNEILL the academic. Both originated in the same wellspring. To take an example: in November 1913 MACNEILL published “The North Began” in “An Claidheamh Soluis”, an article that served as a catalyst for the formation of the Irish Volunteers.¹⁴ It is probably the piece for which MACNEILL is best known among non-specialists. In the same year his important edition of the poems of the eleventh-century pseudo-historical writer Flann Mainistrech, an edition still used, appeared, as well as other key papers.¹⁵ Several of MACNEILL's most significant works date from the revolutionary era, more broadly, including his paper on the Laud Genealogies (1915), the formulation of the rule of dynastic succession (1919) and his ground-breaking article on status and franchise (1923), ones which transformed the very parameters of early medieval Irish scholarship.¹⁶

This MACNEILL, the scholar, has been more generously appreciated than the politician. In a striking summation of his contribution to the foundation and popularisation of the discipline of early Irish History, Francis John BYRNE declared: “To MacNeill belongs the credit of having dragged Celtic Ireland practically single-handed from the

¹² HUGHES (note 7), pp. 18–19. It should be noted, though, that the memoir was primarily designed to showcase MACNEILL's public career.

¹³ The classic statement is Robert Dudley EDWARDS, Professor MacNeill, in: MARTIN / BYRNE (note 6), pp. 279–297, here p. 289.

¹⁴ Eoin MACNEILL, The North Began, in: An Claidheamh Soluis, 1 November 1913, p. 6. The article is republished in *The Irish Volunteers, 1913–1915. Recollections and Documents*, ed. Francis X. MARTIN, Dublin 1963, pp. 57–61.

¹⁵ Poems by Flann Mainistrech on the Dynasties of Ailech, Mide and Brega, ed. Eoin MACNEILL, in: *Archivium Hibernicum* 2 (1913), pp. 37–99. MACNEILL's publications are usefully collated in Francis X. MARTIN, *The Writings of Eoin MacNeill*, in: *Irish Historical Studies* 6(21) (1948), pp. 44–62, and *Id.*, Appendix 1: *The Published Writings of Eoin MacNeill*, in: *Id.* / BYRNE (note 6), pp. 325–353.

¹⁶ Eoin MACNEILL, On the Reconstruction and the Date of the Laud Genealogies, in: *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* 10 (1915), pp. 81–96; *Id.*, The Irish Law of Dynastic Succession, in: *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 8(31) (1919), pp. 367–382, and 8(32) (1919), pp. 640–663; *Id.*, Ancient Irish Law: The Law of Status or Franchise, in: *Proceeding of the Royal Irish Academy* 36 (1923), pp. 265–316. See the assessment by Francis John BYRNE, *MacNeill the Historian*, in: MARTIN / BYRNE (note 6), pp. 15–36.

antiquarian mists into the light of history [...]”¹⁷ It must be remembered, too, that MACNEILL was not working in isolation. He contributed to a constellation of scholarship in the burgeoning and interdisciplinary field of Celtic studies, the world of the likes of Kuno Meyer and Douglas Hyde.¹⁸ Throughout, he was engaged in what he believed was an important struggle to liberate the Irish past from derogatory accusations of barbarism, a fight with a long history as MACNEILL himself was aware.¹⁹ How did MACNEILL balance this urgent political need with historical accuracy? What did he contribute to early medieval Irish history and, perhaps more importantly, to making it relevant to his public? Does his legacy still continue?

II Politics and the Writing of Early Irish History

Given the complexity of MACNEILL's career, these questions are best addressed through highlighting particular aspects of his activities, although this is not to deny the relevance of other material. This paper will mainly centre on the years before MACNEILL became a government minister in 1922, at which point his focus shifted towards a more practical realisation of educational and cultural goals.²⁰ First, however, it is necessary to outline how MACNEILL came to view the relevance of early medieval Ireland for the present. There can be no doubt that MACNEILL was fascinated with the complexity of early medieval social organisation and, for him, it provided alternative socio-political models to those of his own time. These, he argued, were based on limited bureaucracy, strong local relationships and a loose overlordship, exercised by the national monarch at Tara, which did little to interfere with day to day existence, a view that he continued to hold throughout his life.²¹ It is hard not to imagine MACNEILL was responding to his own experiences, creating a utopian vision of the

17 BYRNE (note 16), p. 17.

18 The interconnections between the scholars of this era are increasingly appreciated, especially as more archival material becomes available. See, for example, Seán Ó LUING, *Kuno Meyer, 1858–1919: A Biography*, Dublin 1991; ID., *Celtic Studies in Europe and Other Essays*, Dublin 2000; Dáibhí Ó CRÓINÍN, *Letters of Kuno Meyer to Douglas Hyde, 1896–1919*, in: *Studia Hibernica* 42 (2016), pp. 1–64; Regina Uí CHOLLATÁIN, *Eoin MacNeill: Scholar and Revivalist*, online: <http://historyhub.ie/eoin-macneill-revivalist> (last accessed 15/05/2019). MACNEILL's own appreciation of his debt to Edmund Hogan is insightful. See his remarks in *Contribution by Professor Eoin MacNeill, M.A., D.Litt*, in: *A Page of Irish History: Story of University College, Dublin 1883–1909*, Compiled by Fathers of the Society of Jesus, Dublin 1930, pp. 186–194.

19 Eoin MACNEILL, *Phases of Irish History*, Dublin, 1919, repr. Dublin, 1968, esp. pp. 300–304. It is worth remembering, as well, the frequent racial stereotyping of the Irish in the popular British press in MACNEILL's formative years, see Robert F. FOSTER, *Paddy and Mr Punch*, in: ID. (ed.), *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History*, London 1993, pp. 171–194.

20 MCMAHON / KENNEDY (note 8), pp. 1–20.

21 Representative examples include MACNEILL (note 11), pp. 93–111; ID. (note 19), pp. 271–275.

past in the process. Tellingly, he remarked that “a centralised authority is an instrument of civilisation, not an essential”, as the state should “serve the civilisation of the people, not [...] dominate it”.²² He contrasted early Irish institutions with what he viewed as the inequalities of feudalism, introduced by the Normans alongside foreign rule.²³ Yet, like the Vikings before them, he argued, the Normans eventually integrated with the native inhabitants, contributing handsomely to the ancestral tree of the modern Irish population in the process.²⁴ MACNEILL, perhaps wisely given his own areas of expertise, generally confined his comments to pre-Norman society, emphasising its sophistication, rather than dealing in detail with the Normans in Ireland.²⁵ For instance, he was at great pains to show that Irish society was not tribal.²⁶ MACNEILL, living as he did in a colonialist context, assumed that tribal had a pejorative meaning to be aligned with barbarism, anarchy and savagery.²⁷ While the term, ultimately, did come to be used in a much less loaded way among early Irish scholars, especially under the influence of anthropological studies,²⁸ its potentially negative Eurocentric weight is still problematic. It sometimes functions as a rhetorical device to flatten the complexity of non-European societies,²⁹ or, of those in the past; ‘tribe’ and ‘tribal’ can serve as a verbal shorthand indicating that particular groups or cultures are at a lower rung in the supposed ladder of social evolution. It was an issue that greatly concerned MACNEILL, as he believed it to be the underpinning of a discourse that denied the Irish the right to political self-determination.

This complex of ideas, political and academic, was central to one of the defining debates of MACNEILL’s career, one where interpretations of the medieval were so politically weighted that they are as revealing of current politics as they are of scholarly *de-*

22 Eoin MACNEILL, *Early Irish Laws and Institutions*, Dublin 1935, pp. 48–49; see also his suggestion on p. 74 that the worship of the bureaucratic state is satanic.

23 MACNEILL (note 11), pp. 152–176; ID. (note 19), pp. 292–299.

24 MACNEILL (note 19), pp. 265–266, 273, 322–356.

25 Exceptions include *ibid.*, pp. 300–322, but this is largely devoted to disagreements with Goddard Henry Orpen.

26 MACNEILL (note 11), pp. 152–176; ID. (note 19), pp. 289–299; ID. (note 22), pp. 1–11.

27 MACNEILL (note 11), pp. 152–154; ID. (note 19), esp. pp. 289–290, although it should be noted that MACNEILL himself is dismissive of the “Australian or Central African aborigines”. See also ID. (note 22), p. 16.

28 Daniel A. BINCHY, *Secular Institutions*, in: Myles DILLON (ed.), *Early Irish Society*, Dublin 1954, pp. 52–65, here p. 62; Francis John BYRNE, *Tribes and Tribalism in Early Ireland*, *Ériu* 22 (1971), pp. 128–166; ID. (note 16), pp. 26–27.

29 Archie MAFEJE, *The Ideology of “Tribalism”*, in: *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 9(2) (1971), pp. 253–261; Vail LEROY (ed.), *The Invention of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, London 1989; Felicitas BECKER, *Vernacular Ethnic Stereotypes: Their Persistence and Change in South-East Tanzania, ca. 1890–2003*, in: Alexander KEESE (ed.), *Ethnicity and the Long-Term Perspective: The African Experience* (CEAUP Studies on Africa 1), Berne 2010, pp. 93–126.

siderata. It brought him into conflict with another great Irish medieval historian, his contemporary Goddard Henry ORPEN, a scholar of an unapologetically unionist persuasion.³⁰ Nonetheless, ORPEN's *magnum opus*, "Ireland under the Normans", published in four volumes between 1911–1920, is justly regarded as a seminal work to which scholars still turn.³¹ Its faults, particularly in regard to ORPEN's prejudices towards the native Irish, who he portrays as feckless and incapable of self-government, have been judged to be of less importance than the depth of his scholarship and his dedication to the use of primary source material.³² Indeed, there has been some effort to rehabilitate ORPEN's view of the native Irish but it is unconvincing and runs contrary to his own words.³³ He was a man of his time, as much as MACNEILL, and no amount of effort will turn him into a contemporary historian, nor should it. On the other hand, the same appreciation of context should be extended to MACNEILL, whose critique of ORPEN has been characterized as unfair, vindictive, and an incitement to hatred in Seán DUFFY's heated reassessment of ORPEN's contribution to Irish medieval studies.³⁴

Why was ORPEN's work so problematic for MACNEILL and what does it tell us about his views of the meaning of the past for the present? One obvious answer lies in ORPEN's dismissal of the culture of pre-Norman Ireland as a dead-end; a dead-end, moreover, that made the Norman invasion of the island at once welcome and inevitable.³⁵ For many readers this interpretation could stand in for the present as much as the past. It is no coincidence that the first chapter of "Ireland under the Normans" is entitled "Anarchic Ireland: Ninth to Eleventh Centuries".³⁶ The native Irish propensity for anarchy is a long-running theme for ORPEN. The following quotation, taken from an extended description of pre-Norman Ireland, is representative:

The Chieftain, if he did not fight merely for his own hand, had no higher conception of duty than to increase the power of his clan; with this object in view, he was stayed by no scruples. The clansman, while ready to lay down his life for his chief, felt no enthusiasm for the national cause. The sentiment 'for country', in any sense more extended than his own tribal territory was alike to him and his chief unknown.³⁷

30 A useful introduction is Philip BULL, Orpen, Goddard Henry, in: *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (2014), online: <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a7127> (last accessed 15/05/2019).

31 Goddard Henry ORPEN, *Ireland under the Normans, 1169–1333*, 4 vols., Oxford 1911 (vols. 1 and 2), 1920 (vols. 3 and 4); repr. in a single volume Dublin 2005.

32 See especially Seán DUFFY, *Historical Revisit: Goddard Henry Orpen, Ireland under the Normans, 1169–1333 (1911–1920)*, in: *Irish Historical Studies* 32(126) (2000), pp. 246–259.

33 *Ibid.*, pp. 255–256.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 248–251.

35 ORPEN (note 31), vol. 1, p. 20.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 19–38.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

Here, ORPEN introduces a number of ideas that were politically loaded in the context of 1911, the year the first two volumes of “Ireland under the Normans” appeared. It was a time when a dynamic cultural nationalism, often expressed through a renewed interest in the Irish past and in the Irish language, made for a heady atmosphere rife with political possibilities.³⁸ ORPEN’s barbarous Irish clansmen, roaming an uncultivated landscape with barely the accoutrements of civilisation, were antithetical to these currents. Furthermore, he describes these clans as tribal and localized, lacking any moral impetus beyond their own self-interest. For ORPEN, then, the Irish defeated by the Normans were not inhabitants of a separate kingdom, but primitives for whom conquest was ultimately beneficial. It brought the Irish under the tutelage of their betters. As Orpen remarked: “Until the coming of the Normans – and then only partially – the Irish never felt the direct influence of a race more advanced than herself”.³⁹ His paternalistic view of the native Irish could not be more obvious.

MACNEILL’s negative response may seem predictable. Yet, this was initially relatively muted and balanced by his appreciation of ORPEN’s demonstrable strengths as a meticulous scholar and fine writer. Thus, in his review, published in the “Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland” in 1911, he praises ORPEN’s clarity highly. He further suggests that as both Norman and Gael were ancestors of the modern Irish, their achievements deserve equal attention and celebration.⁴⁰ He does criticize details of the work, particularly ORPEN’s treatment of ‘Laudabiliter’, the Papal Bull issued in favour of an invasion of Ireland by Henry II, even now an object of scholarly dispute concerning its authenticity and contents.⁴¹ Undoubtedly, his greatest censure was reserved for ORPEN’s limited understanding of pre-Norman Ireland, especially its institutions, resulting in a “very decided bias”.⁴² This bias was lost on other reviewers who did not have MACNEILL’s expertise in early medieval Irish social organisation. For instance, the British medieval historian James Tait remarked that an “impartial reader”

38 The secondary literature on this period is vast and no footnote could do it justice. MACNEILL’s own role within the Gaelic revival is discussed in Donal MCCARTNEY, *MacNeill and Irish-Ireland*, in: MARTIN / BYRNE (note 6), pp. 75–97; see also Regina Uí CHOLLATÁIN, *An Claidheamh Soluis agus Fáinne an Lae 1899–1932*, Dublin 2004. The broader contexts form the subject of Robert F. FOSTER, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890–1923*, London 2015. The role of the reading public is emphasized in Andrew MURPHY, *Ireland, Reading and Cultural Nationalism, 1790–1930: Bringing the Nation to Book*, Cambridge 2018. I would like to thank my colleague Frank Bouchier-Hayes for bringing this useful study to my attention.

39 ORPEN (note 31), vol. 1, p. 105.

40 Eoin MACNEILL, *Ireland under the Normans, 1169–1126*. By Goddard Henry ORPEN, in: *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* 1(3) (1911) p. 277.

41 The general scholarly consensus (if it can be termed as such) is that while ‘Laudabiliter’ is likely genuine, the presentation of it by Gerald of Wales is highly misleading. See Anne J. DUGGAN, *The Power of Documents: The Curious Case of Laudabiliter*, in: Brenda BOLTON / Christine MEEK (eds.), *Aspects of Power and Authority in the Middle Ages*, Turnhout 2007, pp. 251–275.

42 MACNEILL (note 40), p. 281,

would agree with ORPEN that an “anarchic Ireland” needed the “discipline” of Norman civilisation.⁴³

There can be no doubt that MACNEILL's assessment of ORPEN's work hardened over time and became largely negative in tone. By 1918, when MACNEILL delivered a series of well-attended public lectures in the Rotunda in Dublin, his critique was far more trenchant, although it broadly followed the critical points outlined in his review of seven years previously.⁴⁴ There are a number of contributing factors. Not only had MACNEILL's political circumstances changed, as described in his own memoir, but so had those of the country, with Sinn Féin riding high in public opinion.⁴⁵ The idea of an independent Ireland in the past, in the present, and in the future, came together in a creative maelstrom of academic research shot through with political conviction. As MACNEILL stated, he now felt in a position to present the “main results of many years of study” to the public for the first time.⁴⁶ And, of course, the fact that MACNEILL was giving his opinion in a public forum, to a large crowd in a heightened political environment, was a very different matter from writing a review in an academic journal. It would be surprising if they were stylistically identical. The result was “Phases of Irish History”, MACNEILL's most substantial popular book, published in 1919 but based almost directly on the lectures delivered in the Rotunda. While the majority of the lectures focussed on MACNEILL's research into early Irish society, its history and its institutions, he devoted considerable attention to ORPEN's portrayal of pre-Norman Ireland and to what he deemed its political significance.⁴⁷ For instance, he remarked of ORPEN that:

When I see the eulogist of Anglo-Norman feudalism in Ireland sitting in judgment upon the political institutions of a people which he has never studied and does not at all understand, I call to mind the estimate formed by ‘the ancient philosophers of Ireland’ about Victorious of Aquitaine – that he was deserving of compassion rather than of ridicule.⁴⁸

MACNEILL, however, did not take his own advice and he wrote, and spoke, at great length in opposition to ORPEN who seems to have become emblematic for him of a

43 James TAIT, *Ireland under the Normans, 1169–1216*. By G. H. ORPEN, in: *The English Historical Review* 27(105) (1912), pp. 144–147.

44 These lectures were originally intended to be held in Molesworth Hall but when this fell through, Bulmer Hobson arranged the Rotunda. See MACNEILL's comments in his memoir: HUGHES (note 7), pp. 95–96.

45 MACNEILL was conscious of this as shown in *ibid.*, pp. 89–96. The spectacular turnaround in Sinn Féin's fortunes is detailed in Michael LAFFAN, *Resurrection of Ireland: The Sinn Féin Party 1916–1923*, Cambridge 1999.

46 HUGHES (note 7), p. 95.

47 MACNEILL (note 19), esp. pp. 300–322.

48 *Ibid.*, p. 240.

scholarship emphasising early Irish backwardness.⁴⁹ This was especially significant as the national character of the early Irish past was of primary importance to him at this stage. In contrast to ORPEN's language of political primitivism, he offered one of complexity, cultural unity and high achievement.⁵⁰ For those listening to him in the Rotunda, MACNEILL painted a vision of a once and future Ireland.

Yet, while ORPEN and MACNEILL may have differed on their evaluations of early Ireland, they were both products of British society and had internalized many of its political assumptions. In MACNEILL's case this subconsciously shaped his reading of early Irish institutions. A useful example is his influential analysis of the socio-political communities known as *tuatha*. These *tuatha*, ORPEN's tribes and MACNEILL's tributary kingdoms, were the basic units from which most forms of political and legal authority flowed, existing within a complex hierarchy of mutual interdependence.⁵¹ For the early Irish, a *tuath* simultaneously comprised a people and its territory. In "Phases of Irish History", MACNEILL compares the *dóer-thuatha* ("unfree peoples / kingdoms") to the subjects of British India; *sóer-thuatha* ("free peoples / kingdoms") are in a form of dominion status, analogous to the "existing autonomous dominions of the British Empire".⁵² In their turn, the free peoples are subject to their provincial overlords who, themselves, are loosely joined under the 'national monarchy' of Tara. MACNEILL idealized what he believed to be the natural political organisation in Ireland, a pentarchy of five connected but largely independent kingdoms, each containing a multitude of self-regulating communities.⁵³

It is worth noting that while MACNEILL's direct comparison of early Ireland with the British Empire may have been inspired by the need to make the medieval relevant for his audience, it also provided the basic framework for his own understanding of the political shape of pre-Norman Ireland; it functions as more than a simple analogy. MACNEILL read early medieval Irish through a presentist lens. Arguably, his understanding of the past tells us a great deal about his aspirations for the present and future. MACNEILL's early medieval Ireland was a perfected British Empire on a smaller canvas, with its bureaucracy replaced by a network of communities joined through interpersonal relationships. It emphasized the importance of the smaller unit, still a defining characteristic in modern Irish social and political life.⁵⁴ Intriguingly, MACNEILL's model suggests that his view of political independence was relative rather than

⁴⁹ This context is explored in Heather LAIRD, *Time and the Irish: An Analysis of the Temporal Frameworks Employed by Sir Henry Maine, Eóin MacNeill, and James Connolly in their Writings on Early Modern Ireland*, in: *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 28 (2008), pp. 128–141.

⁵⁰ See for instance MACNEILL (note 19), pp. 222–248 ("The Golden Age").

⁵¹ BYRNE (note 24); Elva JOHNSTON, *Literacy and Identity in Early Ireland*, Woodbridge 2013, pp. 69–89, which emphasizes their change over time.

⁵² MACNEILL (note 19), pp. 275–277.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 274–299; *Id.* (note 11), pp. 96–113.

⁵⁴ The complex role of small-scale territorial division is discussed in Paul MACCOTTER, *Medieval Ireland: Territorial, Political and Economic Divisions*, Dublin 2008. See also Elizabeth FITZPATRICK /

absolute.⁵⁵ How much of this originated in his reading of the medieval Irish sources? How did this reading flow from his political opinions? The two are so intertwined that it is difficult to be certain beyond acknowledging the extent to which they nourished each other, truly a scholarship for politics and a politics of scholarship.

But, MACNEILL was also capable of criticising aspects of early Irish society; it was far from perfect. Indeed, one of his complaints against ORPEN was that he lacked a critical faculty, too often emphasising the colourful and the epic because of his emotional attachment to the Normans.⁵⁶ For instance, MACNEILL wrote disapprovingly of the early Irish learned classes as “conservative, inadaptable, unproviding”, representing the “fatal weakness” of their culture, a judgement which has been remarkably long-lasting despite its flaws.⁵⁷ However, MACNEILL could be guilty of special-pleading. His sensitivity to assumptions of Irish barbarism was such that he sometimes distorted the obvious meaning of sources. A good example is his treatment of forms of servitude. These were of economic and social significance in early medieval Irish society and functioned within a spectrum of a highly unequal distribution of rights according to class, gender and individual.⁵⁸ MACNEILL argued that slavery was initially a pre-Christian institution which was only re-established under Norse influence.⁵⁹ In reality, slavery, especially debt-bondage, was an ubiquitous feature of pre-Viking society and certainly did not require foreign inspiration, even if the Vikings gave it greater economic impetus. This inconvenient truth was airbrushed by MACNEILL. In fact, a detailed reading of MACNEILL's scholarship shows him at his best when not on the defensive. In these cases, his dedication to historical accuracy, based firmly on the primary sources, is predominant. This is one of the reasons that his brilliant deconstruction of the medieval Irish pseudo-histories as entirely artificial, showing them to be medieval inventions, has stood the test of time.⁶⁰

Raymond GILLESPIE (eds.), *The Parish in Medieval and Early Modern Ireland: Community, Territory and Building*, Dublin 2006.

55 This is also clear in MACNEILL's comments in his memoir about the period in which ‘Phases in Irish History’ was delivered. See HUGHES (note 7), pp. 96–97.

56 MACNEILL (note 40), pp. 276, 281.

57 MACNEILL (note 19), p. 355. The view is echoed in Francis John BYRNE, *Senchas: The Nature of the Gaelic Historical Tradition*, in: John G. BARRY (ed.), *Historical Studies IX: Papers Read Before the Irish Conference of Historians*, Cork, 29–31 May 1971, Belfast 1974, pp. 137–159.

58 Fergus KELLY, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, Dublin 1988, pp. 68–98.

59 MACNEILL (note 11), p. 110. See also Paul HOLM, *The Slave Trade of Dublin, Ninth to Twelfth Centuries*, in: *Peritia* 5 (1986), pp. 317–42, who emphasizes the new commercial aspects of Viking slave trading in Irish contexts.

60 See, for example, MACNEILL (note 11), pp. 25–42; *Id.* (note 19), pp. 90–92; *Id.*, *A Pioneer of Nations*, in: *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 11(41) (1911), pp. 13–28, and 11(42) (1911), pp. 435–446.

III Beyond Apathy and Antipathy: MACNEILL and the Limits of History

Seán DUFFY has remarked of the disagreement between MACNEILL and ORPEN that it is “most unfortunate that a scholar of Eoin MacNeill’s integrity and stature should have let emotions enter the historical debate in this way [...]”.⁶¹ This comment touches on an important issue about MACNEILL’s view of the purpose of history. MACNEILL as a historian was not only what we would now term an academic scholar. He was also a public historian and invested a great deal of time in communicating his subject to a wide audience, through public lectures, radio broadcasts and writing. MACNEILL was passionate about this, emphasising that the Irish should know their own history at first hand and that their story was one of the people, not simply of great men.⁶² Only on this basis could they understand their society and, through understanding, change it for the better. Knowledge of history was instrumental; it was certainly not value free. MACNEILL did not place emphasis on the “spirit of cold detachment”, much prized by a later generation of scholars, especially the revisionists mentioned at the beginning of this paper.⁶³ This does not mean, however, that MACNEILL believed that the historian should function as a propagandist or even give free range to emotional interpretations, the very fears which drove revisionist historiography. As we have seen, he criticized ORPEN for being too emotionally engaged with the objects of this research. Moreover, MACNEILL explicitly regarded historical research as based on scientific principles and likened his apprenticeship with the great scholar Edmund Hogan to working in a laboratory.⁶⁴ In lectures delivered in University College Dublin he stated: “Ancient Ireland, as it happens, is no vacant region for free speculation. The material for its study are remarkably copious, and the method of its study must be by way of research, analysis, and synthesis.”⁶⁵

However, MACNEILL’s view of history was not simply empiricist, although empiricism was foundational to it.⁶⁶ Emotional apperception was also part of the equation; it was the faculty through which historians engaged with the past and, furthermore, engaged their audiences in that past. Emotion, tempered and led by knowledge, bridged the past and present, making the medieval relevant for the researcher and the public. In his foreword to “Phases in Irish History” MACNEILL suggested that “[n]either apathy nor antipathy can ever bring out the truth of history”.⁶⁷ This gnomic phrase distils that

⁶¹ DUFFY (note 32), p. 250.

⁶² The transcript of a radio broadcast, given by MACNEILL, reproduced in MCMAHON / KENNEDY (note 8), pp. 89–90, is an especially clear statement of this viewpoint.

⁶³ EDWARDS (note 13), p. 286, castigates MACNEILL on this point.

⁶⁴ MACNEILL (note 14), p. 191.

⁶⁵ *Id.* (note 11), p. 144.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. xiv–xv. See also the overview provided by BYRNE (note 16), pp. 15–36.

⁶⁷ MACNEILL (note 19), p. vi.

complex attitude. This contrasts with the search for objective ‘fairness’, envisaged as an absence of emotion, that has animated much revisionist scholarship.⁶⁸

MACNEILL took his role as a public historian very seriously. His writing is clear; he has no problems translating technical terms into simpler equivalents and he deploys rhetoric well, shifting cadences when he wished to connect politically or emotionally with his audience. For example, in “Phases of Irish History”, a discussion of sixth-century Ireland develops into a heightened evocation of clashing empires, with a not altogether subtle nod to Ireland’s own political position in 1918. He even remarks:

[...] and I rejoice, I am sure we all rejoice, to see, in these days of clashing and crashing empires, that the clear idea of nationality, as if by the wonderful recreative power that is in nature, is rising in the esteem of good men all over the world, above and beyond the specious and seductive appeal of what has been called ‘the wider patriotism’. In this regard, too, our own country in that most remarkable period of its history may furnish something of a model.⁶⁹

At the same time, he warned his audience against believing comforting mythologies that linked the ancient Irish with biblical history.⁷⁰ The Irish were not a ‘Chosen People’; they were only special, insofar as every other people had its own value. Disentangling legend from fact was crucial in understanding the past.

MACNEILL’s commitment to the transformative power of public history has often been viewed as preventing him from completing book-length research. Thus, modern scholars lament that MACNEILL never produced a monograph or sustained study, such as ORPEN’s masterpiece.⁷¹ His three longer works, “Celtic Ireland”, “Phases of Irish History”, and “Early Irish Laws and Institutions” are all fix-ups of public lecture series, reprinted with minimal changes, apart from introductory matter written specially for the printed editions.⁷² It is certainly true that none of these volumes gather MACNEILL’s many insights into a single all-encompassing interpretation of early medieval Irish society. But, it is also worth considering MACNEILL’s stated opinion that the writing of a truly impartial national history was impossible;⁷³ he situated his work as either establishing critical foundations for further studies or as correctives to misunderstandings,

68 See for instance, Ciarán BRADY, *Constructive and Instrumental: The Dilemma of Ireland’s First ‘New Historians*, in: ID. (note 2), pp. 3–34; Alfred MARKEY, *Revisionisms and the Story of Ireland. From Sean O’Faolain to Roy Foster*, in: *Estudios Irlandeses O* (2005), pp. 91–101.

69 MACNEILL (note 19), p. 227.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

71 BYRNE (note 16), p. 35, remarks that “[h]e (MacNeill) never seems to have had the ambition to complete a definitive work”.

72 MACNEILL (note 11), pp. xi–xv; ID. (note 19), p. vi; ID. (note 22), pp. 5–55, is the longest by some measure.

73 His comments on this matter are usefully collected in Mairéad CAREW, *Eoin MacNeill and the Promotion of Celtic Studies in North America*, online: <http://historyhub.ie/eoin-macneill-celtic-studies-america> (last accessed 15/05/2019).

both academic and popular. Furthermore, specialized research needed to continue. As he pointed out in his preface to “Celtic Ireland”, written in 1921:

There is still work for many pioneers to do [...] As things are, it would be a vain ambition to seek the credit of having said “the last word” on almost any matter of Irish antiquity; but on almost any, in some respect there is still the first word to be said.⁷⁴

This was combined with a conviction that writing an over-arching narrative of Irish history was impossible to complete without bias, especially for a single person. In this context, MACNEILL’s support of collaborative projects, under the auspices of the IMC,⁷⁵ is the closest he could come to moving through that space beyond apathy and antipathy. Significantly, perhaps, despite a growing ecology of textbooks and monographs, early Irish history still lacks a singular grand narrative, although the value of one would rightly be questioned by modern scholars. It could be argued that MACNEILL was realistic: the reaches of the early Irish past were only accessible through painstaking individual research combined with group projects. Nevertheless, MACNEILL’s public lectures do articulate his vision of history far more clearly than anything to be found in his more obviously specialist works, which tend to be tightly focussed, lacking the discursiveness of his talks. They are for scholars. But, MACNEILL understood that history was of cultural importance for all society. For him, making the medieval relevant was a duty and this is where, apart from specialist works, MACNEILL’s vision as a scholar, still resonates.

Yet, there are other factors that need to be considered. MACNEILL’s debate with ORPEN hardened a contrast between an early medieval Ireland, ending abruptly and artificially with the arrival of the Normans in 1169, and a medieval Ireland of natives and newcomers. Even now, relatively few historians of one period, cross-over substantially to the other, despite the clear connections between the two.⁷⁶ This has truncated scholarly understandings of a complex period of Irish history and has tended to make early Ireland appear *sui generis*, self-enclosed and immeasurably remote. Moreover, contemporary scholars of Irish history remain wary of bias and emotion, distrusting their power to twist the past. This fear is justified yet, in the process, it is arguable that something has been lost. Few current scholars of early medieval Ireland connect with popular audiences with the same regularity, and to the same extent, as MACNEILL. In their place, popular romanticized studies of a ‘Celtic’ world predominate, recycling those same fantastical mythologies that Eoin MACNEILL, himself, had long ago disproved.

⁷⁴ MACNEILL (note 11), p. xiv.

⁷⁵ MCMAHON / KENNEDY (note 8), pp. 1–94.

⁷⁶ There are, of course, exceptions, especially in the area of Church reform. For instance, Marie-Therese FLANAGAN is equally at home in pre- and post-Norman Ireland, see for a representative study ID., *The Transformation of the Irish Church in the Twelfth Century*, Woodbridge 2010. More recently, Donnchadh Ó CORRÁIN, *The Irish Church, its Reform and the English Invasion*, Dublin 2017, covers some similar ground.