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**A REVIEW OF IRELAND'S IMMORTALS:  
A HISTORY OF THE GODS OF IRISH MYTH**

Mark Williams, *Ireland's Immortals: A History of the Gods of Irish Myth* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), hardback, pp. xvi+578, ISBN 9781400883325.

*Reviewed by Clare Downham*

The purpose of Mark Williams's book is "to trace the divinities of Irish mythology—most frequently known as the *Túatha Dé Danann* [...] from the Early Middle Ages through to the present" (xiii). The author writes as a literary critic rather than a historian, and this explains both the book's strengths as well as its weaknesses. There is a sophisticated awareness in the book that the divine characters of literature bear a tenuous relationship with the gods of pre-Christian Ireland, and the representation of deities reflects the cultural mores of each passing generation. Nevertheless, the volume may disappoint some readers who are beguiled by the sub-title "A History of the Gods of Irish Myth" only to discover that "It is not intended to be a complete history of the supernatural beings of Irish tradition [...] nor is it intended as a contribution to comparative mythology or the history of religions" (xiv). The book focuses in depth on an important but small range of texts and art works, which represent different historical phases of interest in Irish deities. Williams achieves this goal with panache, providing a wonderful range of new insights into the sources he has selected.

The chapters cover a wide arc of Irish history. Chapter One considers the religious background of the Iron Age and the process of Christianization and takes account of recent scholarship. The next chapter considers two well-known early narratives involving otherworldly figures—"The Adventure of Connla" and "The Voyage of Bran"—which are assigned an eighth-century date, although some scholars have argued an earlier date for the former. Moving forward chronologically, Chapter Three explores two ninth- or tenth-century sagas, "The Wooing of Étain" and the second "Battle of Moytura," where supernatural elements loom large. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the synthesis of Irish origin myths in "The Book of Invasions of Ireland" combined mythology and identity, and this complex text is discussed in depth in Chapter Four. The two chapters on late medieval Irish literature are particularly innovative in their consideration of "The Colloquy of the Elders" and "The Fosterage of the House of Two Vessels." Additionally, the well-known story of "The Tragic Deaths of the Children of Lir" is considered alongside "The Tragic Deaths of the Children of Tuireann." The final medieval text to be discussed

is the fifteenth-century “The Battle of Ventry,” where the identity assigned to supernatural figures is interpreted as a coded call for accommodation between people of Gaelic and English identity in Ireland.

The second part of the book deals with modern conceptions of the gods. Chapter Seven leaps to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discussions of Irish deities in English literature. Chapter Eight explores the writings of W. B. Yeats and George Russell, while Chapter Nine deals with the Celtic Revival in Scotland, providing intriguing insights into the literary figure “Fiona Macleod” (William Sharp) and the painter John Duncan. Chapter Ten discusses a broader range of writers who have sought to combine elements of Irish myth with Eastern philosophy, while the penultimate chapter looks at twentieth-century representations of the God Óengus and the portrayal of Irish gods in different contexts, ranging across classical music, fantasy and children’s literature, and twentieth-century paganism. Chapter Twelve provides concluding thoughts and considers the recent vandalism of John Sutton’s life-size statue of Manannan mac Lir near Limavady, County Derry, which demonstrates that controversy still surrounds depictions of Irish otherworldly figures. Few scholars could be as skilled as Williams in evaluating such a wide range of material from Old Irish texts to near-contemporary sculpture. The resulting read is both engaging and richly informative. It is testament to the engaging nature of the book that I enjoyed it so much but also felt frustrated by it at times.

One quibble is that the focus on a narrow selection of sources inhibits a full understanding of the broader context in which artists in different centuries sought to interpret the Irish gods. It is disappointing that arguably the most famous epic of early medieval Ireland, *Táin bó Cuailnge*, is not discussed at length, a decision that the author recognizes as being controversial (490). One of the most striking early texts on kingship and the supernatural, *Baile in Scáil*, receives little mention. Furthermore, the large body of *dindshenchas* and the vast corpus of bardic poetry are only touched on very briefly (248, 115–17, 182–84, 348). Given the dedication of chapters of the book to the Celtic Revival, the lack of detailed discussion around the figure of Cú Chulainn or the notion of a sovereignty goddess<sup>1</sup> seems surprising, as these were rallying figures in the call for Ireland’s independence. When it comes to modern culture, I would question the validity of distinguishing between high and popular culture (434, 496). Popular manifestations of interest, such as folklore (which offers an abundance of material on immortal beings both in the English and Irish language) and contemporary videogames, are excluded. Of course, to have written a comprehensive history of “Ireland’s Immortals” would be a gargantuan task, but this book appears to skirt around some of the most popular topics and major sources. The overall impression is a set of interesting case studies, rather than a cohesive “History of the Gods.”

The book sometimes displays an outsider's perspective on Ireland. The fact that "Ireland's Immortals" were not originally conceived as a pantheon like the Germanic or Greco-Roman gods and acknowledged as such in medieval literature is viewed as an "oddity" (xv). Similarly, that the Irish gods do not gather in a single abode like Asgard or Mount Olympus is also regarded as an "oddity" (30). Surely what is normal and what is odd here are a matter of perspective. The Irish penchant for localized nature deities and shadowy figures of over-arching significance, rather than a Germanic or classical family of clearly delineated deities with distinct attributes, is not (in the present reviewer's mind) "odd," for it bears comparison not just with other Celtic-speaking lands (10–11) but also with various other polytheistic religions. It is almost as if the Irish divinities are being measured up to an exterior standard and found to be irritatingly vague (5, 38).

There is also a tendency to downplay pan-Celtic influences on Irish myths and to highlight British or Anglo-Irish influence. These arguments would be more persuasive if they were better situated in the context of earlier historiography. The evidence for the wide geographical range of some deities across Celtic-speaking lands in prehistory is not discussed at length. Doubt is cast on the significance of Lug, whose name is linked with various Continental place-names, by citing a secondary source—but without any explanation of its content (17). The suggestion is made that the development of core figures in the Irish pantheon, including Dagda and Nuadu, came about through Romano-British influence (12, 36–38), while other deities including Anu and Lir grew in significance (if they were not entirely invented) in a post-conversion context (189–90, 255, 326). The author hints at a perceived religious evolution from multiple local deities towards a small, organized pantheon, but within the history of religions the teleology of an evolutionary model, with its embedded notions of progress, may be challenged. The crafting of a "proper mythology" for Ireland is largely attributed to Yeats (334–35). The second part of the book is concerned with the recasting of Irish mythological figures in modern English literature in Scotland and Ireland. However, these chapters eschew discussion of post-medieval literature in the Irish language, and I would suggest that this exaggerates British and Anglo-Irish influence in the history of the Irish gods.

Finally, I would take issue with a few points relating to early history. The idea that Brigit was a goddess who was turned into a saint is not debated (483), but should have been. Thomas Charles-Edwards is one of the scholars who have suggested otherwise, and it cannot be regarded as a closed case.<sup>2</sup> I disagree with the statement that St. Patrick's writings "tell us next to nothing...about the non-Christian beliefs and practices" (12) as, apart from reference to idols, Patrick's *Confessio* does offer insights into women throwing gifts as offerings, which could reflect pre-Christian practice. St. Patrick mentions honey being

offered as a sacrifice and the notable ritual of male nipple-sucking, which Patrick refuses to do out of reverence for the Christian God. The Battle of Clontarf was fought in 1014, not 1016 (78).<sup>3</sup> Viking wars in Ireland did not end in the late tenth century (128). The notion that being “more or less naked from the waist down” was “standard non-aristocratic Irish dress” seems to owe more to medieval anti-Irish propaganda than reality (119).<sup>4</sup> Of course, it's easy for a reviewer to be nitpicky when their own area of expertise matches a small sub-section of the overall work. What is really impressive in this book is Mark Williams's ability to bring together modern English and medieval Irish literature to see how Irish deities have been represented at different times. It is a beautifully written analysis, bursting with ideas and new insights, and it deserves to be an influential monograph in the study of Irish myths.

### Notes

1. i.e., a female deity representing Ireland or its earlier constituent kingdoms.
2. T. M. Charles-Edwards, “Brigit (439/452–524/526),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/3427>. See most recently Noel Kissane, *Saint Brigid of Kildare: Life, Legend and Cult* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2017).
3. For a recent summary of the battle, see S. Duffy, *Brian Boru and the Battle of Clontarf* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2014).
4. See for example Christopher James McDonough, ed. and trans., *Warner of Rouen, Moriut: A Norman Latin Poem from the Early Eleventh Century* (Leiden: Brepols, 1995), 74–75 and J. Gillingham, “The Beginnings of English Imperialism,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 5.4 (1992), 392–409.