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Locating Place and Landscape in Early Insular Literature

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PLACE AND LANDSCAPE PERMEATE early Insular literature. Placenames are created as the two massive, mythological bulls throw each other about the countryside in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* (“The Cattle Raid of Cooley”).¹ The *Dindsenchas* corpus overflows with placename lore, providing origin stories for over two hundred places.² Cosmological treatises, such as the Hiberno-Latin *Liber De Ordine Creaturarum* (“The Book of the Order of Creatures”), attempt a comprehensive survey of the natural and supernatural universe, while Adomnán’s *De Locis Sanctis* does the same for human-built holy places.³ Across the Irish Sea, the natural world also looms large in Anglo-Saxon literature: the Seafarer treads the path of the exile on an icy seascape; the speaker of *The Wife’s Lament* resides in a dreary earth-hall overgrown with briars; and Grendel dwells in perhaps the most critically discussed early medieval landscape: his horrible mere.⁴ Cuthbert and Guthlac seek out wilderness hermitages in their Lives, the poet of the Old English *Exodus* transforms the Egyptian desert into a northern Germanic forest, and earthly locales are carefully constructed in Blickling homilies XI and XVI.⁵ Additionally, while not the focus of this issue of the *Journal of Literary Onomastics*, we would be remiss not to mention a similar impulse in Middle Welsh (e.g., the conjuring up of trees to battle in *Kat Goden*; the focus on travel and land transaction in *Breuddhyd Maxen Wledig* [“The Dream of Maxen Wledig”]; Dafydd ap Gwilym’s nature poetry) and Old Norse literature (e.g., the she-troll’s cave at the bottom of a waterfall in *Grettis saga*; the centrality of the world tree, Yggdrasil, in cosmography; the focus on both the homestead and travel through the landscape in the sagas).⁶ In an age of environmental crisis, this feature of early Insular literature deserves our scholarly attention. These landscapes become important cultural places—irreducible aspects of human experience which can teach us a great deal about how medieval peoples connected with their landscapes historically and, potentially, how we might interact with the environment today.

Drawing on Lawrence Buell (1995)—one of the first scholars to develop criteria for “eco-centric” literature—and his successors, medievalists have begun, just within the past fifteen years or

¹ See O’Rahilly (1970; 1976); Kinsella (2002); Siewers (2009). See also Matthew Holmberg’s contribution to this issue.

² Whitley Stokes edited prose *Dindsenchas* tales from select manuscripts and Edward Gwynn published a collection of metrical *Dindsenchas* from a wider variety of manuscripts, including the Book of Leinster. See Stokes (1892; 1893; 1894); Gwynn (1991). See also, Bowen (1975-1976, 115). See also the essays by Kevin Murray and Dagmar Schlüter in this issue.

³ Díaz y Díaz (1972); Smyth (2011); Bieler (1965); O’Loughlin (2007). See also Patrick P. O’Neill’s contribution to this issue.

⁴ See Krapp and Dobbie (1936); Klinck (1992); Fulk, Bjork, and Niles (2008).

⁵ See Colgrave (1940; 1985); Krapp and Dobbie (1936); Krapp (1931); Wright (1993); Morris (1880). See also Danielle Cudmore’s essay in this issue.

⁶ For Middle Welsh literary landscapes, see Haycock (2007); Roberts (2005); Davies (2007); McMullen (2011); Bromwich (1982). For the Old Norse, see Jónsson (1936); Byock (2005; 2009); Larrington (1996); and, for example, Pálsson and Edwards (1989).

so, to take seriously the various ways nature, landscape, and place came together in imaginative literature. With the concurrent development of ecocriticism (ecological criticism), the study of medieval landscapes—both real and literary—has drawn increased attention. One feature that all of these studies stress is the variety and diversity of methods that can be used to explore medieval landscapes (including cognition, temporality, geography, gender, sexuality, subjectivity, spirituality, psychology, and politics, among others). Many of these works, which have helped frame the way scholars read the landscape today, make use of a broad approach to help understand the landscape: examining regions, physical landscapes, and “nature.”⁷ Another more narrowly focused strand of scholarship deals primarily with literary landscapes, as well as the more theoretical construction of “place.”⁸ Most recently, following Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, eco-materialism and object-oriented ontology has gripped the field, with ecocritics offering investigations into the agency of the non-human natural world.⁹ These studies have established medieval literary landscapes as a topic worth closer examination, a field rich with work but also with room to grow (especially into the earlier medieval period).

While ecocriticism is a relatively new discipline, the study of the early Irish landscape has intrigued scholars for centuries. The rigorous study of Irish placenames has been ongoing since the seventeenth century and was established more fully with the Ordnance Survey in 1824. Endeavors like this survey and John O’Donovan’s edition of *The Annals of the Four Masters* (1848-1851) gave rise to perhaps the two most important Irish placename publications: P. W. Joyce’s *The Origin and History of Irish Names of Places* (1883-1887) and Edmund Hogan’s *Onomasticon Goedelicum* (1910). Since these works, there has been more placename scholarship published than can be recounted in this introduction, both in full-length studies and journals specifically dedicated to the study of this onomastic lore. Innumerable archaeological and geographical studies go hand in hand with placename scholarship—but these too go beyond the scope of this introduction. There are, however, several studies worth mentioning that bridge the gaps between geography and landscape,

⁷ Ainsworth and Scott (2000) explore how medieval and early modern landscapes combine reality (or nature) and imagination (or human agency), especially in terms of “regions.” The volume operates from the premise that Europe was preoccupied with regionalism and the assertion of regional identities; the contributions reveal the many factors that need to be accounted for when considering region and landscape. An example of the more traditional and less literary-focused scholarship that evaluates of medieval landscapes is Gardiner and Rippon (2007). Hanawalt and Kiser (2008) is an important addition to the related field of “nature” in the Middle Ages. This volume questions the “problematic ontological status of the category of ‘nature’ itself” (3), as well as the place of the nonhuman natural world in the history of scholarship. A central component of “nature” studies is the nature/culture divide, as well as how to deal with this notion as a binary structure.

⁸ Tomasch and Gilles (1998) examine medieval “geographical desire.” Hanawalt and Kobiak (2000) is one of the first volumes to begin to investigate medieval practices of writing about space and place. This collection examines the various ways “space” is perceived, conceived, and lived in during the Middle Ages, including the mapping, use, and definition of urban space, the ecclesiastical practice of space, or the use of space for performance. Two later volumes build on these previous collections but add landscape as a unifying theme, thereby bringing the element of human contact with the land into sharper focus. Howe and Wolfe (2002) view European medieval landscape as artifact, as territory constructed by medieval people on several interrelated levels, and comment on the “deep ecology” of the Middle Ages. Landscape, by virtue of its being, bears the mark of human design and the essays in this volume approach the topic from this angle. The essays in Lees and Overing (2006) are also preoccupied with the concept of place and landscape. This volume concerns itself with how places are made on physical and literal levels and then how they become culturally construed and recorded. Both volumes arrange their contributions so that essays on actual places in the landscape come first, followed by textual or imagined landscapes.

⁹ See, especially, the essays in Cohen and Duckert (2013).

or archaeology and landscape. Alfred P. Smyth's *Celtic Leinster: Towards an Historical Geography of Early Irish Civilization A.D. 500-1600* (1982) is a good example of the former category. Smyth attempts to reconstruct geography and settlement-patterns by combining topographical information with genealogies and annals. Elizabeth Fitzpatrick's more recent *Royal Inauguration in Gaelic Ireland c. 1100-1600: A Cultural Landscape Study* (2004) is a significant contribution to how archaeology can aid cultural landscape studies. Fitzpatrick's study re-examines the connection between prehistoric "ritual" sites and medieval Irish royal inaugurations, arguing that emerging royal dynasts took an innovative interest in "antique" landscape—living in, altering, and enhancing (with new monuments) these "ceremonial" landscapes in order to validate the right to rule (and create a pedigree for the king).

The presence of the natural world in early Irish tales, poetry, and other sources has resulted in a growing interest in the landscape in medieval Ireland, especially given the new developments in ecocriticism, landscape perception, and place studies. Several recent volumes, in addition to a fair number of individual articles and monographs, reveal this general trend, and present a wide-range of landscape-related studies, utilizing such disciplines as geography, archaeology, and literary criticism.¹⁰ These earlier publications culminate in *Landscapes of Cult and Kingship*. This collection explores specifically royal and lordly landscapes, as well as certain ceremonies, beliefs, and customs (especially sacred kingship) that amassed around such landscapes in prehistory and the medieval period. The essays bring together the physical landscape, kingship literature, and onomastic evidence. Additionally, the editors emphasize the importance of understanding place in their study: "Places are portals to history and identity and it is within the landscape itself, among the monuments and other significant places, that archaeology, history, onomastics and literature meet, for it is here that all human beliefs, aspirations and endeavours are forged."¹¹ This volume showcases the dynamic ways the study of place can lead toward a greater understanding of the landscape in scholarship on medieval Ireland. Two recent monographs specifically deal with the importance of place and landscape in early Ireland. In his *Landscape Perception in Early Celtic Literature*, Francesco Benozzo (2004) attempts to formulate a theory of landscape perception, especially making use of phenomenology to connect layers of landscape with layers of thought. He explains that the tales connect places with their own past, with both mythological and historical consistency, and that, through this connection, the landscape becomes its own legendary tradition. While this is an important monograph on landscape in medieval Irish and Welsh literature, Benozzo's approach is somewhat flawed. In *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape*, Alfred K. Siewers (2009, 86) writes that, "Benozzo's full identification abstractly of landscape with tradition removes the ecocritical potential from his work, preventing him from fully exploring the mediating and fluid role of archipelagic landscape as embodying an overlap of topography and culture." More than the "tradition in spatial form," Siewers argues that the creation of place in Irish literature exposes a

¹⁰ *Surveying Ireland's Past: Multidisciplinary Essays in Honour of Anngret Simms* (Clarke, Prunty, and Hennessy, 2004) shows the interdisciplinarity of this field in its thirty-some contributions, including studies on specific places like Dublin and various medieval manors, the connection of the landscape with economy in bardic poetry, how ruins were perceived throughout the ages, and the sense of place evocable from various minor placenames, among others. While not all of the papers here deal with the Middle Ages, they do provide a good state of play for the field. The fact of this interdisciplinary cooperation is further confirmed by the Tara Project, conducted under the aegis of the Discovery Programme (since 1991), and Bhreathnach (2005). One of the goals of the Discovery Programme's Tara Research Project is to employ an "inter-disciplinary approach involving anthropology, archaeology, history, linguistics, literary criticism and onomastics" (vii) to yield a greater understanding of Tara. This volume does just that: studying Tara from a variety of approaches to show the richness of this place in early Irish sources

¹¹ Schot, Newman, and Bhreathnach (2011, xvi).

sense of the tradition melding with the physical topography. The landscape portrayed in the texts reveals traces of culture, tradition, law, society, and belief which can more profitably be described as an overlapping of topography and tradition, rather than the tradition in spatial form. For now, *Strange Beauty* is the last word on the subject, though the editors of this special issue eagerly await a forthcoming monograph from Amy Mulligan.

As with early Ireland, there has been a great deal of work done on Anglo-Saxon placenames and in English historical landscape studies. The later Anglo-Saxon landscape is particularly interesting for the landscape historian because, in the ninth and tenth centuries, the English landscape entered into its second phase (of three) in the chronology of villages and fields (and, therefore, the towns and manors planned or expanded in this period are the basis for many today).¹² W. G. Hoskins (1955) proclaims himself the first scholar to deal with the historical evolution of the English landscape in his *The Making of the English Landscape*. The importance of Hoskins's seminal study cannot be overstated, as he established landscape history as a new and proper branch of historical study. Hoskins famously describes the English landscape as a "palimpsest" and structures his study on the ways the landscape changed from pre-Roman and Roman Britain through the twenty-first century. His idea of the landscape as palimpsest has been a lasting one and this "landmark" study paved the way for further historical landscape studies and for developments in placename scholarship, especially in the work of Margaret Gelling and, more recently, Della Hooke (whose work uses the landscape to study Anglo-Saxon society and culture, combining archaeology and history).¹³

The study of landscape and literature has a longer history in England than Ireland, but much of the more up-to-date scholarship—that which links landscape and place in interdisciplinary ways—deals with later medieval and early modern England.¹⁴ A *locus classicus* for the genre, even though it gives greater attention to European literature at large (rather than particularly focusing on English literature), is Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter's *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World*.¹⁵ This wide-ranging work explores landscapes in literature and art in many European cultures, examining broad trends as well as providing more detailed studies on the landscape of paradise, gardens, and seasons. When dealing with Old English literature, Pearsall and Salter note two types of landscape representation. They argue that the seascape in *The Seafarer*, while definitely allegorical, is better defined as typological (a description valid in terms of natural reality and personal experience but subsumed in a larger purpose concerning itself with spiritual and conceptual truths). Andrew's imprisonment in *Andreas* and the mere in *Beowulf*, however, present symbolic landscapes (where the

¹² See, for example, Reynolds (2003).

¹³ See Gelling (1978; 1984). In the former volume, her aim is to show how the evidence of placenames can bear on our knowledge of English history, especially in terms of the linguistic origins of names (as well as how historians or archaeologists can draw on her work). The second work, *Place-names in the Landscape*, aims to study settlement- and village-names by reference to their topographical setting (i.e., near rivers, marshes, valleys, hills, trees, etc.). Hoskins and, in many ways, Gelling are succeeded by Della Hooke, a landscape historian who takes a more interdisciplinary approach. In *The Landscape of Anglo-Saxon England* (1996), Hooke discusses many aspects of the human connection to the Anglo-Saxon landscape, including how the landscape was seen by the Anglo-Saxons, how it was affected by economic conditions, and how the administrative framework was set up to "exploit" it. For an idea about the current state of play in placename and historical landscape studies, see Higham and Ryan (2011) for a valuable summary.

¹⁴ See, for example Lynch (2002) or Rudd (2007). One exception is Overing and Osborn (1994). This somewhat unusual book discusses the significance of place in Anglo-Saxon England and especially Iceland, combining a personal study of the landscape with literature. While the book often reads like a travelogue, their approach was, in many respects, groundbreaking in Anglo-Saxon studies.

¹⁵ Pearsall and Salter (1973).

landscape symbolizes the rhetorical amplification of the protagonist's state of mind rather than with the reality of the narrative context). Several more recent studies have done much to combine cultural geography, landscape studies, and place.¹⁶ Jennifer Neville's *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* and Nicholas Howe's work on place and landscape in Anglo-Saxon England are, perhaps, the most important of these (at least until the forthcoming publication of Nicole Guenther Discenza's *Inhabited Spaces: Anglo-Saxon Constructions of Place* [2016]). Neville's monograph explores how the natural world is represented in Old English poetry, closely dealing with literary landscapes. Like many before her, she notes the Anglo-Saxon fearfulness before the natural world but sets as her frame that a single, "Anglo-Saxon" world view or cosmological scheme did not seem to exist. Her monograph explores how the landscape and natural world can define the state ascribed to humanity, reflect the necessity (and fragility) of human society, and contribute to depicting exemplary individuals. In his work, Nicholas Howe (2002, 91) identifies three categories of landscape perception in Old English and Anglo-Latin texts: 1. Inheriting: to come with an attached history or signs of prior occupation (e.g., Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and *The Ruin*); 2. Inventing: to order or impose organizing divisions on the natural terrain so that it becomes a human creation (as in land charters); 3. Imagining: to relate the features of the topography to one's psychological and spiritual lives (e.g., *The Wanderer* and *The Wife's Lament*). While Howe acknowledges the artificiality of these categories (and, indeed, there are conceptual problems with these divisions), the significance of the landscape in Anglo-Saxon literature is clear from his extensive work.¹⁷

A common trend in most of these works is to focus on the Irish or Anglo-Saxon period exclusively, rather than acknowledging any larger "British Isles" context. While Neville does often briefly compare the representation of the natural world in Anglo-Saxon England to Irish sources (albeit, in an extremely generalized and careless way), Ireland is rarely addressed in much of the other scholarship. Howe's work, for example, would benefit from a broader range of comparative study—not just Irish or Welsh material, but also Norse sagas. In contrast, this volume, *Insular Landscapes in the Early Middle Ages*, seeks to place Irish and Anglo-Saxon literary traditions in conversation. Underlying the editors' concept of this collection is our working hypothesis that the role of place, and the naming of these places (while often a significant feature of many literatures globally) is particularly distinctive in the early medieval Insular world. We posit that representations of landscape in the various literatures of early medieval Britain and Ireland not only warrant comparison, but would benefit from greater attention, not only severally (as has been the typical approach thus far), but collectively as reflexes of the same cultural phenomenon. Although we will not hazard a guess about the reasons for these similarities, we think the question is worth asking; and we hope this volume will encourage ongoing comparative work in this area, not to mention increasing contact between scholars who specialize in literatures on both sides of, and spanning, the Irish Sea.

The reader will notice that this volume is very loosely arranged in two sections, the first

¹⁶ See Lees and Overing (2006), which melds landscape studies and place studies with half of its contributions dealing with Anglo-Saxon topics. Lavezzo (2006) is a good example of the possibilities of cultural geography for the field (although the only aspect of the Anglo-Saxon period that she deals with is Ælfric). This monograph is cognizant of how geography and literature worked together to produce an image of English isolation and how this geographic marginality also had a certain social authority. Clarke (2006) focuses on symbolic landscapes which become associated with ideological formulations of English space and identity. She is primarily concerned with literary representations of the *locus amoenus* (and its opposite) in both Old and Middle English literature, including England as an Edenic island, and the role of these symbolic pastoral landscapes in fashioning English national and cultural identity

¹⁷ See also Howe (2000; 2008).

focusing primarily on the literatures of medieval Ireland, and the second on the literatures of Anglo-Saxon England. We refer to these “literatures” in the plural to emphasize that, for the purposes of this volume (at least), we consider the particular language of the texts which emanate from these cultures to be unimportant for addressing such questions as we wish to investigate here. Too often in modern scholarship, especially that of a theoretical nature, Hiberno- and Anglo-Latin texts—when not ignored altogether—appear to be regarded as somehow ideologically separate from parallel, contemporaneous vernacular literatures. It is as if Latin, by its very nature, is tacitly regarded by some scholars as reflective merely of an aloof, foreign, and ultimately ecclesiastical agenda; while at the same time, the vernacular is credulously taken to provide ready access to a more authentic, autochthonous worldview. We find this distinction to be inaccurate and misleading. So, attempting to avoid these pitfalls, we have instead adopted a more inclusive perspective; one that recognizes the existence of an Insular culture that sometimes and in some locales might be expressed in Middle Irish, elsewhere in Old English or other vernaculars, and throughout in Latin. We further propose that this more holistic approach—emphasizing the value of comparative study and foregrounding the cultural unity of the constituent traditions of Britain and Ireland over and above their distinctions—would benefit other branches of scholarship on the early medieval Insular world as well.

Let us turn now to the individual studies. The first three articles herein all focus on the medieval Irish *dinnsbenchas*, a body of literature consisting of stories about places and how they received their names. The word *dinnsbenchas*, perhaps describing a genre in early Irish literature, is translated variously as “lore of places,” or “history of notable places.” The first two articles consider, variously, the conception of *dinnsbenchas* as a genre in medieval Ireland, as well as its role in the broader literary tradition. In the first contribution, Kevin Murray suggests that “[t]he formation of the *dinnsbenchas* corpus...represents a deliberate fashioning and cohesive structuring of disparate component elements from the late Old Irish period onwards...[which] has deliberate genre origins in medieval Ireland.”¹⁸ He concludes that “the materials preserved in this corpus, though disparate in origin, have been largely harmonized in form, style, and purpose to create a distinctive genre.”¹⁹ Considering the same material, Dagmar Schlüter approaches the *dinnsbenchas* tradition in complementary fashion. She suggests that the *dinnsbenchas* material was a “very typical and unique genre of medieval Irish literature with a wider international context...in the tradition of Isidore of Seville”²⁰ but that the *dinnsbenchas* also bear a “...historical component [that] could be exploited to its full potential by those who were involved in the transmitting them.”²¹ Prominent in both Murray’s and Schlüter’s discussions is the incorporation of *dinnsbenchas* material into other Old Irish narrative genres, a particular example of which is closely examined by Matthew Holmberg. In his contribution, Holmberg investigates the *dinnsbenchas* material included in the *Lebor na hUidre* recension of *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, addressing in particular how the scribe(s) working with this recension insinuated onomastic material into the text for localized political ends.

The following three articles focus primarily on topics of Anglo-Saxon interest. Patrick P. O’Neill’s contribution provides a convenient bridge between the sections, exemplifying just how deeply intertwined the Irish and English traditions were. His article discusses the Anglo-Saxon monk Bede’s adaptation of Adomnán’s Hiberno-Latin *De Locis Sanctis*, focusing particularly on the latter’s adaptation and use of diagrams representing holy sites. O’Neill concludes that the diagrams in Bede’s version functioned “...not so much as illustrations ancillary to the main text, but as

¹⁸ See below, pp. 11-12.

¹⁹ See below, p. 17.

²⁰ See below, p. 29.

²¹ See below, p. 29.

highlights in their own right of the central events of Christ's salvific mission... as if [Bede] were inviting readers to approach his work in the spirit of biblical exegesis."²² The final two articles consider the relationship between natural and man-made, architectural aspects of landscape. Danielle Cudmore looks closely at the Old English *Blickling Homilies* XI and XVI, showing how, for the homilist, these locales, shaped by combined natural and human influence "...become embodiments of the interconnectedness of all creation and of the interplay between the divine and the earthly, as well as of past, present, and future times."²³ She concludes that "The homilies' emphases on physical places and corporeal experience not only stresses the spiritual need for bodily penance but affirms a mode of perceiving cosmic history through tangible, present places. Thus, it is possible to view these places as both historical and performative events which also have bearing on the present world of the audience, and the future world it will one day inhabit."²⁴ Finally, applying a very different method, Samantha Leggett also examines human and architectural effects on the landscape, through the lens of archaeology. Specifically, Leggett discusses the competition between secular and religious development of the landscape, and what placenames can reveal about their fluid relationship over time. Focusing on four places (i.e., Bamburgh and York, Winchester, London, and Oxford) her conclusions challenge currently received opinions about the relative power differential between Church and royal authority in Anglo-Saxon England. Leggett suggests that, although "...[w]e may never be able to fully reconstruct the subtleties of power between churches and the state in Anglo-Saxon England...the image that is emerging from this work is dynamic and more nuanced than many authors allow."²⁵

It remains only to thank the authors who contributed to this volume, not only for their contributions, but also for their patience with the editors, as this project evolved over the course of more than a year. We would also like to offer special thanks to Stefan Jurasinski, General Editor of the *Journal of Literary Onomastics*, both for accepting our proposal enthusiastically, and for his support for the project as it came to fruition. Besides having learned a great deal, we have had a great deal of fun.

²² See below, p. 54.

²³ See below, p. 61.

²⁴ See below, p. 72.

²⁵ See below, p. 90.

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