

John Marsden, *Galloglas: Hebridean and West Highland Mercenary Warrior Kindreds in Medieval Ireland*. East Linton: Tuckwell, 2003. 162 pp. \$35.50 (Can), \$26.95 (US), £16.99. ISBN 1862322511

Joining the recent outpouring and expansion of historical writing on medieval Celtic themes, John Marsden's latest contribution provides a welcome exploration of a hitherto largely uncelebrated collective. Making a fine addition to the increasing literature concerning Scotland's Western Isles and their connections with both Scandinavia and Ireland, *Galloglas* is exemplary in its gathering of sparse sources to provide a full and insightful narrative. It is a welcome addition to the new stream of both Irish and Scottish medieval histories that push beyond the traditional themes to explore in new directions.

Giving due credit to Gerard A. Hayes-McCoy's pioneering work on the Galloglas, Marsden makes full use of available materials to explore both the rise and fall of this mercenary warrior class in medieval Ireland; placing them in their wider historical and ethnic contexts. After setting the stage of Scandinavian, Irish, Scottish, and Norman interactions in the mid to late medieval era, Marsden breaks down the Galloglas into the 6 kindreds comprising the vast majority of available records: the MacSweeneys, the MacDonnells, the MacSheehys, the MacRorays, the MacDowells, and the McCabes. To each of these groups, Marsden devotes a separate section exploring their origins, expansions, and central interactions with the other Galloglas groups. While regrettably conjectural as regards the origins of the different *kindreds*, the lack of traditional sources is well supplemented by both name analysis, and an appropriately cautious use of clan histories. As with any historian matching evidence between chronicles, there is an unfortunate amount of approximation done in identifying individuals common to more than one source. However, he carefully leads the reader through murky waters and names both too common and too often changing. One point he clearly expounds is the common descent of four of the *kindreds* from Somerled of Argyll, providing an important connection with this notable 'Lord of the Isles' and the key

ethnic connection between these Irish mercenaries and the Western Isles.

Although Marsden's tracing of the histories of the *kindreds* becomes somewhat difficult to follow at times, the included genealogies provide, with frequent checking, adequate support to follow these complicated and incomplete family histories. The writing leaves no doubt that the author has entirely immersed himself in his research of the Galloglas, drawing upon a wide variety of sources even outside of Scotland and Ireland. Unfortunately, at times there is difficulty in pinpointing exactly what sources were used for specific information, as the author skims over anecdotes with sparse footnoting. However, the overarching argument of this book, the importance of these Galloglas to Ireland during several centuries of intermittent warfare, is well made. A tentative argument is put forward towards their importance initially beginning with Edward Bruce's invasion of Ireland. He convincingly argues that Edward's forces showed the native Irish the potential effectiveness of Hebridean and West Highland warriors against previously unmatched Norman precision and technology. A brilliant picture is painted of the mercenary warrior, armed with his traditional long axe, able to stand against Norman horsemen, and providing able protection for Irish lords. Thus, through the fourteenth century, their renown was made known, and through the fifteenth century their use became wide spread as a wider range of paymasters needed to match galloglas against galloglas. He argues that their peak was reached specifically in 1504 at Knockdoe, the largest battle of its kind in Irish history. However, Marsden also discusses the problems with supporting this type of mercenary warrior. The view that supporting these mercenaries through either 'coyne and livery' or grants of land eventually became too costly is logically presented, and he points to this as the problem leading to their eventual fall into disuse, and replacement by the Scottish Redshanks. Unlike the Galloglas, these 'seasonal warriors' could be called upon from Scotland in numbers great enough to combat those that could be raised by Queen Elizabeth.

The third chapter focuses on the Galloglas as warriors,

showing the common traits and descriptions that unified these groups of mercenaries. He argues strenuously as to the importance of the Galloglas in Irish warfare as the 'elite professional class', especially in the late medieval period. His argument, in large part, focuses around a logical examination of their usability as opposed to any abundance of sources to the point. The argument is still well made, despite the lack of records though, as he demonstrates the use of Galloglas by both the Northern Irish lords as well as the Anglo-Irish magnates of the Pale. They are shown as true mercenaries, fighting, especially in the later period, most often against one another, while being employed by rival factions. It is argued that the previous Irish mercenary warrior of choice, kern, were both to prone to previous loyalty and ineffective against Norman cavalry to continue to be used. The fourth chapter then attempts to put the Galloglas in the greater context of Scandinavian influence throughout the medieval era. However, at times this overview becomes too broad and might be better suited for an extended work on the patterns of Scandinavian influence as opposed to this work on the mercenary Irish, who, although distantly influenced, bear little comparison with the Scandinavian influence in Russia or Normandy.

Marsden has played the part of historical detective expertly throughout this work, finding scraps of information over an immense geographic and chronological range to weave together his view of the Galloglas. Unfortunately, the scarcity of his information, drawn mainly from several Irish chronicles, forces a large amount of conjecture. However, his presumptions always flow logically, and while occasionally very optimistic in nature, he does leave this information solely as hypotheses, often discussing several conceivable scenarios at length. In the end, this book is to be congratulated as it certainly represents the definitive work on the Galloglas; a story that was due to be told, and has been told well.

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