

Review Article

Surveying medieval Irish theology – the significance of the *Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium* for the study of the history of theology.¹

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Only occasionally does a work appear whose impact on our praxis of scholarship is so great that anyone working in the field must thereafter take account of it. Even fewer are the occasions when a work that is, of its nature, taxonomic and bibliographical can claim such a significance. An obvious case is Heinrich Denzinger’s *Enchiridion* of 1854, now in its forty-third edition, or within a smaller ambit *Clavis Patrum Latinorum* of Dekkers and Gaar, now in its third edition,² or in studies relating to Christianity in Ireland in the first millennium, J.F. Kenney’s *Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical* of 1929. Now, I believe, another such seminal work has appeared: ‘the key to the literature of the Irish.’ It is the work of Professor Donnchadh Ó Corráin and was published just prior to his death in 2017. In three large volumes it documents, describes, and gives a bibliographical guide to the state of contemporary scholarship for every literary production by an Irish writer prior to 1600. While other guides have concentrated on particular kinds of sources (Kenney on ‘ecclesiastical’ sources; his projected second volume never appeared) or focused on one language (e.g. the valuable list of Latin works by Lapidge and Sharpe from 1985³), this *clavis* seeks to document everything: for the first time we have a synopsis of writing by the Irish for a period of over a thousand years. During the course of its production many doubted that the task Ó Corráin had set himself was feasible, or even possible, or that, if completed, it could give equivalent attention to, for example, genealogical tracts, mostly in Irish, (n. 760-n.799), and the Latin works of Eriugena (n.438-n.457). Yet, looking at entry after entry one is staggered that Ó Corráin could not only assemble such a vast array of detail but orchestrate it so that others’ work is focused and lightened over the whole range of the material.

But while it should be obvious why this is a ‘must have item’ for those engaged in medieval studies or Irish studies, the appearance of these volumes has not yet aroused (more than two years after their appearance⁴) any similar interest or awareness among those engaged in theology or religious studies with reference to Ireland. Hence this review article whose purpose is to draw attention to the need for anyone interested in Irish Christianity to have these books as a first port of call in any study. However, before moving to some specific test cases, the most obvious point to draw from these volumes is that the vast majority of the extant material, whatever the language, is either explicitly religious in nature (whether that is a great gospel codex or

¹ *Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium: Medieval Irish Books and Texts (c. 400 – c. 1600)*, Corpus Christianorum Claves, Brepols, Turnhout 2017, 3 volumes with individual ISBNs: vol. 1: 978-2-503-57706-7; vol. 2: 978-2-503-57707-4; vol. 3: 978-2-503-57708-1; and with a distinct ISBN as a set: 978-2-503-54857-9, €875.

² And now see: the on-line ‘Clavis Clavium’ which, thankfully, is open access.

³ *A Bibliography of Celtic-Latin Literature 400-1200* (Dublin 1985).

⁴ The *clavis* was published at an event in the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin on 27 June 2017; Professor Ó Corráin died on 25 October 2017.

fragmentary set of homily notes in Old Irish) or produced is such close proximity to Christian belief (e.g. the genealogy *Ádam ar n-athair uile* [n. 796a]) that it is students of religion in Ireland who could possibly make the widest use of this work.⁵

Case 1: Columbanus (CLH n.327-n.338).

Columban of Bobbio (obit 615) is probably the individual who comes nearest the romantic ideal of the learned ascetic who leaves all, travels into a new culture, and there seeks out a life of learning and holiness. However, on consulting the standard edition of his works, G.S.M. Walker's *Opera Sancti Columbani*,⁶ one is presented with an immediate problem: there are works that are certainly from his pen, and others which certainly are not. Moreover, there is a long-lived debate as to whether he is the author of the *Instructiones* where the crucial evidence turns on the Latinity of the texts. Not only is this daunting for the newcomer, the level of philological expertise needed to follow the arguments both for and against Columbanian authorship is increasingly rare. However, by turning to n. 329 one gets a thorough list of the protagonists and is led to Clare Stancliffe's 1997 study with the crucial note: 'essential [reading]: proofs that these *instructiones* [sic] are genuine.'

Now anyone wishing to study this singularly productive monk has a guide at hand to sort the wheat from the chaff, locate the text within the tradition of modern scholarship, and get expert guidance around the pitfalls of secondary literature. I have already annotated my copy of Walker with the *CLH* numbers and suspect many others will do so in years to come.

Case 2: Muirchú (CLH n.217).

Any mention of the life (or lives) of St Patrick should bring a wry smile to the face of any scholar: the chasm between the obscure, probably fifth-century wayward bishop and the later paradigmatic orthodox patron and ecclesial founder could hardly be greater – and since this was first laid out in 1962 by Binchy,⁷ many have felt that there is little theology worth pursuing in the *vitae*. This is compounded by the fact that the standard Latin text by Bieler is less than convenient to use;⁸ and made more difficult in that one has to separate the late seventh-century theologian from most references to him in scholarship written in pursuit of the historical Patrick.

However, Muirchú's work is worth studying as he was supplying his church with the kind of credentials that Gregory of Tours supplied to the Franks and Bede supplied to the Angles and Saxons. Muirchú needed to show that the church in Ireland was part of

⁵ This was asserted by Kenney in 1929 and it was the preponderance of what he classed as 'ecclesiastical sources' that determined his decision to produce that volume first. However, since he never managed to publish the second volume on 'secular sources,' we never could get a comparative overview and had to rely on surveys (e.g. K. Hughes, *Early Christian Ireland: Introduction to the Sources* (Cambridge 1972)) or guides to specific topics (e.g. F. Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin 1988)).

⁶ Dublin 1957.

⁷ 'Patrick and his biographers: ancient and modern,' *Studia Hibernica* 2(1962)7-173. On this famous article, Ó Corráin adds the note: 'a landmark in Patrician criticism.'

⁸ *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin 1979).

the divine plan, linked to the past and the wider church, and a distinct *gens* within the plan of salvation.⁹ Moreover, he is one of the very few pre-Carolingian sources for the Easter vigil who interprets it in terms of the Paschal Mystery. He deserves far more attention than he has received and he needs to come out of the shadow of his subject. Muirchú well deserves a place in the list of Irish theologians quite apart from the Patrick question. But where should one start? The complex web of writing devoted both to him and his subject are laid out in the *Clavis* – with works from the nineteenth century until c.2015 cited – and it becomes clear which one needs to read on any particular problem. Those that deal with him as a source for the historical Patrick are located under n.216, while those that are more focused on the seventh-century writer are under n.217.

The hard slog of having to build a bibliographical database has been removed, and the challenge of reading rafts of material only to eliminate those which are irrelevant has been cut down to size. Perhaps Ó Corráin's labour will lead to a flurry of papers delving into the details of Muirchú's theological outlook.

Case 3: The corpus of penitentials (CLH n.579-84).

It is one of the better-known 'facts' of early medieval theology that the penitentials, whose origins lie in Ireland or areas of Irish theological influence,¹⁰ were 'the work around' for the impasse found in the Latin writers of the fifth century regarding the forgiveness of serious sins committed after baptism. Less frequently claimed for Ireland is that they also played a central role in the development of 'number piety'¹¹ and indulgences. It is also agreed that the notion of tariff penance owed a debt to monasticism's view of progressive growth in holiness through ascetical practice and ideas from native Irish law regarding crimes as being remedied through compensation. So penitentials are complex texts that defy simple categorisations or descriptions.

The value of the *CLH* in this case lies in that it brings the bibliography from the various disciplines that severally study the penitentials into one place. One cannot expect that any single scholar today will address the entire range of questions that any of these texts bring before us – that was probably last possible in the nineteenth century with the work of such men as William Reeves¹² – but to have the fruits of the various approaches all listed in the same place may save us from imagining that our particular base of learning is sufficient for their thorough exploration.

Case 4: Johannes Scottus Eriugena (CLH n. 451).

⁹ See T. O'Loughlin, 'Reading Muirchú's *Life of St Patrick* as a "Sacred Narration",' *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 76(2018)35-51.

¹⁰ See W. Kursawa, *Healing not Punishment: the Historical and Pastoral Networking of the Penitentials between the Sixth and the Eighth Centuries* (Turnhout 2017).

¹¹ Cf. O. Nussbaum, *Kloster, Priestermonch und Privatmesse: Ihr Verhältnis im Westen von den Anfängen bis zum hohen Mittelalter* (Bonn 1961).

¹² See 'Bishop William Reeves, Adomnán, and the beginning of historical theology in Ireland' in M. Empey, A. Ford and M. Moffat eds, *The Church of Ireland and its Past: History, Interpretation and Identity* (Dublin 2017), 124-143.

John ‘Born of Ireland’ is probably the most eminent Irish theologian of all time.¹³ Whether he is viewed as an interpreter of the Greek fathers, a neoplatonic philosopher, or a mystical theologian, no other figure can claim to come even near him as a subject of scholarly interest – and as such he has been the subject of several specialist guides in the past.¹⁴ But while there has been a wealth of studies, much to be welcomed, of John and the *via negativa* and of his relationship to his Greek sources, there are far fewer studies that situate him in his Carolingian context – for example he belongs to the first generation of western theologians who only knew Latin as a learned language (i.e. its sounds are those of its orthography [*litterae*]) and consequently taught their pupils in a manner new then, but which would become standard for later generations of *Latin* Christians. Similarly, while it seems mandatory to mention that he came from Ireland, often accompanied by some romantic flourishes and perhaps some slides of the Book of Kells, his actual academic homeland is rarely taken seriously. It is an interesting task to compare a bibliography dedicated to Bede with one devoted to Eriugena, and note how much more situated (allowing for the fact that Bede remained in his homeland) are Bedan studies.

That background issues should be dismissed as ‘prologue’ was once not even a matter for debate: Eriugena was to be treated as wholly exceptional to his context, ‘the peak in the plain.’ But while such a lofty judgement of his worth might seem to praise him, it also obscures him and his relationship to those very sources which are seen to make him exceptional. How did he understand his Greek sources, how did he approach language, how did he set about using / translating some of the most difficult works of Nyssa, the Ps-Denis, and Maximus?

It seems appropriate here to note that when Eriugena learned Greek he did so as his fourth language (and it is entirely possible he had learned even more than three languages before he studied Greek) and that he had to approach it through his second language. He grew up speaking Irish – and it was long a written language by the ninth century - so it would have been studied so as to introduce the study of Latin. Latin would have been his second language and, unlike his later colleagues who grew up in those regions we now associate with the Romance languages, he would have studied it as *litterae* from the outset. But was the pronunciation he learned in Ireland already that of the Carolingians? We simply do not know but it is a fair guess that he had to adapt his sounding of Latin on several occasions in his lifetime. His third language was Frankish or some Latin-vernacular that would soon become what we call ‘Old French’ – or more probably he would have needed to be able to work in both as these would have been the everyday means of communication in Laon, Soissons, or Reims.

¹³ The designation ‘*Eriugena*’ was one he gave to himself. It is formed by analogy with the Vergilian ‘*Graiugena*’ (*Aeneid* 3, 550) but contains a macaronic which pokes fun at those in the Carolingian court who might sneer at his origins. This consists in the use of the normal Old Irish name for Ireland, *Ériu*, being treated as formally, and so culturally, equivalent to *Graiu* / Greece; that both he and Vergil could happily play with a Latinized Greek past participle, *genna*, no doubt added to John’s satisfaction with his word-play.

¹⁴ See M. Brennan, *Guide des études Ériugéniennes / Guide to Eriugenian Studies: A Survey of Publications 1930-1987* (Fribourg 1989); and there have been bibliographical surveys in several of the volumes produced after conferences by the Society for the Promotion of Eriugenian Studies since that time.

Was it at this time that he began to learn Greek as his fourth language? Perhaps the situation is more complex. In 843 the Treaty of Verdun had to be read in both the language of the Franks and that of the Germans: did he need to work in both? Did he arrive on the mainland via Wales or Brittany - and so have spent time in a centre using Welsh / Breton? Did he travel through England and need to communicate in Anglo-Saxon? One might argue for a later traveller that he could use Latin, but how long did it take for Latin to become normalised in its Carolingian form? The more one looks at Eriugena's linguistic landscape the more intriguing does his work as a translator and a theologian of the limits of language become. He was constantly moving within a web of languages. He lived in a linguistic exile in a way that someone from northern Italy at the time could not have imagined – and such experience may tell us much about his abilities with language and his sensitivities to its limits.

Given that he designated himself with the name of his homeland – the chthonic 'Eriugena' connotes rootedness in the Irish earth in a way that the toponymic designator 'Scottus' does not – it is good to start any bibliographic study of him with this *clavis* of writers from that land.

Case 5: O'Mulconry's Glossary (CLH n.890).

The previous four test cases can be taken as typical of the range of materials that might be accessed by anyone seeking to examine the range of theology practiced in Ireland in the middle ages, but this text would seem to belong purely to the world of Celtic Studies or, indeed, lexicography. Glossaries are *instrumenta studiorum* and, as such, are often viewed as little more than what can now be accessed through a computer search. However, I have four Greek lexica¹⁵ within arms' length as I write – and I am not alone in this – and I make a judgement as to which is most appropriate case by case: each has a vision of the language and each has a distinct hermeneutic that affects the range of values it provides for each word. Now consider this work – from the seventh or eighth centuries – that shows Irish scholars seeking to reconcile their everyday language with the languages of the Scriptures and the church. It was produced as a mine of information on the etymologies of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew words and begs the question as to why such information was important to them. It is thus a window into how they viewed reading the Scriptures, the constantly necessary task of translation, and their own situation in regard to their privileged sources. The opening words – sometimes viewed as its formal Latin title – give a clue to the people who used it: 'an account of the origins of the Irish language which was put together when some religious men gathered together.' How interesting that it claims to be the work of a group of scholars rather than that of an individual.

The *Glossary* needs to be integrated into the history of biblical exegesis in Ireland and to be seen as a key to understanding the translation dynamics underlying the work of such writers as Eriugena – was it with this, or a work like it, that he first became familiar with the language of the Greek fathers? If so, this has made a major contribution to the evolution of Christian theology. Ó Corráin brings it to our

¹⁵ Liddell and Scott, Bauer, Lampe, and, in the last few of years, Montanari; and I can think of several more that I consult on specific topics. Every lexicon has its own distinct perspective – and from this we can speculate as to the hermeneutical suppositions of the individual or group that created it.

attention, gives a guide to the manuscripts, details of the edition of 1898 by Whitley Stokes, and records the key secondary literature. Perhaps such notices will open up the canon of works to which historians of theology attend in the coming decades. However, scholarship does not cease! While writing this review article a brochure arrived in the post announcing a new edition: perhaps this aspect of theology in Ireland will now receive the attention it deserves.¹⁶

Case 6: An anonymous *de viris illustribus* (CLH n.201).

The previous cases share a common thread: there is no doubt about their links to Ireland, but what of the many texts which have been attributed to Irish writers? These form a sizable category and have long been a matter of scholarly contention with those who are maximalists (claiming as ‘Irish’ as many anonymous texts as possible) and minimalists (unless there is overwhelming positive evidence in favour of an Hibernian origin, it is to be rejected). The only way forward is to study each text in turn and decide case by case.

The ‘*de viris illustribus*’ genre came into existence in Latin with Jerome,¹⁷ remained in more or less the same shape until rise of the universities, and then mutated to become the bibliographical guides that are the forerunners of today’s *claves* – so it is appropriate that in a review of this *Clavis* that we should look at an early medieval short version of the genre. The work in question contains entries on just twelve writers – ‘the top twelve’? – and has been printed twice: once in PL 23 where it is attributed to Jerome and again in PL 94 attributed to Bede – but even a cursory reading of the text is sufficient to show that neither could have written it. There is no explicit pointer (‘internal evidence’) in its content suggesting an Irish origin, but external factors, including that notorious will-o-the-wisp: ‘difficult Latinity,’ have led several scholars to attribute it to an Irishman of the eighth century.¹⁸

It is a curious work in that of the twelve writers (we should expect Augustine and a few similar names as a matter of course – and they do appear) we find both Pelagius and Jovinian (but without explicit health warnings) and we find these four curious characters: ‘Helidorus,’ ‘Dardanus,’ a ‘Brother Ambrose,’ and a ‘Favonius’ – this latter name prompted one of Migne’s editors to add this lovely note: ‘Unless the name is corrupt, I have never found this Favonius praised by others among the ancients.’¹⁹ What are we to make of such a text? Is it a wonderful students’ joke sending up their teachers or their studies that was then mistaken by a more serious generation as a work of scholarship and then given eminent attribution?

¹⁶ P. Moran, *De Origine Scoticae Linguae (O’Mulconry’s Glossary): An early Irish linguistic tract, edited with a related glossary, Irsan* (Turnhout 2019). The tract *Irsan* is CLH n.891.

¹⁷ There is a summary of the origins of the genre in my ‘Another post-resurrection meal, and its implications for the early understanding of the Eucharist’ in Z. Rodgers, M. Daly-Denton, and A. Fitzpatrick-McKinley eds, *A Wandering Galilean: Essays in Honour of Seán Freyne* (Leiden 2009), 485-503.

¹⁸ CLH supplies the references.

¹⁹ PL 23,964.

There is no immediate answer to that question nor to the question of its origins, but we are indebted to Ó Corráin for listing all these texts in one place and so pointing out to us how much work is yet to be done. The *CLH* is, therefore, a measure of the state of medieval Irish studies today.

Making a difference?

Probably the greatest benefit of any *clavis* is simply its ability to remove silly ambiguities – what is now often referred to as ‘disambiguation’ – between texts with identical or very similar names and between editions with confusing titles. It does this by giving every textual object (a manuscript, a literary product, an inscription) a single number. This was first attempted by Kenney but without the consistency that became the norm with Dekkers and Gaar, and then a specific numbering for the Latin works (but with different ranges) by Lapidge and Sharpe, but now we have a single set of 1386 numbers with which to identify each Irish production. It would save everyone a great deal of time and annoyance if whenever any one of these items was being referred to, even in passing, if that number were used. This would not only clear up questions like which version of a saint’s life is being used, but would point anyone following the matter further to an agreed date (with which one could then explicitly disagree on the basis of evidence) and to what is/was the agreed best available text of that work.

When the *Clavis Patrum Latinorum* was produced one of its most valuable features was the series of concordances it produced, which had grown to seventeen by 1995,²⁰ which established the principle that every such work should dovetail with similar works. This has been taken, from the Irish perspective, to a new level of precision in the fourteen concordances in these volumes. The concordances to Gamber (liturgical codices), Frede and *CPL* (patristic authors), Michielsen on biblical apocrypha, and the still necessary *Patrologia Latina* are those most likely to be of value to theologians, and allow Irish works, really for the first time, to be cross referenced to the whole extent of the western theological tradition. Three other technical items deserve notice. First, there is a very detailed index of manuscripts (pp. 1755-92), which thankfully gives both current and former shelf-marks, that effectively supplies the long-felt need for a single list of manuscripts of Irish interest wherever located. This had been a *desideratum* since the 1950s when Ludwig Bieler began such a compilation but, alas, the project was not seen through to the end. Now, as a by-product of Ó Corráin’s work we have just such a list and any researcher needing to draw together a composite picture of the *status manuscriptorum* on any topic can do so in a matter of moments. This is a rich vein of gold that will invite doctoral researchers for years to come. Second, following on the work of Vatasso²¹ and the example of Dekkers,²² Ó Corráin has included a single set of ‘incipits’ [sic] combining Latin and Irish (pp. 1830-60) which can not only save confusion, but will be welcomed by all working with manuscripts containing Irish material. Third, the volumes have a single running pagination, and while each volume has a contents’ table, the third volume also has a

²⁰ This 1995 edition included a concordance with the numbers used by Kenney (n. XIII, pp. 910-11) and those used by Lapidge and Sharpe (n. XIV, pp. 912-3).

²¹ M. Vatasso, *Initia Patrum* [Studi e Testi 16 and 17], (Rome 1906 and 1908).

²² Third edition, pp. 787-827.

consolidated table of contents – small details but which will save much time for its users in the longer term.

Having such a broad overview of the extent of the evidence will also contribute towards the solution of some of the more intractable problems relating to the Irish contribution to medieval Latin culture. The most persistent forms of this problem are (a) whether the notion of Irish learning in the early middle ages is a ‘myth’ or a ‘miracle,’²³ and (b) whether the modern phenomenon of interest in ‘Celtic Christianity’ is based on solid evidence or simply an illusion.²⁴ There are twin flaws related to both of these debates, namely, that they select collections of items without any sense of the overall quantity of the material available (to argue for either the paucity of Irish learning or for its abundance); and/or that the studies start from an assumption that what was happening in Ireland (or the insular region or the region of the Celtic languages) was significantly ‘other’ to what was occurring elsewhere in the Latin West. By listing all the materials available for any overall assessment Ó Corráin allows us for the first time to engage in that very simple form of empirical investigation: counting. Similarly, since he relates every text within the larger framework of its medieval genre, at no point (even when dealing with Irish language texts) is the material considered outside its European context. Seeing the material in this list form not only allows us ‘to see the wood from the trees’ but to recognise that both the myth/miracle and ‘was there a Celtic Christianity’ are badly formed questions. The work of Irish writers in Latin is part of the western Christian, Latin landscape and was carried out with the hinterland in mind (as silently witnessed in the distribution of the manuscript evidence today), while the writings in Irish were composed with the consciousness of that larger landscape. Ó Corráin’s work allows us to appreciate that their culture of literacy meant that, although geographically insular, they were culturally part of Europe. Moreover, this was not simply the western Latin lands (with which they had the majority of their physical contacts) but with the Greek east in that, even if they had little direct contact, they were fully aware.²⁵

Brepols appear to hold the lead in the production of *claves* to the intellectual patrimony of Christianity – there is now indeed a specific series: *Corpus Christianorum Claves*²⁶ – and it is a delight that Ireland’s literary productivity is fully

²³ The debate assumes this form in the work of E. Coccia, ‘La cultura irlandese precarolina: miracolo or mito?’ *Studi Medievali* 8 [third series](1967)257-420, and there has been a small but steady stream of scholars since then who have held that the notion of Irish learning is a modern myth. Coccia himself sought to answer his question by a listing of the evidence and Ó Corráin has provided a concordance to his work on p. 1882.

²⁴ See my “‘Celtic Spirituality’: A Case Study in Recycling the Christian Past for Present Needs’ in U. Agnew, B. Flanagan, and G. Heylin eds, *‘With Wisdom Seeking God’: The Academic Study of Spirituality* (Leuven 2008), 143-61.

²⁵ One could enumerate the instances in the *Clavis* where there are indications of this larger perspective, but one could, more simply, just note how through Cassian or martyrologies there were continual reminders that the world of their culture was larger than the Latin west.

²⁶ I have just seen their recent (2019) *Clavis Historicorum Antiquitatis Posterioris* which looks as if it going to be the companion volume to the *Claves Patrum* on ‘historical’ writers such as, for instance, Rufinus as a translator of Josephus.

recognised within that company through these volumes. There are many scholars today who have memories of deep affection for Donnchadh Ó Corráin: he was a generous colleague who always saw the advancement of learning as being as important as his own research. Now those two themes of his work have come together in what is his *opus magnum*. We are all in his debt, and will be so for decades to come. I know that his great fear in his last months of illness was that he would not live long enough to see it ‘through the press’; his death occurred just four months after its appearance: *requiescat, ut arbores in hiberno, usque in diem nouissimam*.