



Stone, B. J.: *The Rhetorical Arts in Late Antique and Early Medieval Ireland*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. Knowledge Communities series. 2022. 275 pp. ISBN 978-94-6294-455-5. £96.00.

This is a daring book. Its thesis is simple: ‘the rhetorical arts *must* [emphasis mine] have had a place in the great [Irish] monasteries that rose to prominence in the sixth and seventh centuries and that were revered for their learning’ (p. 13). The ‘rhetorical arts’ referred to are the classical Roman instructional methods of composition that the author believes continued to be taught (by those ‘Guardians of Language’ that Robert Kaster so brilliantly described) in the schools of Britain and on the continent in Late Antiquity, including the centuries following the ‘Fall’ of Rome. The subject (potentially vast) is succinctly treated in six chapters, covering ‘Late Antique and Early Medieval Ireland and the Latin West’ (pp. 31–43); ‘Learning in Ireland in the Sixth through the Eighth Centuries’ (pp. 45–91); ‘St Patrick and the Rhetoric of Epistolography’ (pp. 93–122); ‘A Rhetorical Analysis of Patrick’s *Epistola ad Milites Coroticus*’ [sic]; ‘The *Hesperica Famina*’ (pp. 155–189), and ‘Secular Learning and Native Traditions’ (pp. 191–234), followed by a brief ‘Conclusion’ (pp. 235–238). The daring lies in the author’s conception of a ‘Late Antique’ as well as an ‘Early Medieval’ Ireland. True, the archaeologists have been here before us (see. e.g., Jacqueline Cahill Wilson *et al.* (eds) 2014), but there the ‘Roman’ was in inverted commas; Stone argues unambiguously for the continuity (and not just survival) of ancient techniques as taught in the Roman schools in sub-Roman Britain and Gaul into the fifth and sixth centuries, from Quintilian down to Ausonius and beyond (including Sulpicius Severus). To account for this there is a nod in the direction of Heinrich Zimmer’s famous *direkte Handelsverbindungen* between Ireland and the continent and the equally famous (or notorious) note—championed by Kuno Meyer—in a Leyden MS. about a supposed exodus of Roman scholars from Gaul to Ireland in the face of the barbarian invasions.

But Stone is not naive about the question: ‘questions remain as to what rhetorical education in these places looked like’ (p. 14), and he knows enough to ask: ‘Had the trivium of the liberal arts found a home in Irish schools?’. To scholars become accustomed to answering ‘No’ to that question, and assuming that the curriculum in the Irish schools was rigidly focused on the bible, grammar and computus (p. 60), a classification that the computists traced back to Augustine, the Liberal Arts may seem to be little more than a ninth-century fad that blazed briefly with the Carolingian discovery of Martianus Capella by some Irish ‘wandering scholars’ and by their continental contemporaries, but that then fizzled out. The half-hearted attempt to trace the use of Cicero’s *De oratore* back to seventh-century Ireland through the Carolingian scholars Einhard and Lupus

of Ferrières and a single surviving copy in Insular script is a bit of a stretch. No more convincing is Stone's argument (pp. 24 ff.) for the use in Ireland in earlier centuries of Boethius (not just the *De arithmetica* that is cited in seventh-century computistical texts, but also the *Consolatio*), Cassiodorus, *Expositio in Psalmos* as well as the *Institutiones*, Martianus, *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, and Isidore's *Etymologiae*. The evidence is thin—to say the least—for all but Isidore, of course) and the argument is not helped by the fact that Stone nowhere mentions Burkhardt Taeger's seminal articles on Martianus (detailing the evidence from the famous [early eighth-century?] Irish Donatus commentary known as the *Anonymus ad Cuimnanum*), while not enough is made of Ulrich Schindel's several fundamental articles on late Roman grammarians, their sources and their circulation. That said, he is well aware (pp. 63 ff.) of the important contribution made by early Hiberno-Latin grammarians: 'Rather than copying handbooks passed down from antiquity, these scholars were innovators who created their own handbooks based on their own traditions and for use by their own scholars and practitioners' (p. 63).

The most intriguing part of the book is Stone's connection of Late Latin texts with early (?) Old Irish texts that appear to derive from the native tradition of *filidecht*. The apparent fact that Cicero's (better-known) *Rhetorica ad Herennium* is drawn upon by native legal scholars in a (eighth-century?) text of the *Nemed* School of poetico-legal tracts (pp. 61–63) is certainly eye-catching, but it highlights what is perhaps the principal drawback in the author's approach: though reference is made to 'diagnostic' texts such as Columbanus's letters, Cumman's Paschal Letter, and the compositions of Bangor and Iona authors and others (all of them expertly handled), for proof of his case the reliance is mainly on esoteric texts like the *Hisperica Famina* (pp. 155 ff., though not listed in the index; the analogy with Apuleius, Aulus Gellius and Fronto made on p. 20 is absurd) and *Auraicept na nÉces* and the *Coire Goiriath* (pp. 207 ff.), none of which can be described as typical of the literary or legal production of the sixth and seventh centuries. Even when allowance is made for the remarkable discovery (by Liam Breatnach (1984)) that an entire section of the *Bretha Nemed* tract (from which the 'School' takes its name) was translated from the famous *Collectio canonum Hibernensis*, it is hard to avoid concluding (with Johann Corthals) that those other texts too (like the equally exotic *Tenga Bithnua*) were most likely either translated directly from or based on (lost) Latin originals. The earliest native legal tracts certainly have rhetorical elements in them (see Robin Chapman Stacey's remarkable *Dark Speech* (2007)), but they are not those of the Roman rhetoricians.

If the author would argue (p. 21) that 'it is my contention that evidence for the continuous relevance of rhetoric does indeed exist' for Early Medieval Ireland, he would need either to have accumulated more evidence, or different evidence, or else to have marshalled his existing evidence in a different way. In the continued absence of anything approaching a comprehensive work on *Books Known To*

*The Irish* such as has existed for Anglo-Saxon England for decades (Donnchadh Ó Corráin's massive, three-volume *Clavis Litterarum Hibernensium* is a sort of Prolegomena to the task), it is hazardous to claim knowledge or use of a text from (Roman) Late Antiquity by Irish authors, either 'at home' in Ireland or on the continent. That said, Stone rightly dismisses (p. 70) the nonsense pedalled by Neil Wright and others, that Columbanus acquired all his knowledge on the continent (a claim that is never made for Alcuin!). And he (again rightly) emphasises Louis Holtz's verdict on the Hiberno-Latin grammarians who taught their Priscian, that theirs was 'a conscious pedagogic project', not just a mindless repetition of what they had read. He might have pointed out that one Irish glossator even criticises Priscian (cf. Stokes and Strachan (eds) 1903: p. 136).

It is usually thought unfair to criticise an author for not having written another book altogether, rather than the one under review, but in this case it must be said that the premise contained in the title might have been better demonstrated if Stone had arranged his chapters in chronological sequence, rather than leaping from Late Antiquity into Ireland in the sixth, seventh and eighth centuries, followed by St Patrick's writings and then the *Hisperica Famina*, with 'Secular Learning and Native Traditions' bringing up the rear (whereas Pelagius is curiously absent, apart from occasional passing references, e.g., pp. 14 and 94). On the subject of dating and locating St Patrick 'many an investigator will leave his bones to bleach in that desert before it is accurately mapped' (Binchy), but Stone works carefully through all the scholars who have ventured into those quicksands (Bury, Bieler, O'Rahilly, Esposito, Hanson, Carney, Dumville, Koch, Howlett and others), and offers a sensible survey of the evidence from the saint's two surviving writings (if not of the historical background; it is not true to say (p. 95) that 'the evidence for an education in Gaul is strong'). While he rather bizarrely states that 'the relationship of Patrick and Palladius may not be as important as scholarship has suggested' (p. 110, citing Colmán Etchingham), it is disappointing to see no serious engagement with the suggestion (advanced by this reviewer) that Palladius may, in fact, be the real progenitor of the Hiberno-Latin rhetorical tradition identified by the author; my 'Who was Palladius?' (2000) is cited in the bibliography. On the other hand, it is gratifying to see the general field of computistics, and Cummin's Paschal Letter in particular, treated seriously (pp. 63 ff.). The pity is, perhaps, that Stone did not follow up the observation of Donald Bullough (1963, 1964) that the Prologue to Victorius of Aquitaine's Easter tables was used as a model of style (and rhetoric?) by Muirchú, Tírechán and the earliest Northumbrian hagiographers. It might also be pointed out that Dan Mc Carthy's seminal articles on the origins of the so-called 'Irish' eighty-four-year Easter table (see now Mc Carthy 2022) have cast brilliant new light on the reception of writings by Rufinus of Aquilaea and Sulpicius Severus in Ireland in the first decades of the fifth century. Given the frequent comparison made by scholars between Sulpicius's *Vita Sancti Martini* and seventh-century

Irish saints' Lives, this early attestation of all of Sulpicius's writings in Ireland (Chronicle, Easter table and the *Vita Martini*) surely obliges us to reconsider previous assessments and evaluations of Hiberno-Latin learning in the fifth century? Sadly, Mc Carthy's articles are nowhere cited in this book.

There are occasional slips: Jacopo Bisagni is cited (p. 40 n 43) for early Irish astronomy and computistics but not for his seminal article on code-switching (2013–2014); a mysterious 'Siewers' is cited (p. 68 n 118) but appears nowhere in the bibliography; Liam Breatnach is cited (pp. 195 ff.) under 'Breatnach 1987' for his edition of *Uraicecht na Ríar*, which is not in the bibliography. Curiosities are the statement that Gildas is stated to have written 'a Hiberno-Latin [*sic*] that betrays a rhetorical education' (p. 14); that Columbanus's 'refined style . . . betrays a secular education' (p. 67); and that '[b]oth Columba and Columbanus received their training in Bangor' (p. 70). But these are only minor lapses. All in all, the author has carried out his stated task with considerable success. Like the Irish poets of old, I end as I began: this is a daring book.

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