

Seán Duffy, *Brian Boru and the Battle of Clontarf*. Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2013. ISBN 978-07171 5778. Pp.? Price?

Commemoration is an odd phenomenon, especially in an era where university researchers, trained professionally to be cautious and slow to judgment, are encouraged to become media figures. The Irish commemorations for 2014 have been complicated by the recession as well as by the looming deadlines of the centenaries of 1916–22 and the political attention which these anniversaries are garnering. Researchers in medieval Irish studies are very fortunate, therefore, that the millennium anniversary of the Battle of Clontarf has been marked by the production of the monograph under review. Written by a political historian of late Viking and Norman Ireland, it supplements beautifully the literary approach adopted by Máire Ní Mhaonaigh in *Brian Boru – Ireland’s greatest king?* (Stroud: Tempus 2008). The writing style, as in all Seán Duffy’s works, is accessible and clear, and, in continuation of the great tradition of Gill and Macmillan in Irish history writing, the book can be read by students, professionals, and the public at large with equal degrees of interest.

The book is constructed in a chronological framework, beginning with a long introductory section entitled “Viking Ireland” (pp. 1–60), but two-thirds of which deals with the nature of Irish kingship, society, and provincial organization in the period prior to the initial Viking onslaughts at the beginning of the ninth century. Chapters on Brian’s ancestry, his rise to the position identified as “emperor of the Gael” (which Duffy sees as probably involving a period of overlordship in the Clyde estuary (p. 149)), and the battle of Clontarf follow. Treatment of the latter is divided between an account of the events and personnel involved, followed by a discussion of annalistic records, biographies of Brian, and accounts of the great battle written subsequently.

This approach facilitates those who seek clarity concerning the “real” events and people involved – but it also avoids forcing the reader to tackle many of the complications. Duffy notes with approval “the wonderful feat of mathematical detective-work” by James Henthorn Todd, the editor and translator of *Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaibh* in 1867 “which confirmed Todd in his view that the *Cogadh* was a faithful record of all that happened at Clontarf” (p. 217). Duffy himself refers to veterans of Clontarf and people who had lived through Brian’s high-kingship, concluding that “a text written by someone who had information supplied by such people is something of enormous value” although “it must be taken with a pinch of salt, where its author forgets he is a historian” (p. 198).

For this reviewer, the author of *Cogadh Gáedhel re Gallaibh*, our major source for Clontarf, may have considered himself a conveyor of *senchas* (tradition or lore), but the conventions under which he compiled his account were heavily influenced by the genre of medieval romance. The great hero of the *Cogadh* account is Murchad son of Brian, a champion who carried a sword in each hand, killed a hundred men in one day (fifty with each sword), and was a match for the Greek Hercules or the Trojan Hector, as well as the Biblical Samson and Irish heroes drawn from the *Táin Bó Cúailgne* and the Túatha Dé Danann. Indeed, the *Cogadh* author tells us that the speed of his sword striking his enemies during the battle generated such heat that the gold inlay of the pommel and hilt melted into the palm of his hand.

These details require more than a pinch of salt to swallow for they indicate that, in the author’s mind, heroism is to be depicted in a grandiose and heavily contrived style. Is it then allowable, as Duffy does, to simply summarize Murchad’s actions as “a lengthy eulogy” (p. 210) and then take the military details of such heroes’ exploits and map them on a sketch map of Dublin (Map 8, p. 203), producing a battlefield depiction with troop movements marked by arrows of a type more commonly seen in discussions of Waterloo?

Comment [CS1]: Price \$34.85  
Hardback, \$26.91 paperback, \$7.86  
Kindle.

Comment [LT2]: Did you intend the question mark? Yes, the sentence begins with an interrogative “is it allowable?” rhetorical I know.

One detail suggests to me that this is deeply dubious as an historical approach; Brian's son-in-law (and step-son), Sigtryggr Silkiskegg, is said by the *Cogadh* author to have watched the fighting at Clontarf from his *gríanán féin* along with his wife. This phrase was translated by Todd as "the battlements of his watch tower" (PAGE?) and is invariably located at the walled city of Dublin (whose citizens are also looking on from their rooftops). The word *gríanán* is, however, used of a sunny place frequented by women; the author of the *Cogadh* is suggesting that Sigtryggr not only owns one, but that he lurks in it while more virile men are battling in conditions where faces were-are so clogged with blood that no-one could recognize friend or foe. And yet, Sigtryggr, peering from under the roof or covering of this structure, is able to distinguish events and in particular, the death of his wife's nephew at the *corad Cluana Tairb*, or the weir of Clontarf. No matter where we locate this weir (Duffy suggests modern Fairview Park [p-218]), it seems an extraordinary feat of eyesight. For me, this incident strongly suggests that the *Cogadh* author is depicting dramatic truths rather than literal facts about the battle.

Whatever one's scepticism about the overall evaluation of the *Cogadh* as an accurate historical record, Duffy's approach throughout is to compare and contrast his findings where more than one source exists and contextualize — in so far as he can — whenever he is citing unique material. As far as each individual incident of Brian's own career is concerned, this results in a clear and very fair presentation of the evidence; the problem lies rather in the fact that a reader who knows nothing about the *Cogadh* is not exposed to the very literary, and consciously-composed, nature of the tale as a whole.

One of the strengths of the book lies in the international dimension to the story and here Duffy's wider research interests are very much to the fore (pages 242-8). He sees the gathering of mercenaries from abroad as being facilitated by the recent invasion of England by the Danish overlord Sveinn Forkbeard. The sudden death of the latter meant that "in late April 1014 there were Danish chieftains and large numbers of Danish warriors who had seen their conquest of England slip away before their eyes. Surely some of them then enlisted ... in what they were no doubt promised would be a walk-over in Ireland" (p-245).

Duffy has done an excellent job in bringing together the historiography of Brian Boru and in presenting it in an appealing and coherent manner which is accessible to all. It has to be said though, that his work is very much a compilation and an evaluation of what previous authors have written. Our inherited picture of Brian Boru is so very much one created by nationalist historiography of the later nineteenth century, reproduced with (perhaps) added Catholic overtones in Irish primary school textbooks in an almost unchanged format since Irish independence. It would be nice to think that in this millennium year, we might go back and revisit our notions of heroism, of political success, and of ethnicity as well as concepts of invasion, conquest, and leadership and perhaps take this opportunity to re-evaluate Brian as a successful and wily politician who defeated the machinations of his rivals for fifty years, created stronger models of jurisdiction and overlordship than had ever before been seen in Ireland and who died, literally, "with his boots on."

**Comment [CS3]:** p.190-91 in J.H. Todd, *Cogadh Gaedhil re Gallaibh – the War of the Gaedhil with the Gail* (London 1867): Rolls series 48

**Comment [LT4]:** For? I "use of" but in American English it might be different.

CATHERINE SWIFT  
*Mary Immaculate College*  
*University of Limerick:*

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