
The book was first published in 1998 and came out as a paperback in 2000. Everything about it commends it to our attention. The author has an impressive list of credits and publications on this topic to his name. The choice of James MacKillop for the work by Oxford Publications bespeaks his authority and command of his subject. A previous review describes it as ‘brilliant, detailed, and authoritative’, which it certainly is. No one could quarrel with the statement.

I would however hesitate to agree with a further statement in the review mentioned, that it is ‘the perfect introduction to a vibrant people’. My hesitation concerns not the scholarship or authority of the author, which is beyond question, but the amount of detail given in the book. It is a little overwhelming. May I quote one entry in its complete form:

Áed, Áedh, Aodh [Ir., fire; cognate with L. aedes, aestus]. The most common personal name in early Ireland; it was held by at least twenty saints and by numerous high kings and petty kings, as well as by a multitude of figures in saga and legend. Some figures are always known by the ModIr and ScG spelling of *Aodh. The name is often anglicised to Hugh, and has given rise to more than a dozen surnames: Hay, Hayes, O’Hea, Hughes, McHugh, McCue, MacKay, etc. See also Aeda.

The editor tells us that he worked to make the information contained in the book freely accessible for students and anyone who could use a college dictionary and that since it is a ‘Dictionary’ and not an ‘Encyclopaedia’ it is assumed people are looking for specific information in a hurry. In my opinion it could take a little more time than suggested to digest all the riches contained in every entry. Many alternative spellings are given, as, for example, in the entry under Fionn mac Cunhaill. There are ten possible spellings of the name provided, including Old Irish, Scottish Gaelic (both with variants), Manx and an anglicised form. Unless the reader was deeply into all the Celtic dialects, I am unsure about the
usefulness of such detail to many who would otherwise enjoy the pleasure of the scholarship.

There is a certain unevenness occasioned by the concentration on the British Celts and the almost total omission of matters European. There are fifteen references supplied for material we may consult on Ogham, and only two following much shorter entries on Hallstatt and La Tene, each one including but a single reference to the art. It is relevant to comment that Europe was even more dominated by and influenced by Celtic culture than the British Isles.

Perhaps it is churlish to admit to a hesitation with this book. A reliable, scholarly reference for Celtic Mythology has long been a need and I looked forward to the arrival of such a work. While not denying its worth, had it been less specifically directed towards providing linguistic information, it would have been more readily accessible to the many interested parties who would like to have such a handy reference work. Perhaps Oxford Press is considering a companion volume encyclopaedia which could only increase the value and usefulness of the Dictionary.

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