

James Muldoon, ed.

*The North Atlantic Frontier of Medieval Europe,
Vikings and Celts*

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THE volume entitled *The North Atlantic Frontier of Medieval Europe, Vikings and Celts* (2009) is a collection of articles originally published between 1893 and 2004. This book constitutes the third volume in the series *The Expansion of Latin Europe, 1000-1500*, edited by James Muldoon and Felipe Fernández-Armesto. This series, which will eventually contain fourteen volumes, covers large and important areas of the medieval history of Europe, from the spread of Latin Christendom to Islamic expansionism and the effects of the Mongol Empire. An overall theme is frontiers, and this volume concerns the western frontier of Europe, that of the North Atlantic, mainly focussing on Britain and Ireland. The book contains a comprehensive introduction by volume editor James Muldoon, followed by nineteen chapters that have been organised into six thematic parts, providing the book with a clear chronological framework, starting in the 9th century and stretching to the late 15th century. In Part One, the settlement and rule of the Vikings in Ireland, England and Greenland is discussed; in Part Two, the emphasis is instead placed on the extension of English power into the Celtic areas of Britain and the justifications presented for this enterprise, issues which are considered in more depth in Part Three. In Parts Four and Five, the attention is shifted slightly as these sections deal with the English domination of Ireland. In Part Four, the actual expansion into Ireland is treated while, in Part Five, the next phase, that of governing medieval Ireland, is considered. The sixth and final part contains just one article, investigating the possibility that the English 'discovered' America in the late 15th century.

The articles are consistently of high standard, and one of the great benefits of this book is that it provides valuable insights into scholarly discussions

covering a large geographical area and a rather long time period, while at the same time, due to the strict focus of the volume, explaining important processes and events in the complex history of Britain and Ireland. This book is therefore useful to scholars and students alike, although the great variation in the original publication dates of the articles means that they are of course reflecting differing views and eras of thinking. This is counterbalanced by the Introduction, where each chapter is placed in its wider context and more recent views are also presented. The great chronological spread does nevertheless mean that the book at first sight seems disjointed. As soon as one starts reading, however, it is clear that this is a false impression. The articles have been selected with such care that the reader very quickly gains a clear overview of issues relating to expansion, kingship and politics in medieval Britain and Ireland. The book therefore provides an excellent starting point for research into this part of history.

Despite the title of the volume, an area that is less well covered is the Norse settlement in the North Atlantic, as two of the three articles on the Viking Age concentrate on England (Laurence M. Larson, 1910) and Ireland (Jean I. Young, 1950). The only chapter that deals with the wider North Atlantic is Christian Keller's excellent article on Greenland (1990). One would have wished for at least one more chapter here, focussing on the settlement of Iceland, the Faroe Islands, or the Scottish islands. The problem with the current selection is that the Greenland case is very specific and is not therefore representative of the other Norse settlements in the North Atlantic. This problem is indeed reflected in the Introduction where it is stated that in the long run the 'Viking advance into the Atlantic had little significance' and the islands are described as having 'harsh climates', 'difficult terrain for agriculturists' and 'little in the way of merchandise for trade' (p. xvii). All these statements are of course relative, but it must be made clear that they cannot be applied across all the different island groups. Indeed, in comparison to parts of the Viking homelands in Scandinavia, even the Icelandic climate could be seen as rather mild, and, in terms of agriculture Orkney especially provided very good opportunities. Moreover, the potential for trade in fish and woollen cloth, in particular, was most significantly demonstrated by the trade known to have taken place from the late Middle Ages to the early Modern Period.

There are, however, many fascinating topics that are subject to discussion in this volume. Among the most interesting aspects are the three articles in Part Three, *The Conquest of Britain*, discussing English expansionism in different areas of Britain and also emphasising the complicated and ever-changing relationship between 'the Celts' and the English/Anglo-Normans. This can be illustrated by an example from the article by Michael Brown (2004) where it is

argued that, although there was no Norman conquest of Scotland, by the late 13th century the Kingdom of Scotland was gradually being 'Normanised', gaining a political structure that resembled those of stronger European kingdoms. Brown shows how the Scottish kings in this way came into conflict with Celtic tribes on the borders of their realm. The other two chapters in Part Three, by R. R. Davies (1979) and J. G. Edwards (1956), provide detailed understandings of the problems experienced by the Anglo-Normans in their attempts to secure power over the Celtic population in Wales.

On the whole, this volume will most certainly prove popular with many readers, as it brings together key texts, produced over a long period of time, examining kingdom formation in the North Atlantic area, covering not just conflict, but also the reality of politics and the imposition of law into newly settled areas.

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