

The Historiography of the Twelfth Century Reform in Ireland

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A review and analysis of writing on the twelfth century church reform in Ireland from the period itself to the present day. It shows that most writers were strongly influenced by the concerns of the era in which they lived and by their own political or theological viewpoint. In many cases the sources were discredited and the evidence distorted to serve the particular prejudice of the author.

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The reform of the Irish church in the twelfth century is a topic which has received considerable attention from historians.¹ The survival of extensive source material and the implications of the subject for many crucial questions in subsequent Irish history, which explain such interest, are also key factors in understanding the poor quality of much of this work. The impenetrable linguistic barrier of Old Irish which denied access to much of the political and social history of the period to all but a few specialists, was eliminated by the availability of readily accessible Latin sources. This apparent advantage led, in practice, to a situation where the material frequently did not receive sufficient critical examination or evaluation. The interaction of the emotive issues of religion and the Anglo-Norman invasion made it almost inevitable that authors of general histories would use the reform as evidence to support their particular overall viewpoint rather than as an important topic in its own right. Such approaches, common to many other areas of Irish history, applied equally to writers hostile or favourable to the actual work of the reformers.

In one major aspect, however, the historiography of the reform is unprecedented. The surviving sources indicate clearly that grave and widespread abuses existed in the Irish church and that a lengthy and difficult reform had to be undertaken. Yet historians, almost without exception, have sought to discredit this evidence and deny that serious irregularities existed. Even more remarkably, this has resulted not from any attempt to present a united front but to support differing and frequently diametrically opposed points of view. This unique approach, added to the significance of the reform for general interpretations of Irish history, makes a study of its historiography particularly fascinating and rewarding.

Much of the historical argument has been based on the authenticity and reliability of the primary evidence. The main sources are the correspondence of Lanfranc and Anselm, Archbishops of Canterbury, to various people in Ireland between 1074 and 1109, a treatise on church government by Bishop Gilbert of Limerick,² three letters from Pope Alexander III written in 1172,³ the life of St. Malachy by St. Bernard of Clairvaux,⁴ and the decrees

¹I am grateful to Professor Donnchadh Ó Corráin of the Department of Irish History, University College, Cork, who first suggested to me that this subject might repay investigation and gave me much subsequent help and encouragement.

²Printed in *The Whole Works of the Most Rev. James Ussher*, eds. C.R. Elrington and J. H. Todd, Dublin 1847-64, vol. IV, section 3, 'Veterum epistolarum Hibernicarum sylloge'. The letters of Lanfranc (1070-89) and Anselm (1093-1109) are on pp. 490-530 and the 'De Statu Ecclesiae' of Bishop Gilbert pp. 500-510.

³Printed in E. Curtis and R. B. McDowell, *Irish Historical Documents*, London 1943, pp. 19-22.

⁴*St. Bernard of Clairvaux's Life of St. Malachy of Armagh*, ed. H. J. Lawlor, London 1920.

of the reforming synods.⁵ These various documents indicate that it was in the area of marriage practice that the chief abuses existed. Unions within the forbidden degrees of kinship are condemned by Lanfranc and Anselm in letters to Tairdelbach Ua Briain, to Muirchertach Ua Briain, and to Gothric, King of Dublin.⁶ Pope Alexander, in his letter to Henry II in 1172, and the decrees of the Synods of Cashel in 1101 and 1172 provide full details of these abuses and show that incest was included.⁷ These sources also testify to the prevalence of divorce, while St. Bernard charges that the sacrament of marriage had been abandoned by large sections of the population and one of the decrees of Cashel in 1172 appears to confirm this.⁸ Marriage among the clergy was legislated against in 1101 at the first Cashel synod.⁹

The other major abuse that existed related to the role of bishops. There were too many of them, they were not consecrated properly and they did not fulfil their proper function. The *De Statu Ecclesiae* of Bishop Gilbert, being a simple blueprint for a diocesan and parochial organisation, indicates a fundamental lack of understanding about the normal forms of church government. The Irish bishops had merely spiritual functions in a church system organised and administered on a monastic basis which explains how the problem of multiplicity and irregular consecrations had arisen. As well as the testimony of Lanfranc, Anselm and St. Bernard, the legislation of the Synods of Rathbreasail and Kells/Mellifont provide full evidence of the reform in this area.¹⁰

There is a lack of such clear-cut agreement among the sources for the other abuses. Lanfranc was unhappy about the method of baptising and the second decree of the 1172 Synod of Cashel laid down the correct procedure.¹¹ St. Bernard asserted that confirmation and confession had been abandoned, but no supporting evidence exists for this claim.¹² His statement that tithes were not paid is confirmed by the second Synod of Cashel and Pope Alexander's letters.¹³ Lanfranc accuses the bishops of practising simony and the first decree of Cashel in 1101 apparently refers to such an abuse, but due to textual difficulties this is arguable.¹⁴

Both Lanfranc and Anselm have a central role in any discussion about the reliability of the sources for the twelfth century church. Through their consecration of the bishops of the Ostmen towns both men were in close contact with Ireland and apart from their advice on theological matters help with secular problems was also requested.¹⁵ Lanfranc's

⁵S. H. O'Grady ed., *Caithreim Thoirdhealbhaigh*, London 1929: A list of the eight decrees of Cashel 1101 in an early modern version of the *Senchas Sil Bhriain*; translation *ibid.*, v. ii 185. The decrees of Cashel 1172 from Giraldus Cambrensis *Expurgatio Hibernica* are printed in *Irish Hist. Doc.* G. Keating, *History of Ireland* (Irish Texts Soc. ed. 1908), pp. 296-307, is an extract from the lost Annals of Clonenagh and our only source for legislation of Rathbreasail and Kells-Mellifont.

⁶Ussher, *Sylloge*, pp. 490, 492-494, 521.

⁷*Irish Hist. Doc.*, pp. 18, 21; K. Hughes, *The Church in Early Irish Society*, London 1966, p. 246; A. Gwynn and D. F. Gleeson, *A History of the Diocese of Killaloe*, Dublin 1962, p. 112.

⁸Ussher, *Sylloge*, pp. 492, 521, 523; Lawlor, *Life of Malachy*, p. 37; *Irish Hist. Doc.*, pp. 18, 21.

⁹M. Dolley, *Anglo-Norman Ireland*, Dublin 1972, p. 7, Decree 5 of Cashel 1101.

¹⁰Ussher, *Sylloge*, pp. 493, 500-510, 521, 524; Lawlor, *Life of Malachy*, p. 46; John Watt, *The Church and the Two Nations in Medieval Ireland*, Cambridge 1970, p. 12; Dolley, *Anglo-Norman Ireland*, p. 7.

¹¹Ussher, *Sylloge*, p. 493; *Irish Hist. Doc.*, p. 18.

¹²Lawlor, *Life of Malachy*, pp. 18 and 37.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 37; *Irish Hist. Doc.*, pp. 18, 21.

¹⁴Ussher, *Sylloge*, p. 493. The textual arguments are dealt with by K. Hughes and A. Gwynn. See in particular *Irish Eccles. Rec.*, 66(1945), 83ff.

¹⁵Ussher, *Sylloge*, pp. 495-597.

statement that the Irish law of marriage was rather '*maritali seu fornicaria lege*'¹⁶ is significant as it shows an awareness of the Brehon Law basis for the Irish practice. Their credibility has occasionally been attacked on the grounds that their ambition to control the Irish church gave them a vested interest in emphasising and exaggerating its defects. The Ostmen bishops who were consecrated at Canterbury swore oaths of obedience to the Archbishop.¹⁷ In the oath of Bishop Patrick in 1074 Dublin is described as *Metropolis Hiberniae*: if this false status accorded to Dublin is taken in conjunction with Lanfranc's claim to be *Britanniarum primas* and the insistence on the oath of obedience even as late as 1138, then a case appears to exist for the view that Canterbury hoped to incorporate the Irish church under its dominion.¹⁸ However, the true motive appears to have been merely pastoral concern, and when the welfare of the church could be shown to be served without such control it was readily abandoned. Anselm simply offered his congratulations and hopes for a successful reform to Gilbert who had been consecrated bishop of Limerick without the knowledge or consent of Canterbury.¹⁹ The fact that a precedent had been created for independent action in this area appears to be of no concern to Anselm. The reliability of the Archbishops as sources cannot be seriously undermined in this manner.

The letters of Pope Alexander III must also be regarded as dependable. Papal information on the state of the Irish church came largely from the reforming Irish bishops.²⁰ Policy in Rome would also have been influenced by the visit of St. Malachy in 1140 and the journey to Ireland of the special Papal Legate, Cardinal Paparo, in 1152. Paparo met the leading reformers at the Synod of Kells/Mellifont where he presented the pallia for four archbishoprics. The inclusion of Tuam and Dublin, though pallia had only been requested for Armagh and Cashel, indicates that Rome was aware both of the political and religious tensions in the country. The rise of Connacht under Turlough O'Connor demanded that an archbishopric be sited there, while the continued assumption of unauthorised power by the Bishop of Dublin could only be solved by acceding to his demands.²¹ Such sensitivity, coupled with the personal experience of Paparo, suggests that Papal information on Ireland was both adequate and up to date. St. Bernard's information for his *Life of St. Malachy* derived from his friendship with his subject, and from Congan, abbot of an Irish monastery, who supplied an account of Malachy's early career in Ireland.²² Despite such impressive sources, Bernard's work has to be treated with extreme caution. He was writing hagiography not history, and his description of the Irish church was primarily to highlight the daunting task which faced St. Malachy. His general condemnations are sweeping and expressed in extreme language, but his specific references to abuses occupy merely two sections from a total of seventy-five. His treatment of marriage provides a guide to his overall reliability. He mentions the subject three times, once in the statement that there was "no entry into lawful marriages" and twice that this had been fully corrected in Malachy's lifetime.²³ If he was aware of the full details regarding marriage irregularities

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 493.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 564-566.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 565-566. Oath sworn by Patrick, Bishop of Limerick.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 513.

²⁰Letter from Pope Alexander printed in *Irish Hist. Doc.*, pp. 19-20.

²¹Ussher, *Sylloge*, p. 530. Letter from Anselm to Samuel, Bishop of Dublin reproving him for using the forms and symbols of an Archbishop.

²²Lawlor, *Life of Malachy*, pp. 4, 131-137. The saints met during Malachy's journeys to Rome in 1140 and 1148.

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 18, 37, 39.

in Ireland it seems inconceivable, given his aim of highlighting the poor state of the church before the advent of Malachy, that he would not put greater stress on the subject. One must assume that neither Malachy nor Congan explained fully to him the exact nature of those abuses. The major criticism that can be levelled against his work, therefore, is not, as many historians suggest, exaggeration but lack of precise information about Irish practices. This interpretation is reinforced by his simplistic belief that the hereditary succession at Armagh was the chief cause of the general laxity throughout the Irish church.²⁴

The decrees of the synods are not free from interpretative problems either. The legislation at Cashel in 1101 correcting marriage abuses, if taken literally, would suggest that the only faults were unions within the forbidden degrees of kinship. It is generally agreed that this decree shows merely the extent to which the reformers considered it politic to legislate for change at that particular time. Similarly the decree on marriage at Cashel in 1172, while indicating that the problem was not totally solved, does not give any firm information on what progress had taken place. The correct translation of some decrees is in doubt, and the absence of direct copies of the decrees from Rathbreasail and Kells-Mellifont further restricts our knowledge about these assemblies.

The sources for the reform, therefore, while not free from omission and ambiguities are nevertheless more plentiful and accessible than those for most other topics in this period. The consequent ease with which those interested in the subject could pursue their own research and use the authority of primary sources to bolster their arguments has been a major factor in the heated controversy which is the main characteristic of the writing on this topic.

The historiography of the reform begins, in a sense, as early as 1317. In that year the Irish chiefs, under Donal O'Neill, addressed a remonstrance to Pope John XXII denouncing the evils of English rule in Ireland. In outlining the events leading to the original invasion, the church reform and the part played by Pope Adrian IV is mentioned. He is castigated for issuing the Bull *Laudabiliter* and for supporting Henry II in his expansionist plans. It is stressed that his judgement was affected by his concern for English interests which arose, not so much from his birth, as from "feeling and character".²⁵ This concern to minimise the importance of his English birth is a reflex of the events which led to the remonstrance. In a petition for recognition of Edward Bruce as the lawful Irish king, a stress on the importance of birthplaces would not have been very politic. The attack on the English Pope is, however, significant as it marks the beginning of a trend which has continued to the present day.

In the seventeenth century Geoffrey Keating's account of the reform shows strong influence of a Counter Reformation mind.²⁶ The creation of discipline and order within the church is seen as having been paramount. Control by lay princes is ended and the main abuses listed are simony, usury and non-payment of tithes. The reforming synods are presented as forerunners of the Council of Trent and the abuses of his own day are transferred to the twelfth century. His main concern is to demonstrate that no justification existed for Henry II to invade Ireland. The reform, far from showing a need for outside intervention, actually proves that the Irish had successfully conducted their own reform.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 46.

²⁵This document is printed in *Irish Hist. Doc.*, pp. 38-46.

²⁶G. Keating, *Foras Feasa ar Éirinn* (ed. P. S. Dineen), London 1908, vol. III, pp. 299-317.

He strongly refutes the notion that Canterbury had jurisdiction over the Irish church and specifically mentions Hanmer's error in this regard.²⁷ He concedes that the Ostmen did have links with Lanfranc and Anselm, but he sees the racial bond between Normans and Vikings as largely responsible for this. He skilfully uses the examples of the building of abbeys like Mellifont and Holy Cross as proof that the Irish church had completed its reform by the mid-twelfth century. No reference is made to the fact that these monasteries were foreign-inspired and merely part of the attempted reform. To have acknowledged that native impetus had not been paramount at any stage would have weakened his fundamental argument that the state of the church did not justify in any way the involvement of Henry II in Irish affairs.

In the nineteenth century there were two stumbling blocks for historians dealing with this topic; the explanation of the irregularities in sexual behaviour and the papal authorisation for the Norman invasion. The most common tactic in dealing with the latter embarrassment was to place considerable stress on the nationality of Pope Adrian. The implication that this led him to make an unjust decision is clear, though interestingly it is never explicitly stated. There was no scapegoat readily available for the sexual abuses and various attitudes were adopted. Ignoring them completely was one solution, and Emily Lawless and P.W. Joyce, for example, list the abuses simply as heresy, lack of episcopal jurisdiction and failure to pay tithes or Peter's Pence.²⁸ M. Haverty, the most widely read popular historian at the turn of the century, asserted that St. Bernard was the only source to mention such irregularities. As the saint had no personal experience of Ireland and was noted for his exaggerated vision of the corruption of the world, he could not be regarded as reliable. Haverty thus implicitly denies their existence by undermining the main source and omitting any mention of other evidence which would sustain the charges.²⁹ Monsignor E.A. D'Alton on the other hand, confronts this issue squarely with a curious mixture of vivid detail, Victorian moralising and ingenious explanations. In twelfth century Ireland a lengthy waiting period existed between the ceremony and the consummation of a marriage which led, in his view, to these abuses. While they could not be condoned, they were "different from those illicit connections which ignore religion altogether and are founded exclusively on the uncontrolled impulse of the passions".³⁰

Such variety in approach is absent when the causes and results of the reform are being dealt with. The impact of what P.W. Joyce terms "the Danish troubles"³¹ is used without exception to explain why a reform was needed. The Vikings are presented as savage heathens who came with a missionary zeal to destroy the Irish church.³² The evocative image of Turgesius and his wife defiling the high altar at Clonmacnoise dreamed up by the clever propagandist author of *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gaillaibh*³³ is faithfully recorded by these historians as unassailable fact, to dramatically highlight the evil nature of the invaders.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 301.

²⁸Emily Lawless, *Ireland*, London 1887; P. W. Joyce, *A Short History of Ireland to 1608*, Dublin 1924, pp. 240-247.

²⁹M. Haverty, *The History of Ireland*, Dublin 1906, pp. 163-164.

³⁰E. A. D'Alton, *A History of Ireland from Earliest Times to the Present Day*, Vol. I, Dublin 1906, p. 187.

³¹P. W. Joyce, *A Short History of Ireland*, Dublin 1800, p. 238.

³²For a contrary view of the Viking presence in Ireland see A. T. Lucas, "The Burning and Plundering of Churches in Ireland, 7th to 16th Century", in E. Rynne (ed.), *North Munster Studies, Essays in Commemoration of Monsignor Michael Moloney*, Limerick 1967, pp. 172-229, and "Irish-Norse Relations: Time for a Reappraisal?", *J. Cork Hist. Archaeol. Soc.*, 71 (1966), 62-75.

³³J. H. Todd (ed.), *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gaillaibh: The War of the Gaedhil with the Gaill*, London 1867, p. 226.

The particular attraction of this argument for nationalist historians was the placing of the blame on outsiders and thus preserving their general view of the greatness and nobility of the Irish. A stress on foreign contamination is a characteristic of all such writing with an emphasis on abuses that existed elsewhere in Europe. It was only to be expected, the argument concludes, that the general decay in moral standards should have affected Ireland and no blame should attach to the Irish church.

Any discussion of the modern historiography of the reform must begin with Edmund Curtis' standard work on medieval Ireland.³⁴ This eminent historian, whose bias towards gaelic Ireland was largely a reaction to the pro-Norman approach of G.H. Orpen,³⁵ gave generous space in his book to this topic. He was fundamentally unsympathetic to the reformers, seeing them as having created a false picture of the decadence in the Irish church. This exaggeration and distortion had been a crucial factor in the decision of the pope to issue the *Laudabiliter* Bull which had provided the legal basis for Henry II to annex the lordship of Ireland. The main responsibility for the ending of gaelic independence was placed firmly on the shoulders of the reformers, particularly St. Malachy and the bishops who had direct contact with Rome: "Ireland had to pay dearly for the pious exaggerations of her spiritual chiefs".³⁶ The probable ignorance in Ireland of the existence of this document³⁷ is swept aside in his determination to explain the Irish kings' ready acceptance of Henry II. His revealing comment, "it is hard to explain otherwise the general and voluntary surrender both in church and state of native Ireland",³⁸ highlights his own awareness of the inadequacy of the argument. As he develops his case, it becomes clear that he considers there were two separate groups of reformers: a native-minded party, who opposed involvement with Canterbury, and a Roman party, who ignored every other consideration in their campaign to achieve total conformity with the papacy. This approach leads him into occasional inconsistency. There was no sense of nationality in Ireland, he suggests in explaining Ua Briain deference to Canterbury, yet the Bishop of Lismore is castigated for allowing zeal for the universal church to overcome his patriotism.³⁹

Curtis also places an undue emphasis on the ultimate Viking ancestry of the Normans. The link between Canterbury and the Ostmen is seen as resulting from feelings of common kinship. He fails to sustain this argument, regarding the Ostmen bishops as Irishmen to prove that the reform was a native-inspired one while referring elsewhere to the towns as foreign enclaves, hostile to their Celtic neighbours. In dealing with the actual abuses he makes a distinction between the clergy and laity. Uncanonical marriage, for example, was a vice among the latter while toleration of such unions was a fault of the clergy. His main point, however, is that the state of corruption was exaggerated both through zeal for perfection and through the use of intemperate language. His conclusion involves an acceptance of the total success of the reform effort with the important qualifications that it was neither completely necessary nor desirable and was brought about at a heavy price.⁴⁰

³⁴E. Curtis, *A History of Medieval Ireland, 1086-1513*, revised ed. London 1938.

³⁵G. H. Orpen, *Ireland Under the Normans*, 4 vols., Oxford 1911-20.

³⁶Curtis, *Medieval Ireland*, p. 37.

³⁷According to Giraldus Cambrensis it was first produced at a Council in Waterford some years after the invasion. Watt, *op. cit.*, (1972), p. 33.

³⁸Curtis, *Medieval Ireland*, p. 60.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 13-14 and 59.

J.F. Kenney, in a foreword to his *Sources*,⁴¹ stresses the importance of seeing the reform in its European context: the situation in Ireland should not be regarded as unique but merely as part of the general laxity prevalent throughout the church. He is concerned to give the credit for reform to the Irish churchmen themselves and to minimise the role of Canterbury. He coined the term 'ecclesiastical imperialist' for Lanfranc and links his expansionist ambitions with those of Henry II in the political sphere. The Ostmen bishops are excluded from any complicity in Canterbury's design, being motivated by sound theological considerations alone. They subsequently proved this by readily accepting the reformed Irish diocesan and episcopal system. The main fault in the church was, what he vaguely terms, laicisation, and the significant achievements of the reformers were the correction of abuses, development of proper organisational structures and the improvement of the morality and spirituality of the people.

Eoin MacNeill⁴² has an interesting duality in his approach. He praises the reformers for providing a native impetus for change without any prompting from outsiders. However, their part in supplying a pretext for Henry II to obtain papal sanction for his annexation of Ireland makes them deserving of censure. Their reports to Rome in "language of pious reprobation" were, in his view, crucial in this instance. On the abuses he carefully conveys the impression that they were relatively minor, particularly by reference to the fact that all "local customs" were frowned on by the church at this period.

Fr. Aubrey Gwynn has written the definitive account of this topic.⁴³ He expertly sets it in the wider context of the Gregorian reform in the European church, and argues that this is the only valid perspective from which to approach the twelfth century Irish changes. At no stage in medieval Irish society, he accepts, was the Irish practice in marriage brought into line with canon law, but he rejects the idea that incest was widespread or that it was legislated against at the Synod of Cashel in 1101. He postulates that an error may have been made and transmitted in the various manuscripts that contain the text of the decrees. The lack of evidence in the extant literature for this practice and its non-appearance in the decrees of the second Synod of Cashel are used to support his argument. This latter point ignores the fact that by 1172 there had been seventy years of reform work, and if it had made any progress then incest, at least, should have been remedied. In general, however, Gwynn's treatment of the subject is the most scholarly, fair and objective that has yet appeared.

To his translation of St. Bernard's *Life of Malachy*, Dean Lawlor contributed a lengthy introduction placing the responsibility for the degeneration of the church almost entirely on the Vikings. The revival of learning in the tenth and eleventh century monasteries is seen as preparing the way for the twelfth century reform in the same way that a revival of learning preceded the sixteenth century European reformation. Dublin, he believed, "glorified in their subjection to Canterbury".⁴⁴ This is his interpretation of the letter from the inhabitants to Ralph, Archbishop of Canterbury in 1122. Its real purpose, however, was to flatter the Archbishop so that he would agree to consecrate their bishop-elect and help them to resist the claims of Armagh to primacy of the Irish church. Politics rather than loyalty or emotion was the key factor. In an appendix⁴⁵ he lists the abuses mentioned

⁴¹J. F. Kenney, *Sources for the Early History of Ireland: Ecclesiastical*, New York 1929.

⁴²Eoin Mac Neill, *Phases of Irish History*, Dublin 1919 (reprinted 1968), pp. 238-287.

⁴³A. Gwynn, 'The Twelfth Century Reform', in P. J. Corish ed., *A History of Irish Catholicism*, vol. II, Dublin 1968. See also his articles in *Irish Eccles. Rec.*, August 1945 and Feb. 1946.

⁴⁴Lawlor, *Life of Malachy*, intro. p. xxii.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, appendix, pp. 161-163.

by Bernard and offers his own comments on them. These remarks are mainly designed to qualify the dogmatic assertions of St. Bernard. Marriage, confession and confirmation had not been abandoned but were not performed according to the Roman rite. The saint, he would concede, had some foundation for his criticisms but his inflamed rhetoric presents a false picture.

Protestant writers have basic similarities in approach which transcend their denominational concerns. There is a pronounced lack of sympathy for the reformers who are shown as agents of the papacy, attempting to extend its influence and power. Emphasis is placed on the freedom from Roman control of the church and parallels are drawn between it and the national churches established by the sixteenth century reformation.⁴⁶ This idealised version of the early Irish church, noted for the "primeval purity of her doctrine and teaching",⁴⁷ necessitated a rejection of all evidence which pointed to corruption and a need for reform. The reformers, Henry II, the Pope and the Archbishops of Canterbury, all receive severe strictures for their roles in the attack on this pre-reformation national church. The English nationality of Pope Adrian is given prominence and a carefully calculated picture presented of a ruthlessly ambitious man prepared to sacrifice both the Irish church and the country's political independence for his own aggrandisement.⁴⁸ The Vikings do not fare much better, being singled out for attack both for their initial assault on Irish christianity and the impetus which their descendants subsequently gave to the reform.⁴⁹ The Culdee movement gets prominent mention due to a belief that it represented an organised opposition to the claim for primacy by Rome. This whole movement is misunderstood and distorted by such writers, one of whom even regarded it as continuing until 1625 as a last remnant of the old independent Irish church.⁵⁰

Church of Ireland writers tend to adopt a subdued approach in expressing these views. The apparent existence of some of the essential features of the Established Church at such an early period is presented with unconcealed pride. There is considerable stress on the point that the twelfth century reform merely marks the introduction of a Roman interlude in the Irish church which was corrected again in the sixteenth century, and that this independence has been maintained through the efforts of the Church of Ireland. There is also a definite suggestion that the golden age of Irish christianity was linked with its freedom from papal control.⁵¹

The most balanced treatment from an Anglican viewpoint is that of St. John Seymour, a widely respected ecclesiastical historian. He provides a factual, dispassionate survey of the reformers' work and in contrast to most clerical writers sets the events in their proper historical context. He even delivers a gentle rebuke to those who had argued that the reform placed the free Irish church in the bondage of Rome. He shows that closer communion with Rome was unavoidable if the Irish church was to be brought into line with that of Britain and the rest of Europe. However, he thought it necessary to add a reminder that the Papacy was quite a different, and by implication less objectionable, institution at that

⁴⁶R. Mant, *History of the Church of Ireland*, London 1840; J. Macbeth, *The Story of Ireland and Her Church*, Dublin 1899; W. A. Philips ed. *The History of the Church of Ireland*, 3 vols., Oxford 1933-34; C. Pike, *Story of Religion in Ireland*, London 1895; J. Olden, *The Church of Ireland*, London 1892.

⁴⁷Macbeth, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

⁴⁸G. Gordon, *History of Ireland*, London 1806, p. 65; Pike, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

⁴⁹Macbeth, *op. cit.*, p. 100; Olden, *op. cit.*, p. 167; Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 54; R. Murray, *Ireland and Her Church*, London 1845, p. 112.

⁵⁰Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁵¹Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 52; Macbeth, *op. cit.*, p. 107; Olden, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

period than it became subsequently. He shares the accepted viewpoint of the time that the Vikings were militant heathens intent on the destruction of christianity and even questions the sincerity of their initial conversion in the tenth century. The selection of Irish bishops by the Ostmen towns, who in turn rejected the Celtic church and looked to Canterbury, is noted as unusual and used to dismiss the statement of Geoffrey Keating that the Ostmen looked to Canterbury initially because they feared the imposition of native Irish bishops on them. The reformers are seen as enthusiastic promoters of the Norman conquest using *Laudabiliter* to full and deadly effect. The decision to reject the involvement of Canterbury but accept English political control is presented as the fatal error. The connection with England not alone failed to improve religious life in Ireland but exacerbated the problems which already existed. On the other hand, had the reformers worked for Papal approval through Canterbury rather than dealing directly with Rome, "the Irish church could have been an independent church in full communion with Rome".⁵²

Presbyterian authors take a far more extreme view. The reform is constantly used as an object lesson in the perfidy of Rome and the continual malign designs of the papacy. The need for constant vigilance to prevent such an occurrence is stressed as are aspects of the contemporary situation: "Irish Roman Catholics should bear carefully in mind that it is to the Pope of Rome they owe their subjugation to Britain of which they complain so much". The polemical nature of most of this writing is further underlined, e.g. "Being the infallible head of an infallible church, surely he did not err?".⁵³ Considerable liberties are taken with the facts to further this objective as evidenced by the assertions that the reform resulted in indulgences being openly sold, purgatory preached for the first time, simony becoming widespread and the bible being discarded.⁵⁴

An effort is also made to show that an embryonic Presbyterian system existed in the early Irish church. The impotence of the bishops, and the lack of contact with Rome provide the basis of argument through the Culdees are an important plank for other writers.⁵⁵ The general lack of success in making such a thesis plausible is underlined by the conclusion of one of its foremost proponents, the Rev. Thomas Hamilton: "the church was characterised by much of the simplicity and freedom of Presbyterianism....it was certainly much more essentially Presbyterian than Popish or Prelatic".⁵⁶ A further distinctive aspect of Presbyterian historiography is a stress on the purity of early Irish christianity. Contact with Rome in the twelfth century led to contamination which was only eliminated four hundred years later with the advent of their church.⁵⁷ Hamilton again typifies this attitude as well as the intemperate language frequently employed: "...for centuries the christianity of Ireland was purer than that of any other nation....but little by little the pure stream became corrupted until it was lost in a foul and foetic quagmire, reeking with filth".⁵⁸

Protestant writers, therefore, had a twofold purpose: they wished to link the early church with their own individual sects and show continuity of belief, practice and organisation,

⁵²St. John D. Seymour, *The Twelfth Century Reformation in Ireland*, Dublin 1932—I am grateful to the Hon. Editor, Prof. Etienne Rynne for bringing this publication to my attention.

⁵³T. Hamilton, *History of the Irish Presbyterian Church*, Belfast 1887, pp. 20-21.

⁵⁴D. Stewart, *The History and Principles of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*, Belfast 1907, pp. 13-14, 17; Hamilton, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

⁵⁵Gordon, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁵⁶Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁵⁷Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

⁵⁸Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

and in addition, to present a justification for the sixteenth century reformation by showing that Rome had imposed its authority a mere four hundred years earlier. In this context it was necessary to present the reformers in the most unfavourable light possible. The Ostmen, Irish and Normans who were involved are censured as the dupes or willing accomplices of the power-hungry papacy. For moderate writers this was sufficient, but the more extreme author felt it necessary to include further interpretative and often highly inflammatory descriptions of the detrimental effects which the twelfth century changes had on religious life in Ireland. This deplorable regression was not to be reversed until "the era of the reformation arrived bringing hope of better things".⁵⁹

The authors of school text-books found this topic generally uncongenial. The lives of Malachy, Bernard and Laurence O'Toole were useful in showing that the twelfth century could produce spiritual giants, but the difficulties of explaining the deterioration from the 'Golden Age' outweighed this advantage. The most common approach was to have an introduction detailing the intense anti-christian activities of the Vikings and then attribute the decline in morality to the Norse attacks. It was, in the circumstances, an understandable approach, and the inevitable distortion and omission of important facts was no greater than in other, supposedly more academic, works.⁶⁰ Modern school texts have shown a major improvement in this, as in most other, areas. The continued emphasis on St. Malachy at the expense of the details of the abuses and their reform is due to modern educational ideas on history teaching rather than to any attempt to deny unpalatable truths.⁶¹

Among recently published work on the twelfth century are two monographs by John Watt.⁶² Lay control of ecclesiastical affairs is given an undue emphasis in explaining the abuses particularly in regard to marriage where the influence of Irish law was undoubtedly more significant. His use of phrases which describe Ireland as "the admiration of christendom" suggests that the 'Island of Saints and Scholars' style of writing will not easily be eliminated.

The most original modern work has come from W. L. Warren, who, in the course of a controversial essay on the century in general, argues that the reform was largely a parchment one. The letters of Pope Alexander III, hailing as the will of God the submission of the country to Henry II, are seen as the real death-knell of Irish independence. Papal motives, he suggests, were distrust of a reform too closely associated with monks, and it is frequently overlooked that Adrian IV was instrumental in transferring power in the church from monastic orders to bishops. The main flaw in this argument is the lack of evidence for such mistrust. Malachy had originally wished to stay at Clairvaux but Pope Innocent II had decreed that he would be "employed to more profitable advantage in Ireland". Malachy went to meet Pope Eugenius in France in 1148, "as he need not fear that he should have any difficulty with him". The sending of Paparo as Papal Legate in 1151 clearly indicated papal approval of the structure and personnel of the reform. Warren's most original suggestion is that Henry II's invasion of Ireland was first suggested by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the loss of primacy over the Ostmen towns having made the

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶⁰J. Ryan, *Ireland from A.D. 800 to A.D. 1600*, Dublin n.d. but 1927; J. F. O'Doherty, *A History of the Catholic Church*, Dublin 1943; M. Hayden and G. A. Moonan, *A Short History of the Irish People*, Dublin 1925 (new edition 1960).

⁶¹G. MacGearailt, *Celts and Normans*, Dublin 1969; J. Feeny, *A History of Ireland*, Dublin n.d.

⁶²J. Watt, *The Church and the Two Nations in Medieval Ireland*, Cambridge 1970, and *The Church in Medieval Ireland*, Dublin 1972.

Archbishop fearful for the future of the church in Ireland—the intervention of Henry would rectify this and also recover for Canterbury what they saw as usurped rights. The whole essay is a highly conjectural but nevertheless fascinating interpretation of the period.⁶³

The advantages which this topic possessed in its extensive source material, of an apparently uncomplicated nature, and the resultant attraction of numerous scholars, proved to be largely counter productive. It led to work which was concerned primarily with subsequent historical issues and gave inadequate attention to the significance of the reform in its own period. The popular conception of Ireland as the 'Island of Saints and Scholars' was threatened by the highlighting of moral and organisational abuses for which correction was sought. This undermining of a basic plank of much nationalist historical writing was aggravated by the evidence presented of papal authorisation and support for the Norman invasion. The impetus given to reform by the Ostmen of Dublin, Limerick and Waterford was an embarrassment as it weakened the generally accepted view of all Vikings as ruthless destroyers of christianity. The closer relationship with Rome, which was fundamental to the reformers' work, was a special point of controversy for Protestant writers. As a result the treatment of the reform, depending on the function it was intended to serve, varied in emphasis, distortion or omission. The common factor which transcended these individual concerns was a siege mentality. Particular denominational, sectarian or political viewpoints had to be defended. The degree to which they were vulnerable dictated the extent of the deviation from acceptable standards of historical enquiry. The historiography of the reform, therefore, provides extremely valuable insights into the diverse and changing preoccupations and prejudices of historians unable to resist that most intractable, but irresistible, subject, the Irish past.

⁶³W. L. Warren, "The Interpretation of Twelfth Century Irish History", in J. C. Beckett ed., *Historical Studies VII*, Belfast 1969, pp. 1-19.