

Interview with Edel Bhreathnach

Irish Medieval History and its Possible Future Directions

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Abstract: *This interview took place at the Discovery Programme, Dublin, on 25th September 2014. Edel Bhreathnach discussed the state-of-art in Early Irish Medieval History and her opinions about the Irish educational system and the future of Irish Medieval Studies. She also provides some hints about the directions she is taking with her own research projects.*

Keywords: *Edel Bhreathnach; Irish History; Medieval History; Discovery Programme; Monastic Ireland; Mapping Death; UCD Michael Ó Cléirigh Insitute.*

Edel Bhreathnach was born in Dalkey County Dublin. She is the daughter of Meabh and Fionnbharra Breathnach and sister of Aíne, Colm, and Bríd Bhreathnach. Edel grown up in an Irish speaking home and her mother nurtured her interest for Irish history at home, introducing her to the monumental *Lives of Irish Saints*, by Canon John O’Hanlon. She was educated at Cóláiste Íosagáin, Bootertown, Co. Dublin and attended her local parish church where her interest for the sacred and the influence of Christianity in Ireland was further stimulated. It was at the Dalkey Castle and museum, with a view of the ruins of the old parish church, that Bhreathnach celebrated the publication of her newest book, not only with fellow academics, but also with her family and friends. Edel is married to Ragnall Ó Floinn, who is currently director of the National Museum of Ireland, and they have two children Sorchá and Muiris Ó Floinn, who are now both in college.

Bhreathnach has had a versatile and exciting academic trajectory and is now a scholar with an impressive publication record and multiple skills, who thinks broadly, and, as a result, has greatly contributed to the Irish scholarship. Her areas of interests and expertise include, but are not limited to, kingship, religious beliefs, monastic studies, Franciscan studies and historiography of history writing in Ireland. She graduated with a degree in Celtic Studies from University College Dublin (UCD) in 1979 and studied further at Jesus College Oxford between 1983 and 1984. Between 1979 and 1988,

she worked for the Department of Foreign Affairs, before she started to work for the National Council of Educational Award. She returned to UCD for formal training and obtained her doctoral degree in 1991 under the supervision of Professor Francis John Byrne. After its completion, she worked in the Discovery Programme (DP) as a research fellow on the “Tara Project” for fifteen years, publishing widely in the field. In 2000 she was awarded a Moore Institute (NUI Galway) post-doctoral research fellowship, and became in 2002 a UCD Mícheal Ó Cléirigh Institute research fellow. In 2007 she became Deputy Director and Academic Project Manager of the UCD Mícheal Ó Cléirigh Institute, where she coordinated several projects such as on the material culture of the mendicant orders in Ireland, funded by the Irish Research Council, and another on the early book and manuscript heritage of the Irish Franciscans. She acted as national coordinator of “Louvain 400”, the 400th anniversary of the foundation of St Anthony’s College, Louvain. In 2013 she returned to the DP in the position of Chief Executive Officer (CEO), a position that she holds at the moment. Concomitantly, she is one of the principal investigators of the project “Monastic Ireland: Landscape and Settlement” funded by the Irish Research Council.

Elaine Pereira Farrell (EPF): Edel, you are a very complete scholar. You have a deep knowledge of the Irish sources, historiography and archaeology, you are bilingual, being fluent in both English and Irish and have a great command of Old Irish, Latin and other European modern languages. Do you think that the Irish schools and universities are still training people at this high level?

Edel Bhreathnach (EB): No, but teachers are not given the time or scope to examine their subjects in depth with their students even to post-graduate level. The system militates against analysis and discourse, which incidentally still happens elsewhere – as I know from my son who is currently studying pure philosophy in the University of Edinburgh. He has six contact hours per week but is expected to read a considerable amount of primary and secondary material in preparation for his seminars, and if he does not he will be unable to participate properly. That challenges a student and leads to deep and independent thinking.

EPF: The European Commission and its funding schemes and the Irish Research Council (IRC) are promoting gender equality in research and innovation.¹ You were expecting your daughter soon after you completed your doctoral degree and yet you developed an admirable academic career at the same time as you fulfilled your role as mother. Was it difficult to be mother and scholar at the same time? How did you master these responsibilities? Did you encounter resistances and barriers in the academic environment for being a woman and a mother? Would you have any advice for younger female scholars?

EB: I was lucky when Sorchá and Muiris were born because I worked as a Research

Fellow on the DP Tara Research Project. Then I was appointed to Research Fellowships in NUI Galway and UCD and both posts were flexible in their schedules and could be worked around school hours and other commitments. But even then it was difficult and I was only able to continue to work with the support of Ragnall, my parents and a network of friends, especially school mothers who were willing to mind them after school. The barriers to women – with or without family – are structural and social. Many decisions are taken over pints and in dark corridors – mainly by male colleagues when you are not around. But then my view has been not to care about status or title – as long as treated fairly – and to concentrate on moving the subject forward and encouraging students.

EPF: During the years you were achieving your qualifications the debate between “nativists” and “revisionists” or “anti-nativists” was still a quite lively one. In a 2010 publication Colmán Etchingham used the term “post-anti-nativist” to define the state-of-art and the current position of most scholars.² Would you classify yourself as a “post-anti-nativist”?

EB: I have never regarded myself as post- or anti- anything. The great advantage of having Ragnall around is that he gave me a different – and often more level-headed – perspective that led me to steer clear of these often very destructive and personal debates. I also gained a different view of my field by living away from Ireland for a while and by pursuing a very diverse career. No one can be absolutely correct in such a debate. Humanity is too complex to be depicted as either black or white. There are constant changes and a depth of various levels of beliefs, traditions and customs in most societies.

EPF: Etchingham has also defined that Irish scholarship is now in a “post-monastic” phase, meaning that scholars have departed from the traditional “Hughesian model” that defined that the Irish church was essentially monastic and because of that very peculiar.³ You have also done a lot of work on Irish monasticism and church history and you are currently looking at the role of bishops in monastic orders. How “monastic” do you think Ireland was? And how similar or different do you think that the Irish church was from other medieval churches?

EB: Many years ago I suggested that we view early medieval Irish monasticism in a new way and move from depicting the medieval institution as post-Reformation and even post-Napoleonic reformed orders. Monasticism is guided by a rule and how a rule is followed varies from the large organised community to the individual anchorite, from the royal foundation to the monastery founded by the abbot-saint and directed by the father abbot. All such forms of monasticism existed in medieval Ireland and they often co-existed within the same foundation. In the post-twelfth century period, most

of the early monasteries – though not all! – shifted to new structures offered by new orders – monastic and mendicant.

EPF: One aspect of Irish historiography that has intrigued Brazilian scholars is its chronology. It is commonly acknowledged that traditional division of Ancient, Medieval and Modern histories are artificial and biased. However, even though historians criticise their own artificial chronological divisions they are indispensable. In the Irish case there is traditionally a gap between pre-history and medieval history, with the fourth to fifth centuries as a temporal boundary with the arrival of Christianity and of writing.⁴ Nevertheless, it is a conservative way of defining history purely based on writing, as history can also be uncovered through archaeology. Besides, Ireland was in touch with the rest of Europe, which was in the “Ancient” period, or “Late Antiquity”. Would you think that there is a need to revise these nomenclatures? What do you think that could be suggested to replace the traditional “pre-history” terminology for the Irish period before the fifth century?

EB: Late Antiquity is a term commonly used to describe the period you mention and I am perfectly comfortable using it in relation to Ireland. After all, Christianity and literacy emerge strongly during that period and Ireland is caught up in these movements. We are somewhat obsessed with the influence of Rome on Ireland. The Romans did not come here but the legacy of the Roman Empire – Latin, literacy and Christianity – certainly did. Once we move into the sixth/seventh centuries we are in the early medieval period with everyone else – and have our own variations during that period. We must remember that chronological narratives differ depending on geographic or modern cultural perspectives.

EPF: In the recent years, during and after the Irish economic boom there was a great development of the field of archaeology, which you followed very closely. It obviously inspired you to found the “Mapping Death” project with Dr Elizabeth O’Brien, which stimulated conferences and scholarly outputs, (<http://www.mappingdeathdb.ie>). The database is available online. How can scholars still benefit from the data available there? Are there future plans for this project?

EB: The “Mapping Death” database is constantly being updated and corrected thanks to the heroic work of Dr O’Brien. She continues to work on an analysis of the data and following up on particular sites with C14 dating and other scientific investigations. The “Mapping Death” project really framed the narrative of my recent book and continues to inform my work as it moved me away from dealing with documentary evidence to facing the harsh realities of life found in the burial record. We hope to improve the database next year and to add to the historical and osteological information.

EPF: In 2013, you, Dr Rachel Moss (Trinity College Dublin - TCD) and Dr Malgorzata Krasnodebska-D'Aughton (University College Cork - UCC) were granted €369,000 by the IRC to finance the project “Monastic Ireland: Landscape and Settlement” (www.monastic.ie). Through this grant you were able to employ three recent PhDs as post-doctoral fellow and research assistants. Do you think that there are many other scholars with that vision, of trying to attract major funding in order to generate jobs in the field? How relevant you think it is for the current Irish economic context?

EB: We are always being told that employment prospects are best for students if they take science or technology degrees. That is true but it should not be to the detriment of other disciplines. If we consider that there is no full professor of medieval history in Ireland today – in a country with a huge medieval legacy. A German colleague has likened this situation to Germany having no full professors of engineering! A strongly supported subject, especially relating to Irish culture, will inevitably attract good students and investment in the subject, and most especially in major cultural institutions will pay off. They should not be regarded as a drain on economic resources. Quite the opposite – perhaps our politicians and policy-makers should visit places such as Aachen and Köln to see how investment in culture works for these cities – and medieval culture at that!

EPF: Why “Monastic Ireland”? What inspired/motivated you to develop this project?

EB: “Monastic Ireland” evolved out of a great project “Monastic Wales” (<http://www.monasticwales.org>) directed by Professor Janet Burton (Trinity St David’s, Lampeter) and Dr Karen Stöber (University of Lleida, Barcelona). It was also informed by my work on the mendicant orders while working in the UCD Mícheál Ó Cléirigh Institute and also by constant and inspirational chats with Dr Colmán Ó Clabaigh of Glenstal Abbey, a leading expert on medieval monasticism. When the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht and Fáilte Ireland (the Irish Tourist Board) granted me funds to produce an accessible database, I was fortunate to recruit energetic graduates, Dr Niamh NicGhabhann (now University of Limerick) and Dr Keith Smith (TCD) to build the database and website. That laid the foundation for a further research phase and for the large grant that Dr Rachel Moss (TCD) and Dr Malgorzata Krasnodebska-D'Aughton (UCC) and myself received from the IRC.

EPF: The project “Monastic Ireland” is taking a collaborative approach dialoguing with scholars leading similar projects such as the “Monastic Wales”. At important conferences such as the International Medieval Congress (IMC), that attracts hundreds of scholars to Leeds every July, there is currently a tendency for people to present papers at sessions organized by major research networks. Do you think that besides the obvious positive aspects, such as sharing of information and fund attraction, there could be negative ones? Would the big projects suffocate the possibility of smaller projects and research questions that are not on “fashion” or in the concern of the major “networkers”?

EB: This is always a problem although I feel that it is good for Irish scholars to be part of these international networks. It brings the Irish material and research to the attention of a wider audience who would not otherwise come across it. The main problem with international funding is that money attracts money and you find that the major universities in Britain and Europe gobble up an awful lot of funds and attract “big name” scholars. This leads to an imbalance and can be a barrier to smaller institutions, which have excellent projects and scholars but do not have the administrative or reputational powers of the others.

EPF: A good deal of your research has been dedicated to Leinster, the place you are from. But you have also developed research of broader scope, such as your newest book, and the “Monastic Ireland” project. There is a great need for local case studies as much as for broader comparative studies. On a practical level, do you think it is possible to balance the dialogue between the “local” and the “global”? What are your methods and approaches to achieve this balance?

EB: Over the past ten years, as I get older (!), I find that I have established a methodology for myself in which I delve very deeply into a locality through all possible sources and themes emerge which I then pursue by reading around them in a more universal context. I also find that I no longer confine myself to the history of one particular period but I can move fairly easily from prehistory to the early modern period. This enriches many of my studies. You can lose perspective if you are overly restricted in your scholarship.

EPF: The Irish historiography in the time of Eoin Mac Neill was very nationalistic, largely due to its historical context during the process of independence. Later, in the mid- 20th century there was a strong emphasis in the field of history for “neutrality”.⁵ How do you see these questions fitting in the 21st century? Is it possible to tackle a national history without being a nationalist and having a political agenda?

EB: Eoin Mac Neill did have a nationalistic approach to his scholarship at times but nevertheless he was a brilliant scholar who produced scientific history. He differed in that regard to many of his contemporaries who were not scientific in their approach and did not have the skills to tackle primary sources. There is too much emphasis on the influence of nationalism on the writing of Irish history and modern commentators are often far too simplistic in their analysis. Historical research is a science with a particular methodology and pursuit of that science as such should deter the historian from producing works that are biased or simplistic. People can be too influenced by contemporary dialogues (as in the case of twenty-first century damning of twentieth-century Ireland). These dialogues are necessary to improve society or rid it of some oppression, but they should not encroach on scientific historical writing.

EPF: In Brazil, history teachers have an important role in promoting political awareness and contributing to the formation of conscious citizens. Due to the current context of effervescent protests and public manifestations, scholars and society are debating the role of educators, both at secondary and higher educational level. Some argue that they should not manifest in class their political views and they should teach history with political “neutrality”. Do you have any parallels to that in Ireland? Do you think that teachers and lecturers in Ireland have or should have an impact on how the Irish perceive their own past and how they should design their future?

EB: I am not aware of this debate among teachers in Ireland. I suppose that it was keenly argued when I was at school in the 1970s and we were in the middle of the Northern “Troubles”. A very politically active history teacher taught me in my senior school year. Tony Gregory, who later became a member of parliament, was a left-wing socialist republican who contributed hugely to his own community in the deprived areas on inner city Dublin. He may not have been a talented historian but we did have very lively discussions in class and he produced three professional historians – Colmán Etchingham (NUI Maynooth), Niall Ó Ciosáin (NUI Galway) and myself!

EPF: On your DP profile webpage you listed among your research interests “The historiography of history writing in Ireland”. Some countries have a very strong scholarship of theory of history, in the sense that there are very strong conceptual debates. In Brazil for example, in most departments, the Bachelor Degree in History Programme would include modules on theory and methodology of history. Would I be correct in concluding that in Ireland the focus of both historical research, and history teaching at university level do not stress theoretical debates? My perception would be that the teaching practice in Ireland is highly focused on primary sources and less into how historians have been reading those sources. In Brazil, there is, generally speaking, a limited training in medieval languages and palaeography that needs to be improved. In comparison, the Irish are stronger on that, but do you think that the Irish scholars need to stimulate more theoretical approaches and be more multidisciplinary, dialoguing more with social sciences?

EB: Yes, I do think that we need more philosophical and cognitive approaches to our historical discourses in Ireland. Otherwise, we either confine ourselves to narrative or in modern history to journalism. I am particularly proud of my work with the archaeologists Conor Newman, Joe Fenwick, Dr Roseanne Schot and Professor John Waddell (all NUI Galway) on the Irish “royal sites”. We have broken through the old narrative by using anthropological and more conceptual approaches and by seeking universal patterns and examining comparative evidence. In Irish historical studies, Charles Doherty has been very courageous and imaginative in opening up the Irish evidence to new perspectives. I do not agree that Irish history graduates or their teachers are particularly strong on

languages, either Latin or continental languages, as scholars are elsewhere. Difficulties with languages pervade the Irish education system and put us at a great disadvantage in so many fields.

EPF: In your recent book, you argued that “Irish universities no longer value medieval Irish history” (p. 241). Recently there was a debate about the replacement of the UCD Professor of Early Irish, which featured in the national press in Ireland. Despite the academic protests, it was decided that UCD was not going to hire a professor under a permanent contract, but instead a lecturer with a short-term contract. Fortunately, since that happened in UCD, the University College Cork (UCC), the School of Celtic Studies of DIAS and the University of Utrecht advertised professorship positions of Celtic Languages. What impact do you think this kind of negative attitude towards the field of Celtic Studies will have on the future of the Irish Studies? Do you think that the fields of Celtic and Irish studies are still perceived as relevant in the 21st century? Is future research in the area sustainable?

EB: Celtic Studies (which was my primary degree) as designed in the nineteenth century mainly following a German linguistic model is probably an outmoded model and I feel that this is the reason for its decline in so many universities. The model in UCC is cohesive and has created a lively department. This should be the model perhaps elsewhere. In any event, one hopes that the success of the Irish Medievalist Conference (ICM) at UCD will lead to a renewal of the discipline – perhaps in a different format – in the institution.

EPF: Some countries still have a tendency to fund only national histories and some academic circles are still pretty closed for non-national scholars. However, European funding agencies are now promoting mobility and international networking and knowledge transfer. How important do you judge this to be?

EB: There are two aspects to this trend. If it relates to universities attracting non-EU nationals for higher fees and lower standards, I view that as unethical. If it means, however, that funding non-EU graduates attracts scholars with very different academic backgrounds into a field, this is to the good of a subject. It may require teachers to put a greater amount of time into forming these students, but if there is a good response, it is worth the effort. But teachers have to be supported in such endeavours by their institutions.

EPF: Do you think that Irish academics are prepared to welcome both ideas, firstly to move abroad to work and research, and secondly to increase the number of international scholars in their institutions?

EB: Irish academics vary in their willingness to move abroad and too often it is to Britain and the US. It should also be said that institutions are not always hugely supportive of enabling their academics to travel. If our language skills were better we could gain a broader experience by travelling to European universities and delving into literature in language other than English.

EPF: Recently the DP and the Royal Irish Academy (RIA) became Institutions of High Education, meaning that both now qualify to welcome and train postgraduate and post-doctoral researchers and attract with them funding from bodies such as the IRC. Why do you think this was important and necessary?

EB: Firstly, I would stress that like the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies (DIAS) and the RIA, the DP is primarily a research institution and its remit is to be an archaeological research centre. This status needs to be strengthened and being recognised as such by the IRC is hugely important. The DP aims to train archaeologists to analyse data and to work alongside scholars of other disciplines. It has also built a strong reputation in geo-surveying and other modern techniques, and also in methodologies of genuine collaboration with other disciplines. I want to see this type of analysis and collaboration strengthened and I am also passionate about bringing our research to the attention of a wider audience, especially schools and local communities. I have outlined all these aims in the DP's Strategic Plan 2014-2017.⁶ Over the next few years, the DP will not compete for post-graduate funds but will consider working with universities in their applications for PhD scholarships. As to post-doctoral and major project funding, it is most likely that bids for money will be done as parts of collaborative networks – as in the case of “Monastic Ireland”.

EPF: Your career and life story proves that you have always been an innovative and driven scholar. What are your personal research projects for the next years?

EB: I have so many projects on my mind that there are not enough hours in the day or night to do them at the moment. My current focus is on “Monastic Ireland” and “Mapping Death” and will be for some time. A major objective in my current and future work will be to see the Irish evidence – which is considerable and relatively unknown – become part of the international dialogues relating to so many aspects of the medieval world, and indeed leading on some aspects of these dialogues. I certainly will not be idle for the foreseeable future!

Notes

* Edel Bhreathnach's Select Publications

Ireland in the medieval world AD 400-1000: landscape, kingship and religion. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014.

(Ed. with Schot, R.; Newman, C.) *The landscape of kingship and cult: text and archaeology*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011.

(Ed. with McCafferty, J.; MacMahon, J.) *The Irish Franciscans 1534-1990*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2009.

(Ed. with Cunnigham, B.) *The Four Masters and their world*. Dublin: Wordwell Books, 2007.

(Ed.) *The kingship and landscape of Tara*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005.

Tara: a select bibliography. Dublin: Discovery Programme and Royal Irish Academy, 1995.

- 1 Acknowledgments I wish to warmly thank Edel Bhreathnach for her kindness in answering these questions. Dr Annejulie Lafaye (TCD), Dr Keith Smith (TCD) and Dr Dominique Santos (FURB) were very generous in taking time to read a draft of this interview and for contributing to the shaping of these questions. The “Monastic Ireland” research team and the DP staff for providing such a lively environment of encouragement and learning and the IRC for the most appreciated financial support. For the European Commission “Horizon 2020” see following link: <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/horizon2020/en/h2020-section/promoting-gender-equality-research-and-innovation> (accessed 25th September 2014); and for the Irish Research Council document on its “Gender Strategy and Action Plan 2013-2020” see: http://research.ie/sites/default/files/irish_research_council_gender_action_plan_2013_-2020.pdf (accessed 25th September 2014).
- 2 Etchingam, C. “Bishops, Church and People: How Christian Was ‘Early Christian Ireland’?” In: *L'Irlanda e gli Irlandesi Nell'Alto Medioevo: 16–21 aprile 2009. Atti delle Settimane di Studio del Centro Italiano di Studi Sull'Alto Medioevo* 57, 2010, pp. 325–5, 327.
- 3 Ibid, p. 327.
- 4 Farrell, E.C.S.P.; Santos D.V.C.. *Early Christian Ireland—Uma Reflexão Sobre o Problema da Periodização na Escrita da História da Irlanda*. In: Baptista, L.V.; Sant’Anna H.M.; Santos, D.V.C.. *História Antiga: Estudos, Revisões e Diálogos*. Rio de Janeiro: Publit, 2011, pp. 185–213.
- 5 For Eoin MacNeill’s biography see: Maume, P.; Charles-Edwards, T., “MacNeill, Eoin (John)” In: *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. Ed. James McGuire and James Quinn. Cambridge: University Cambridge Press, 2009. For debates about Irish historiography see: Brady, Ciaran (ed.). *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism 1938-1994*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994. The debate about History as a science and its methodologies is very extensive, but to mention a few influential, but rather outdated works, see: Bloch, M. *The Historian’s Craft*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992 (2nd edition); Carr, E.H. *What is History?* New York: Penguin, 1987 (2nd edition); Cardoso, C.F. *Uma Introdução à História*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1981.
- 6 The document is available at: <http://www.discoveryprogramme.ie/publications/other-publications/245-dp-launches-strategic-plan-2014-2017.html>. (accessed 26th September 2014).