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## The Gaelic Background of Old English Poetry before Bede

Colin A. Ireland  
*Arcadia University*, [irelandc@arcadia.edu](mailto:irelandc@arcadia.edu)

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DE GRUYTER

*Colin A. Ireland*

# THE GAELIC BACKGROUND OF OLD ENGLISH POETRY BEFORE BEDE

RICHARD RAWLINSON CENTER SERIES

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MEDIEVAL  
STUDIES

Colin A. Ireland

**The Gaelic Background of Old English Poetry before Bede**

# Publications of the Richard Rawlinson Center



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# **The Gaelic Background of Old English Poetry before Bede**

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I ndilchuimhne ar Honóra  
Mo sholas treorach  
Spreagadh m'intinne  
Mo ghrá geal  
Ar feadh níos mó ná  
Ceithre bhliain agus triocho

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## Preface

Readers of this book live in a world where speakers of English have been at the forefront of cultural, political, social, and scientific affairs. There has been a tendency, therefore, for scholarship from this English-speaking world to impose a template onto the early medieval world that parallels and reflects modern circumstances. Because of the pre-eminence of modern English as a world language a large amount of scholarship has been produced about literature in Old English and the Anglo-Saxon peoples who created it. By way of illustration, contrast the number of universities worldwide with English departments containing active medievalists against the few universities that have Celtic Studies departments. The diminished status of the Gaelic (Irish and Scottish) and Brittonic (Welsh) languages in the modern world has allowed their influence in, and contributions to, the medieval insular world to be either overlooked or undervalued.

As Christianity spread across Western Europe it brought literacy in Latin from the Mediterranean world to peoples who had not yet developed written literatures in their own native languages. After the arrival of Latin literacy, the first written vernacular literatures in Western Europe were developed in Ireland and Britain, and texts in the Gaelic, Brittonic, and Germanic languages and dialects were preserved. The long-established Gaelic and Brittonic languages produced rich and varied literatures, of both secular and ecclesiastical import, that transmitted much indigenous lore and tradition while reflecting their early conversions to Christianity. Old English also produced a vernacular literature, preserved in the blended dialects of Germanic immigrants to Britain, but one narrowly confined to ecclesiastical subjects or topics derived from written sources of the Mediterranean world. Old English texts about native lore or local concerns are made significant by their paucity.

Although last to arrive in the archipelago, Old English has become the most widely known and studied of the early medieval insular vernacular literatures. However, it is the least informative about indigenous lore and local cultural traditions. For researchers interested in the archipelago's indigenous traditions, the written resources are much richer and more plentiful in the Gaelic and Brittonic vernaculars. More importantly, the cultural traditions transmitted through Old English did not evolve independently, but rather in association with their well-established Gaelic and Brittonic Christian neighbors.

A feature of modern Old English and Anglo-Latin criticism can be called the "appeal to Rome." Anglo-Saxon culture stressed its relations with Rome beginning with the Augustinian mission sent to Canterbury by Pope Gregory (d. 604). The "appeal to Rome" was reinforced through those early mission activities,

Roman sojourns of clerics like Wilfrid and Benedict Biscop, the writings of Aldhelm and Bede, the tenth-century Benedictine Reform, and the writings, especially the homilies, of Ælfric and Wulfstan. The notion of Anglo-Saxon “orthodoxy” is based on the contents of the writings of a few named, historical authors. It must downplay the breadth of subject matter that exists elsewhere in the Old English corpus, whether secular (e.g., *Beowulf*, *Widsith*, *Deor*) or ecclesiastical (e.g., anonymous homilies). The “appeal to Rome” has allowed critics to dismiss the older Gaelic and Brittonic traditions as “heterodox” or “schismatic.” This is unwarranted, particularly in the case of the seventh-century Gaelic Christian literary tradition, in both Latin and Old Gaelic.

Many modern Old English and Anglo-Latin scholars apparently saw their academic discipline as beginning with Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, proceeded through an examination of a select few named Anglo-Saxon authors, in either Latin or Old English, and shaped their discipline into the *Historia ecclesiae Romae apud gentem Anglorum*. Modern academics of Old English have made a virtue of a vernacular literature that, with notable exceptions, is remarkably incurious about its own indigenous cultural traditions and which can be rigidly derivative in its adherence to a purported Roman “orthodoxy” with identifiable sources.

But the Church itself has never, throughout its long history, promulgated a consistent view of its own “orthodoxy.” Such a modern critical view is anachronistic and leaves unexplained numerous anonymous Old English texts, both ecclesiastical and secular, that do not respond to the “appeal to Rome.” More crucially it has encouraged critics to ignore possibilities of influence from contiguous insular cultures of the Gaels and Britons. This study proposes a necessary corrective to that narrow doctrinal approach to insular vernacular literatures.

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