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Laing, Lloyd and Jennifer Laing. *Celtic Britain and Ireland, Art and Society*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995. Pp. 223. ISBN: 0-312-12613-1.

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As its title suggests, this work is a survey of Celtic culture in Britain and Ireland, seen mainly through the archaeological and art historical record. The content covers a broad range of materials and sites, beginning in the pre-historic period and traveling logically forward to the end of the twelfth century, when Celtic art disappeared in the face of the the Norman and Anglo-Norman invasions.

Like several of these authors' previous works, this is an attractively presented book. While it is not immediately clear who its intended audience is, the reader is hospitably welcomed into the spacious layout, with its comfortable text width, and colored illustrations scattered liberally throughout. Indeed, it is a particular pleasure to see so many archaeological sites and stone monuments illustrated in color. Therefore it is a pity that the placement and choice of the illustrations so often bears no relation to the text, and that the generous margins were used so rarely to direct the reader to illustrations -- which can be as distant as twenty pages away. The drinking horns and pony cap from Torrs, Kirkcudbright, for example, are discussed on p. 23 a mid illustrations of Iron Age forts, but they are illustrated on p. 45. Conversely, the Snettisham hoard is illustrated on p. 28 within the discussion of Iron Age forts and burials, but the hoard itself is not discussed until p. 48. In neither case is the reader given any indication of where to find the illustrations, or even whether such illustrations exist. When this tendency is set against the generally uninformative captions (for example, is the roundel from Danebury illustrated on p. 40 part of the horsegear from Danebury mentioned on p. 27, and, if not, what is it and where is the horsegear?), one is tempted to the conclusion that the illustrations are not, in fact, designed to support the text, but function mainly as kaleidoscopic decoration. This in turn suggests that the book is intended for what might be called "the general reader".

Such a possibility is further supported by the introduction, where the authors apologize for the fragmented nature of the archaeological material, and for their decision not to acknowledge scholarly controversies or to use suitably cautious language. Indeed, the lack of references and citations necessarily make the book a frustrating one for scholars. For the general audience, then, one infers. In that case, it would have been kind to explain to the general reader that "copper alloy" (p. 30) usually means "bronze" or something like it. It would also have been nice to have terms like "slender stemmed trumpets" (p. 74), "carnyx" (p. 75), and "degenerate lyre scroll with keeled half-moons" (p. 76) explained before the appendix on p. 204! The language, in fact, could profitably have been relaxed.

The avoidance of scholarly debate may have been intended to simplify the subject for the general audience. Perhaps in keeping with this, the authors offer few opinions of their own, leaving the reader to draw his or her own conclusions from the material presented. But the general reader, unversed in archaeological and art historical methodology, is hardly in a position to do this. A more

conversational approach in which attention is drawn to linking ideas, possibilities and conclusions would probably have been useful. In fact, I have wondered for a long time whether we don't underestimate the general reader. Even untrained, this person is probably capable of assimilating new ideas or enjoying scholarly debate and controversy, if these are communicated in accessible language. Wouldn't it be nice, for example, to alert the general audience to the notion that art is not the picture book of history but a wielder of ideas? Or that scholarship is not the assimilation of "facts" but the formation of a conclusion based on investigable and critiqueable sources -- or, better yet, that scholarship does not produce consensus so much as a mind-expanding range of possibility? The general reader, after all, is the voter who will (or will not) support art and scholarship in society at large. Why not make sure this voter understands why he or she should do so?

Indeed, there is plenty of scope for debate over the material covered in this book, and the general reader could benefit from having this made plain. For example, I was gratified to find one of my own theories included in the text (p. 98-99) as though it were an accepted part of scholarly opinion on the bossed penannular brooches of the ninth and tenth centuries (see "Migrating Ideas or Migrating Craftsmen? The Case of the Bossed Penannular Brooches", in *The Age of Migrating Ideas*, R. M. Spearman and J. Higgitt, eds., Edinburgh: The National Museums of Scotland and Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd., New York: Alan Sutton Publishing Inc., 1993, 182-7). But this theory, that the brooches were made by and for Scandinavians, not Irish, is resisted by the more traditional scholars, and perhaps the general reader should be informed of this, especially as the book as a whole takes such a traditional view of the field. But then, that traditional view is not made plain either. And this, it seems, is the crux of the matter. The scholarly frame of reference has not been set out, and the material therefore has little meaning and controversies cannot be addressed -- be the terms ever so general.

In fact, the assumptions of the field are formative of the structure of the book, and reflected in unexpectedly significant observations at pivotal points in the text. Thus the whole is arranged around the tacit inquiry, "how did Celtic culture survive"? The chapter "Celts and Romans" is the shortest in the book and contains the comment that open work mounts "were one medium through which Celtic art was kept alive in Roman Britain" (p. 82). The long chapter on "The Golden Age", is followed by one on "The Viking Age", in which we are correctly told that "there is now a growing conviction among scholars that Irish art continued to flourish in the ninth and tenth centuries" (p. 166). And in the Epilogue, the suggestion is made that the contemporary fascination with Celtic art may be "the Celtic artistic spirit responding, as so often in the past, to outside challenges" (p. 201). In these orthodox assertions, the structure and dogma of the field is laid out and there is opportunity for debate.

It may be noted that each assertion is made with reference to a significant historical crisis which accompanied marked changes in "Celtic" art, and the essential continuity of this art may therefore be questioned. The Roman invasion and colonization must have created a serious disruption in Britain (and, as we have discovered since the publication of this book, in Ireland too), especially as they remained for several hundred years. Moreover, it is as the Romans arrive and settle that the original foliate "La Tene" patterns disappear and are replaced with new geometric designs, new Roman brooch and buckle types are introduced, and millefiori work as practiced by the Romans starts to appear in "Celtic" enamels. In order to sustain the idea that these designs, forms and techniques are natural Celtic developments, it is necessary to ignore evidence such as Roman floor mosaics, Roman brooches and buckles, and Roman enamelwork. And in fact few of these Roman materials are even mentioned, much less illustrated, in this short chapter. The Vikings too must have created a serious disruption in the ninth and tenth centuries (indeed, we know that they did) as they first attacked and then settled. To sustain the growing conviction that Celtic art continued to flourish during this period, objects like the bossed penannular brooches are traditionally designated Irish

rather than Scandinavian (although the Laings do not entirely subscribe to this, as we have seen), and late objects such as the croziers of St. Dymphna, St. Mel, and the one in the British Museum tend to be backdated to the Viking period. Ironically, these croziers tend to support the opposite thesis, that Celtic art ceased to be produced during the Viking Age, because their apparently traditional decoration is executed in Scandinavian techniques fundamentally different from those used in Ireland before the Vikings. Finally, the contemporary fascination with Celtic art comes after a long period of oblivion, and in the context of a wide-ranging attraction to the folk arts of many cultures. The rosewindow of the National Cathedral in Washington comes to mind, with its mixture of Celtic and Mayan motifs, and the show "Riverdance" with its blend of Irish, Spanish and Rock dancing.

The traditional view of the field thus leaves something to be desired, and making this plain could have prepared the way for new inquiry or a closer examination of the objects themselves. How much richer to examine the ways by which Celtic art "came back" after periods of dormancy, and what the new types, techniques and designs contributed to it. How much richer, too, to examine the effect of Celtic aesthetics on the incoming settlers. For example, the late objects in chapter 5, such as the Shrine of the Bell of the Testament, the Lismore Crozier, and the Cross of Cong (illustrated on pp. 195 and 197) are among the finest works ever produced in Scandinavian styles, and they were produced in Ireland, not Scandinavia. The Shrine of the Bell of the Testament is by a craftsman who was at least half Scandinavian. On it, we can see him developing motifs he had apparently found on an old Irish book shrine that he had evidently refurbished recently (its filigree panels are closely similar to those on the bell shrine). And in the Lismore Crozier and the Cross of Cong we can see Irish craftsmen assimilating the design repertoire and black-white aesthetic of that same half-Scandinavian craftsman (they reproduce and blend motifs found only on the Shrine of the Bell of the Testament and back in Scandinavia). In the back-dated croziers, we can see Scandinavian techniques being used to produce copies of antique Irish motifs and types in an apparently concerted effort to recreate the lost art of the "Golden Age." In all these objects we can see the artists' and patrons' minds at work and the fruitful interactions between them all.

Is it beyond the scope of a book like "Celtic Britain and Ireland" to outline and question the formation of the field, to point out the controversies, or to look at some of the material in detail? It could be argued that the Laings were looking specifically at Celtic art and society, but we have seen that these cannot be isolated from neighboring arts and societies, and any attempt to do so must be misdirected. Moreover, what does the general reader gain from a kaleidoscopic view of selected material divorced from comment, context and debate? Does it impoverish the "Celtic" heritage to consider the possibility that its legacy is not all purely Celtic? Or does it enrich all our cultures to see how much our artists and their sponsors appreciated and built on each other's work, and still do?