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A map of the Arctic published in Amsterdam in 1606 (from G.
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Iain G. MacDonald, *Clerics and Clansmen. The Diocese of Argyll between the Twelfth and Sixteenth Centuries* (The Northern World 61), Leiden & Boston: Brill 2013, ISBN 9789004185470, xlvii + 417 pp., index and illustrations.

The diocese of Argyll is situated in western Scotland, on the northern periphery of the medieval Western Church. There, the barren landscape is intersected by the sea, with high mountains sometimes plunging directly into the water. Beyond the borders of the diocese, further out to sea, are the Hebrides and the monastery of Iona, well-known even today. According to tradition, the Irish monk Columba arrived there in the year 563 and founded the monastery that became the base for the mission in Scotland. After a long process, this mission eventually led to the establishing of the diocese of Argyll during the twelfth century, with its episcopal see situated on the island of Lismore. The whole process probably mirrors tensions between the Scottish monarchy and the Church in the Irish Sea area.

Iain G. MacDonald's monograph is based on his PhD-thesis from the University of Glasgow in 2009. The aim of his study was to analyze the role of the secular clergy in the diocese and, thus, how the Church functioned at the most basic local level. His topic is important, since our knowledge of really local conditions, especially in the Northern European fringe areas, is poor. He also asks whether any apparent differences can be observed between how the Church functioned in the distant, relatively isolated and poor Argyll compared with other dioceses in the Western Church. MacDonald points out that there is no similar study regarding Scotland, but with reference to the source material he has been able to establish a link with similar investigations made for Norway and Sweden by Professors Torstein Jørgensen (Stavanger) and Kirsi Salonen (Turku/Åbo) respectively. Unfortunately he had neither the intention nor the possibility (the monograph is already comprehensive enough) of studying the theology or devotion of the clerics or the laypeople. One can hope that he will return to such a study, if it is at all possible, but lack of source material might be an obstacle.

The main sources are the records held in the Papal Chancery and in the Penitentiary. Supplications to obtain legal decisions from the Church's highest authority were sent to both places from all parts of the Western Church. These mostly concerned dispensations of various kinds. In this instance, researchers into Scotland's past are fortunate, because the source material, while scanty, is more comprehensive than that from the rest of the church provinces in Northern Europe. MacDonald

is of the opinion that this is due to the fact that from 1189–1192 Scotland was subject to the Pope in a special way, partly in contrast to the Church in England. Moreover, Scotland had no metropolitan see until 1472, when the country was placed under the Archbishop of St. Andrews. All of this led to the Scots being more inclined to turn to the Pope than to others for authoritative answers. There are approximately 400 supplications to the *Curia* from the clergy in Argyll between 1342 and 1560—when a decision taken in the Parliament ushered in the Reformation in Scotland. The supplications were submitted by the clerics themselves and, consequently, are very useful sources for anyone attempting to elucidate their origins and their ties to local magnates.

The monograph is divided into two main parts. The first (Chapters 1 and 2) deal with the origin of the diocese, the development of the episcopal see and the cathedral chapter. The results presented in this part constitute the historical framework for the second main part which deals with the individual clerics with regard to their descent, education, qualifications concerning pastoral care, and the extent to which they fulfilled the requirement for celibacy. At the end of the thesis there is, among some other things, a very useful register of 489 priests in Argyll (pp. 274–357) containing basic information about them together with references to the sources.

MacDonald works methodically and clearly with his source material and constantly refers to earlier research, of which there is not very much. The way he works and the clarity with which the results are presented makes them convincing. He often argues against and/or corrects earlier scholars' relatively negative opinions about the churchly life in Argyll. One is struck by Mac Donald's well-balanced arguments and critical approach to the records and also by his ability to elucidate complex developments. Moreover, the monograph is mercifully free from overburdening theoretical reasonings.

In the first chapter, the author makes it clear that bishops were active in Argyll during the early Middle Ages, that is, before the diocese came into existence during the twelfth century, with Lismore being a religious centre from the ninth century. He very competently shows how, through a slow process, the religious centre gained ascendancy over the surrounding territory, with the involvement of the secular power. Furthermore, he demonstrates how communities and cathedral chapters appointed bishops and the sort of advantage that could be achieved by establishing a diocese in accordance with the secular magnates.

As part of the historical framework there is a discussion of the emergence of the cathedral chapter and its nature. However, a clearer picture

can be drawn from the end of the fourteenth century with the aid of the petitions to the *Curia*. Other important questions are raised regarding how the elections of bishops took place, who the prebendaries were, who formed part of the cathedral's clergy and which were the origins of the clerics regarding birthplace and kindred. Thus, the monograph offers interesting material for asking corresponding questions regarding the dioceses in the Scandinavian realms, where the source material is even scarcer than in Argyll and not so easily dealt with.

In late medieval descriptions as well as earlier research it was maintained that Argyll was poor, rural and an unsuccessful diocese. MacDonald, therefore, tries to understand the history of the cathedral and of the episcopal see from the perspective of the great changes that affected the diocese during the latter part of the Middle Ages, that is the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The second chapter treats questions about patronage, the appointment of bishops and the bishops' relationships with the members of the cathedral chapter. According to the author there is very little to indicate that the poverty of the diocese had any negative effect on the quality of the bishops. His competent analysis also presents a very plausible explanation for why the bishops did not reside in the cathedral on Lismore from the middle of the fifteenth century: It was connected with political and economic change; so, in that sense the poverty of the diocese did play a crucial part.

MacDonald finds explanations for the changes mostly in material reality, where money, as well as royal and noble claims to supremacy, played a decisive role and not in spiritual aspects or the decrees of ecclesiastical law. It is completely feasible to see the development of church history in Argyll mainly from that perspective. But the question of language also played certain part as it relates to the local and regional identity: Could the person appointed speak Gaelic? The author points out that the increasing number of papal appointments (provisions) from the 1380s onwards diminished the status of the bishop among his flock and led to its becoming less secure as the cleric could appeal to a higher court.

Chapter 3 introduces the investigation of the origins of the secular clergy, the number of priests and their advancements. During the period between 1342 and 1560 there are known to have been approximately 419 secular clerics from the diocese of Argyll, of whom 354 certainly held benefices there. MacDonald maintains convincingly that it is not meaningful to make statistical comparisons with other dioceses, since only those priests who turned to the *Curia* in order to obtain specific benefices appear in the records. He also shows that the clerics were mainly of local

descent, serving the church in their home parishes. Most of them belonged to the lesser nobility.

In Chapter 4 Macdonald shows that the requirement for celibacy was not always practised in Argyll, as was the case also in the rest of the Western Church. However, only some 10 per cent of the total number of priests seem to have been sons of priests. This appears to me to be a very low figure taking into account the free attitudes towards sexual life that, according to the author, were prevalent in the societies studied together with the fact that, also according to the author, sons of priests could hardly become anything other than priests themselves. One is sometimes forced to ask what conclusions can be drawn from the sources when, for instance, the number of records does not even amount to ten over a period of ten years. In this instance the author does not seem to provide a full explanation for the low figure. However, he considers it reasonable to correct the opinion of some earlier research that the Western Church would have collapsed without the sons of priests. Did the sons of priests inherit their fathers' benefices? The author points out that this only happened with "a surprisingly limited number of benefices," the explanation being the increasing frequency of papal provisions. Consequently those who wanted to acquire a benefice, had to fight for it rather than inherit it, more often than previously, which seems to be a probable interpretation.

The education at universities and the classical education of the secular clergy is the subject of Chapter 5. It appears that, during the whole period studied, around a third of those who acquired benefices in Argyll had a university education. According to MacDonald that should be considered a respectable figure compared with dioceses in England and Germany during the late Middle Ages. Most of those who had such an education went to the nearby universities in St. Andrews (founded 1410) and Glasgow (founded 1451), only a few went to England or the Continent. I find it striking that we no longer know where a large number of the clerics educated at universities received their training (see Table 9).¹ On the other hand, this concerns comparatively few individuals, only around 120 for the whole period of 218 years. For instance, between 1342 and 1360 only two priests had studied at the university, but we do not know where. The tendency, however, was for expectations that priests would have a higher education increased from the middle of the fifteenth century.

MacDonald relates the university-education of the clergy to the priests' kinship with various clans and finds that the differences lie in the degree of lay control over the churches; the more powerful the lay

control the fewer the number of clerics who had studied at the university. Perhaps such a conclusion need to be better substantiated.

According to the author a classical education in Latin was probably given locally in Argyll by the learned orders. At the same time he points out that the source material is too fragmentary to allow any definite conclusions to be drawn.

The final chapter deals with how well the priests took care of their benefices. Unfortunately, Argyll lacks the type of important source material that an episcopal register provides. Such a source would contain information about the priests' presence in their parishes and the way they served the *cura animarum*. The supplications to the *Curia* reveal that priests held more than one benefice at a time. Furthermore, it is obvious that not all those holding benefices were ordained priests when they received them and in many cases were never ordained, which constituted a problem in Scotland throughout the late Middle Ages. As a consequence, those who were in the lower orders of the ecclesiastical hierarchy were unable to administer the sacraments as required by canon law and so had substitutes, or simply disregarded canon law.

To conclude, this study deals with many questions that are important for an understanding of the late medieval Western Church in the northern periphery, and which are also relevant in the Scandinavian kingdoms. As the author notes in the conclusion, more investigations concerning the clergy on the diocesan level need to be carried out for the whole of Europe. Iain G. MacDonald's extraordinarily skilful monograph should stimulate scholars to apply his questions and methods to other dioceses in order to establish whether his overall conclusion is applicable everywhere else: The diocese of Argyll—despite its poverty and geographical position—did not differ appreciably from other dioceses in Scotland or elsewhere; it was ordinary. As is true of many dioceses, in my opinion it still remains to be seen whether the late medieval Church really exhibited such homogeneity, depending, of course, on the criteria you use for determining what is ordinary.

At all events *Clerics and Clansmen* is a most valuable, inspiring and thoroughly researched monograph. MacDonald has an excellent command of his source material, and he is capable of scrutinizing it critically as well as relating it properly to earlier research in the field. Therefore the book is very easy to embrace. The fact that the conclusions are in some respects open to discussion only raises its scholarly value.

NOTES

- ¹ On p. 206 it is stated that “just under a third” while on p. 232 it says that “over a third” had a university-education. It is not clear how MacDonald has arrived at the estimates. It would probably have been better to give actual numbers. There are 9 figures, 6 maps and 12 tables in the book, all for some unknown reason placed together in the beginning (pp. xi–xl), whereas one would prefer to find them on the pages with the explanatory text.

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