



BOOK REVIEW:
Imagining the Celtic Past in Modern Fantasy

Robert Finnigan

Fimi, Dimitra, and Alistair J.P. Sims, editors. *Imagining the Celtic Past in Modern Fantasy*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. ISBN 9781350349995.

In the introduction to *Imagining the Celtic Past in Modern Fantasy* (2023), Dimitra Fimi states: “The idea of ‘Celticity’ has often functioned as a reservoir of cultural memory, nostalgia, and constructed heritage in modern fantasy” (3). This assertion sets the tone for a rich and detailed exploration of how contemporary fantasy literature engages with, reinterprets, and challenges notions of Celtic heritage. Published as part of Bloomsbury’s *Perspectives on Fantasy* series, this book provides a collection of essays that interrogate the construction and utilization of Celticity in modern narratives. Rather than presenting a singular overarching argument, the editors have organized the volume as a thematic exploration, creating a multifaceted examination that progresses from Celtic elements as narrative intrusions to their commodification in popular culture. With contributions from ten researchers, the book illuminates the ideological, cultural, and historical stakes of depicting Celtic pasts in fantasy literature. The text will undoubtedly appeal to scholars of fantasy and heritage studies, though its theoretical density may challenge general readers.

The book is divided into four parts, each focusing on specific thematic and generic aspects of Celtic fantasy. The progression of these sections reveals a deliberate curatorial vision from the editors, moving from localized literary analysis toward broader cultural implications. Part I, “Celticity as Fantastic Intrusion,” examines how Celtic elements intrude upon historical and narrative frameworks in three key texts and sets the stage with three essays examining how Celtic elements create a sense of otherness or magical incursion into otherwise familiar worlds. K.A. Laity’s chapter on Susanna Clarke’s *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* explores the tension between Englishness and Celticity

in the novel, with particular attention to how fairy magic embodies an unsettling Celtic otherness. Laity's analysis draws out the anxieties surrounding the porous boundary between rational English magic and its more emotional, dangerous, and Celtic-coded counterpart. Following this exploration, Gwendolen Grant's discussion of Alan Garner's *Boneland* situates the novel within Garner's broader engagement with Celtic mythology, revealing how Jungian psychology and Garner's personal mythology inform the seamless blending of worlds in his novel. The first part concludes with Kris Swank's essay on Jodi McIsaac's *The Thin Veil* series, offering a compelling examination of how McIsaac's heroines draw on Irish mythological figures to navigate personal and collective crises, presenting supernatural gifts as deeply intertwined with human and humane qualities.

Part II, "Celtic Fantasy Worlds and Heroes," turns to world-building and heroic narratives. Alistair J.P. Sims analyses the heroic biographies of Cú Chulainn and Connavar in David Gemmell's *Rigante* series, employing the Heroic Biography Pattern, a framework analyzing the recurring narrative elements in heroic lives similar to Campbell's hero's journey, to unpack their archetypal qualities and narrative functions. Anthony Smart's chapter complements this with a detailed study on the influence of classical ethnography on Gemmell's depiction of Celtic and Romanized worlds, illustrating the complex interplay of barbarism and civilization in these narratives. Cheryl Morgan's essay on Patricia Kennealy's *Keltiad* series rounds out this section with a fascinating exploration of how Celtic myths and futuristic settings intertwine to create a richly imagined and ideologically loaded narrative universe, further demonstrating how heroic patterns evolve across different storytelling contexts.

Part III, "Celtic Fantasy Beyond the Anglophone," broadens the discussion by highlighting non-Anglophone perspectives, demonstrating how Celtic imagery transcends linguistic boundaries. French language fantasies take center stage in Viviane Bergue's chapter as she examines how Léa Silhol's work blends Celtic and Christian mythologies, positioning Silhol's portrayal of faeries as representations of both fallen angels and moral arbiters in a fantastical world. Duncan Sneddon's essay on Iain F. MacLeòid's *An Sgoil Dhubh*, on the other hand, focuses on Gaelic history and mythology, offering a close reading of how MacLeòid integrates Old Irish sagas, Norse traditions, and contemporary Gaelic identity into a uniquely rooted fantasy setting. Both chapters highlight the depth and diversity of Celtic influences across languages and cultures.

Part IV, "Fantastic Perceptions of Celticity" then moves on to examine the cultural commodification and reinterpretation of Celtic themes in speculative fiction and fan culture. Juliette Wood's essay on the Celtic Tarot discusses how modern esoteric practices imaginatively link Celtic mythology with divination, despite the historical disconnect between these traditions. The volume concludes with Angela R. Cox's chapter where she uses critical discourse analysis to explore fan discussions of Celtic material in fantasy, uncovering how Celtic tropes have become so embedded in genre conventions that they are often rendered invisible. Cox's work also highlights the colonialist undertones of these tropes, noting how the romanticized and homogenized use of Celticity often erases authentic Irish and Welsh cultural elements.

One of the volume's strengths is its ability to challenge readers' assumptions about Celticity. As Fimi notes in her introduction, "pan-Celticism"

often collapses regional differences and historical gaps, creating a mythological past that is more coherent than reality. Several essays interrogate the origins of these misconceptions, tracing the romanticized view of Celtic traditions to figures like Robert Graves and Jessie Weston. For instance, Grant's chapter reveals how the triple goddess figure in Garner's work owes more to Graves's *The White Goddess* than to authentic Irish or Welsh sources. Similarly, Wood's essay highlights the imaginative but unhistorical association of the Celtic Tarot with ancient myth.

Imagining the Celtic Past in Modern Fantasy is an invaluable resource for scholars and readers interested in the intersections of fantasy, mythology and cultural identity. Though not structured around a single unified thesis, the editors have crafted a coherent scholarly journey that gradually expands its scope, beginning with close readings of Celtic intrusions in specific texts, moving through examinations of heroic patterns and cross-cultural expressions, and culminating in broader analyses of how Celtic elements function within fan communities and popular consciousness. This structural progression reflects the multilayered nature of Celticity itself as a construct that operates simultaneously as literary device, cultural touchstone, and commercial product. By blending rigorous scholarship with accessible prose, Fimi and Sims have curated a collection of research essays that is as enlightening as it is enjoyable, offering fresh perspectives on the enduring allure of the Celtic past in modern fantasy literature.

Biography: Robert Finnigan obtained his PhD at the University of Sunderland and is now based at the University of Birmingham. Robert is currently researching Arthur O'Shaughnessy and Anglo-Irish contributions to Aestheticism and Decadence within the *fin de siècle* period. His primary research interests lie in the broad areas of Aestheticism, Decadence, as well as Science Fiction, Fantasy and Speculative fiction. He has published several articles on these subjects and has reviewed for journals including *Journal of Victorian Culture*, *Victorian Review*, *Victoriographies* and *The Pre-Raphaelite Review*, *Irish Studies Review*, *Nordic Irish Studies*, *The Irish Journal of French Studies* and *Studi irlandesi: A Journal of Irish Studies*.