



The Archaeological Journal

Book Reviews



DUNLUCE CASTLE: HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY. By Colin Breen. Pp. xvii and 272, Illus 147. Four Courts Press, 2012. Price: £35.00. ISBN 978 184682 373 2.

This book focuses on ‘the historical background and architectural evolution of the castle and the subsequent development of settlement in its immediate environs’ (p. 1), and it is described by the author as ‘an interim statement on our knowledge of the castle and its evolution’ (p. 1). As the title implies, the book attempts to bring together the known history of Dunluce with its archaeology, a subject that has been the focus of a research project run by the author with the support of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and Queens University Belfast. The project was initially focused on the wider lordship of the MacQuillans in North Antrim, but Dunluce soon took centre stage. This is unsurprising, as it is one of Northern Ireland’s premier tourist attractions, and it has previously received little in-depth study. For many people interested in castles in Northern Ireland, this book has been eagerly anticipated.

It is perhaps for this reason that the author has chosen to publish the book at this stage. This book should act as a synthesis of work carried out; however, it is clear throughout its chapters that the book is only one part of a much wider project, and that the supporting information, in terms of excavation reports and building surveys, remains to be published independently. This leaves the book awkwardly straddling the popular and academic; it does not provide the engaging pace and level of clarity required of a popular work, but it also fails to provide the academic reader with enough evidence to make informed independent conclusions.

Nevertheless, the scope of the book is exhaustive and it is profusely illustrated. Chapter 1 presents an introduction to the project alongside an introduction to the castle and its environs. Chapters 2–4 deal with successive periods of occupation at the site, beginning with the Anglo-Norman background and ending with Randal MacDonnell’s ownership from 1601. These chapters are split into chronological phases, with each phase discussed firstly in terms of the social and political background and family history, and then in terms of the architecture, charting changes made to the castle by its successive owners. This format allows the architectural developments of the site to be directly linked with historical developments, providing a readable account of what would otherwise be a confusing list of names, dates and building phases. Chapters 6 and 7 deal with the rise and fall of Dunluce town; known from earthwork remains, but revealed here for the first time through excavation. The discussion of the blacksmith’s workshop is particularly impressive for its analysis of the spatial distribution of finds to reconstruct the area where the blacksmith worked. Chapter 8 brings the story forward to the present day and provides an interesting account of the various works carried out to conserve and protect

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the remains, whilst the final short chapter pulls the evidence together into a site chronology, and useful phased plans are presented. Overall this book is a significant step forward in our knowledge of this site and it certainly whets the appetite for the results of further investigations.

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