improvement and building of churches seems greatly at odds with the competitive landscape that some have imagined in the localities. Saul’s commonsense suggestion that we reestablish religious devotion (and its many outward manifestations) at the center of gentry life is especially welcome if we are to imagine the secular and the sacred as experienced by contemporaries rather than as understood by moderns. In a world dominated by landed elites and in which distinctions between sacred and secular could be illusory, Saul shows us a reimagined space in which real devotion was already a long-established part of “secular” lordship and where piety and landed authority were mutually reinforcing in their nature and application. Here, for the gentry, the outward brilliance of “their” parish churches could serve as working, living endorsements familial status and authority. In this way, the church buildings themselves serve as critical “documents” in their own right, which by virtue of their visual character might even tolerate some (judicial) speculation as to the interior lives of their patrons.

As one might expect, the part of Saul’s book that deals with the later Middle Ages provides its longest and most satisfying treatment. Already having made the case for local and regional difference in available materials, to the documentary evidence Saul adds the full measure of evidence drawn from physical remains, the most important of which are, of course, the extant parish church buildings themselves. In this sense, the large tranche of surviving buildings, mirrored by the period’s documentary wealth, provides Saul a large range of source material to judge survey and consider the interplay between these two pillars of provincial life, parish churches and the gentry elite.

In this final sense, then, the reader might correctly return to the question of concision: How does Saul succeed here with such relative brevity? The buildings themselves are Saul’s primary focus here, as the book’s many original images might suggest. Though at times one might have wished, as a reader and specialist in the field, for more elaboration on this issue or that, it is Saul’s disciplined omission of such material that makes such a book possible, let alone successful, given the existing range of potential subtopics and side narratives. In this very clever way, Saul achieves what to some historians may seem unlikely: an analytical and learned survey of England’s gentry at work in the parish that also points toward a vast range of potential pathways for future research in the subject.

Mark Arvanigian
California State University, Fresno
marvanig@csufresno.edu

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The author of two previous monographs on the laws of medieval Ireland and Wales, Robin Chapman Stacey has established herself right at the forefront of scholarship on early Celtic literature and law. Her new book, Law and the Imagination in Medieval Wales, takes us on a journey through the medieval Welsh landscape—both geographical and political—where the pathways of law and literature are revealed to be inextricably connected.

The essential premise of the book is that the medieval Welsh lawbooks, whose extraordinary and convoluted history is expertly summarized in the introduction, are part of the same narrative tradition as the more famous literary texts of Wales, particularly the prose tales of The Mabinogion. Just as literature works through language and imagination to construct a stylized version of a “real” world where the shifting textual direction, foregrounding some things, marginalizing or omitting others, deludes the reader into “misrecognizing” the reflected world as
coherent and stable, so the Welsh legal texts construct their own selective version of medieval Wales as a particular kind of geopolitical space—ancient, autochthonous, sovereign—which is no more reflective of reality than the tales of regional kings and Arthurian heroes.

Early in the book, Stacey claims that “law was an important form of political literature in medieval Wales … [and] one of the most influential forms of political writing in the period” (25). Taking shape in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, possibly dating back as far as the tenth century and the rule of the south Welsh king Hywel Dda, and surviving in several thirteenth-century redactions, the Welsh law texts bring an imagined past to bear on a contemporary context in which Welsh princes or “kings” shared power, often unwillingly, with Norman lords.

The book is organized into three main sections, “Imagined Landscapes,” “Body and Bawdy,” and “Violence,” each subdivided into one or more chapters. These broad headings allow the argument to range over a number of themes, with the frame of reference moving around the legal texts, the literary texts, and what we know of the historical circumstances of the time. Discussing the importance of land, and who owns it, at a time when the Normans were carving out vast estates for themselves in southern and eastern Wales, Stacey relates the “Laws of Country” to literary myths of ancient sovereignty and the close relationship between the king and his land. But the laws, like much of the contemporary literature, work to highlight “the perceived inadequacy of archaic mythological structures to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing political world” (148). Fears that native secular customs relating to marriage might be undermined by the imposition of ecclesiastical legislation led to the formation of the “Laws of Women,” emphasizing the need for well-regulated sexual unions that contribute to the joint wealth of the kin group while also allowing for the possibility, however regrettable, of separation and divorce—one of the many areas in which Welsh law diverges from European norms.

Remarkably, in a society where violence was endemic, particularly within kin groups, where male leaders removed their rivals through murder or mutilation, the law texts pay relatively little attention to crimes of violence, especially in comparison with the literary texts of the Mabinogion, where acts of extraordinary cruelty are recounted. In the case of at least one of the redactions (Iorwerth B), the intention may have been to downplay the violence of internal politics in order to suggest the importance of strong and effective princely governance. Most surprisingly in a legal text, humor, often of a deliberately burlesque type, plays a key role in providing a politicized commentary on the practices of the princely courts.

Throughout the book, the main point is that the law texts are attempting to manage the implications of Norman settlement in relation to the traditional governance of Welsh territories under dynastic princes. Despite the inherent conservatism of legal language, the Welsh laws are not simply attempting to preserve an ancient, unchanging, and largely imagined past, but to promote forms of governance that might meet the challenges of the present. In their repeated evocations of unitary rule within a single polity, the law books hint at ways in which Wales might adapt to a new political reality without losing its traditional identity in the process. Just as important is Stacey’s interrogation of the supposed objectivity of legal texts as sources of “real” history: as she demonstrates throughout the book, the Welsh law texts are, like literary texts, acts of imagination, offering a different discursive method of mediating a reality that is impossible to retrieve.

In terms of sheer depth and breadth of scholarship, the book is a phenomenon, displaying a profound knowledge of the minutiae of Welsh law and legal language, a secure understanding of the political culture of medieval Wales, and a dazzling parade of primary and secondary sources. For Celtic scholars, familiar terms and tropes are given new contexts and interpretations; for nonspecialists, the book opens up a world of possibilities for comparative investigation of medieval law, literature, and politics.

Helen Fulton

University of Bristol

helen.fulton@bristol.ac.uk