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The Insular Latin Grammarians. By Vivien Law. (= ***Studies in Celtic History,*** 3.) Woodbridge [England]: The Boydell Press (Boydell & Brewer Ltd.), 1982. Pp. xiv, 131.

Reviewed by ROBERT A. KASTER, *The University of Chicago*

To step before a classroom of students who are just beginning to learn Latin is not an unalloyed pleasure: the difficulty of one's own task can be oppressive; the prospect of tedium is surely considerable. Yet there is at the same time the exhilarating certainty that students who now know nothing will (at least, most of them) soon be learning before one's eyes; and one can take a certain comfort in the resources at one's disposal, especially the range of textbooks which promise, by varied paths, to lead the students carefully and intelligently through the mazes of morphology, vocabulary, and syntax. Teachers of Latin have always known the difficulty and the tedium, but they have not always been as fortunate in their resources. A case in point is provided by the Irish and Anglo-Saxon scholars of the seventh and eighth centuries to whom Law's book is devoted.

The book is (in the words of David Dunville, general editor of the series) "above all [...] about pedagogy, about how men attempted and achieved the

very practical task of facilitating the teaching of Latin in a wholly new context, [...] to speakers of a Celtic or Germanic dialect in circumstances where the student could never hope to hear Latin used as an ordinary everyday language" (p.viii). At the heart of the book are Law's descriptions of the two kinds of textbook that the Insular scholars developed to meet their needs: the 'elementary' grammars, which took the *Ars Minor* of Aelis Donatus as their model and originated largely in Anglo-Saxon circles; and the more detailed 'exegetical' grammars (associated with Irish centers), which according to Law combined the characteristics of contemporary biblical exegesis with the habits of the grammarians of late antiquity who wrote commentaries on Donatus.

Law lays the groundwork for these descriptions in a series of chapters which are for the most part well-planned and clearly presented. First, the "Introduction" proper (Chapter I): here Law contrasts with the more diversified linguistic geography of the East the 'monolithic' linguistic situation of Western Europe, where Latin had been the only language of culture throughout the history of the Roman Empire, and rightly emphasizes the resulting position of Latin as *the* language of Western Christianity; she then sketches the state of Latin culture in Irish and English circles up through the seventh century. In Chapter II ("The Roman Grammarians", 11-29), after a brief survey of the Roman schools that produced the handbooks on which the later writers depended, Law presents a catalogue raisonné of the late antique grammars used by the Insular scholars and describes the passage of grammatical texts from the Mediterranean basin to the Insular centers of the northwest. Having thus begun to move from the milieu of late antique grammar to the world of the Middle Ages, Law completes the transition in Chapter III ("The Christian Grammarians", 30-41), where she traces the development (probably on the Continent, by the beginning of the seventh century) of a Christianized version of Donatus' *Ars Minor* that was to be another important source for the Insular grammarians. (I shall return to the subject of 'Christian grammar' below.) At this point, Law is ready to turn to the men who are her main subject — although one more chapter yet intervenes, on that bizarre figure Virgilius Maro Grammaticus: since the chapter (42-52), beyond making yet another stab at fixing his date and origin,[1] does no more than emphasize Virgilius's isolation ("[his] remarkable teaching seems to have made little impact on his readers; it was accepted as the joke it was" [p.51]), one would have preferred to see this space devoted to more detailed treatment of the 'elementary' and 'exegetical' grammars themselves.

In any event, we come at this point to the 45 pages that are the book's *raison d'être*: Chapter V, on "The Elementary Grammarians" (53-80); and Chapter VI, on "The Exegetical Grammarians" (81-97). Both chapters follow the same plan: a brief introduction, summarizing the main characteristics of the 'type' Law has identified; then a series of descriptions of the individual representatives of the 'type', most of which are still unpublished or have yet to receive satisfactory editions.[2] The 'elementary' grammars follow, more or less closely, the analysis of the parts of speech found in the *Ars Minor* of Donatus, while using other sources to amplify or vary the doctrine of the *Ars*. According to Law, these grammars are characterized above all by their concern with the inflecting parts of speech (noun, pronoun, verb, participle): full paradigms of declensional or conjugational types are provided in great profusion; long lists of examples are included to supplement the paradigms; and the teaching of Donatus is sometimes replaced by instruction more helpful to non-native speakers — most notably in the treatment of the noun, where Donatus' paradigms, chosen to illustrate the three genders (irrespective of the declensions to which they belonged), are jettisoned in favor of paradigms which illustrate (in the manner of Priscian's *Institutio de nomine*) the patterns of the five distinct declensions.

On the other hand, the 'exegetical' grammars which Law surveys aimed at providing more advanced instruction by commenting in detail on the *Ars Maior* of Donatus. Here the medieval commentators had at hand the model of late antique commentaries on Donatus, especially Pompeius, who enjoyed great currency in Insular circles;[3] but the exegetical grammars went beyond the model of the late antique commentaries, "to apply the methods of scriptural exegesis" to the text of Donatus, as "the bible of the classroom" (p.81). This methodological choice is what, in Law's estimation, set these grammars apart from their late antique models and made them at home in the world of the seventh and eighth centuries. Briefly, the chief characteristics which, on Law's reading, unite these grammars with contemporary Insular biblical exegesis, or which show the influence of Christianity more generally, are the following (pp.82-85): "their dependence on a single work", the *Ars Maior* of Donatus; their penchant for posing questions as a means of exegesis; their delight in controversy and polemics; their citation of pertinent passages from the Church Fathers (especially to point out differences between ancient and ecclesiastical usage); their occasional "attempt to draw a parallel between a grammatical phenomenon and some point of theological doctrine" (p.83);[4] the attention paid, as in Irish biblical exegesis, to the *tres linguae sacrae* (i.e.,

Greek and Hebrew, as well as Latin); and the application to Donatus of the inquiry concerning the *locus*, *tempus*, *persona* (and sometimes *causa*) *scribendi*.[5]

Having presented her sketch of the 'elementary' and 'exegetical' types, Law swiftly brings the work to a close. Chapter VII ("The Carolingians: Heirs of the Insular Tradition", 98-105) briefly traces the diffusion and influence of the Insular grammars on the Continent down to the middle of the ninth century. In the "Conclusion" (Chapter VIII, 106-108), Law first summarizes the results of her survey, then urgently calls for the use of consistent and clear editorial conventions in the large job of research and publication that is yet to be done. Finally, she takes up, in a short Appendix (109-111), the relation between her bipartite taxonomy of 'elementary' and 'exegetical' grammars and a different, tripartite scheme previously outlined by L. Holtz (1977).[6] The book also contains a bibliography of primary and secondary sources (112-19), a useful set of specialized indexes (of manuscripts [120-23], provenances and scriptoria [124], and medieval library catalogues [125]), and an index of general subjects (126-31).

As Law repeatedly emphasizes, this book can be no more than a tentative sketch of its subject. An immense amount of work remains: as was already noted, most of the texts touched on here are still unpublished or poorly published and so await the thorough analysis (of origins, sources, methods, and assumptions) that can only be attempted when reliable critical editions are in hand; more works of the same sort undoubtedly lurk undetected in manuscript collections; and both the known and the undiscovered texts could yield information that would subtantially change the picture that Law has presented.[7] Even within those limitations, however, Law has performed a singular service, in bringing together a good deal of information otherwise very difficult of access, in presenting it clearly and (as far as one can judge) accurately, and in placing it in the cultural context of the early Middle Ages.[8] It was one of Law's main aims in the book to stimulate further research: I can only hope that she will succeed, for she has certainly whetted my appetite for more.

Yet the very virtues of the book, as a foray into poorly charted territory, place the reviewer in an odd position: as Law remarks — disarmingly, and correctly — in her preface (p.xiv), "we shall have no means of evaluating the present study" until the research that it is mean to stimulate has been carried out. With that remark in mind, therefore, and in the spirit of the book more generally, I wish to devote the remainder of this review, not to the interrogation of details, but to several broader questions which the book brought to mind — questions which Law was not yet able to answer for me, but which she and others might consider in the future.

I take as my point of departure the first sentence of Law's conclusion (p.106): "The Insular Latin grammarians began their work faced with a difficult task: the adaptation of the pagan grammars of Roman Antiquity for use by christian pupils of Celtic or Germanic mother-tongue". In passing over that sentence, my eye was first arrested by the phrase, 'pagan grammars', and its implied antithesis to 'christian pupils'. The phrase and the others like it used earlier in the book are, of course, misnomers, insofar as they suggest that the ancient grammars had some religious significance, in content or inspiration. True, the grammars of late antiquity (very) occasionally included the name of one or another of the traditional divinities — *Iuppiter, pater Liber* — in a list of examples or a discussion of difficulties; but not only are such examples rather rare, they are included for purely formal reasons, as just another instance of morphological regularity or irregularity. The examples, and the grammatical texts more generally, were devoid of sanctity: they would have inspired no religious awe in a 'pagan' reader; no less to the point, perhaps, they would have inspired no religious repugnance in a Christian reader. (After all, many Christians of late antiquity received the traditional instruction in grammar, with no immediate peril to their souls.) When the grammarians and their texts received the blast of Christian polemic in late antiquity, as they sometimes did, it was very seldom for specifically religious reasons having to do with the 'pagan' content of their work.[9] Rather, they were attacked for their social (that is to say, secular) significance. They were attacked as purveyors of a system of speech which — largely because it was limited to the tiny social elite that had access to the schools of 'liberal letters' — symbolized a cluster of related ills: pride; competition; a concern for 'form' rather than 'substance'; a division in the community based on superficial marks of status. This is the reason that St.Augustine, in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, was ready to set aside the grammarian's *ars* entirely;[10] and this is the reason that the 'pagan grammars' would more accurately be termed 'secular grammars'.

But this brings me to my real point: for the texts with which Law is centrally concerned appear themselves to have remained fundamentally 'secular'. Certainly the 'Christian grammars' treated in Chapter III scarcely seem worthy of the name. Christian or biblical vocabulary might now find a place in the paradigms and examples, to produce a superficially 'Christianized' *ars*;

but the veneer is exceedingly thin, and there is no evidence of an attempt to render grammar 'Christian' in any real sense, by making the analysis of language dependent on and at one with Christian thought. Nor do the Insular grammarians themselves seem to have taken matters much further in this respect, despite Law's tantalizing hints of some attempts to "[seek] a religious interpretation for grammatical phenomena" or "reconcile the Bible with Donatus" (86-87).[11]

Hence one set of questions that kept recurring as I read the book. Was more of an attempt made to produce a 'Christian grammar' for Christian pupils than Law has been able to present within the limitations of her provisional sketch? Or if such an attempt was not made (as I suspect is the case), why not? Why did the rise and establishment of Christianity not do more to alter the 'ossification' of Latin grammar? Why did this new system of thought — involving a changed conception of man's place in the world, of the relation between creation and the Creator, of the function of language among men and between men and God — not produce a truly 'Christian grammar'? The traditional, 'secular' grammar made sense, as a religiously neutral entity, in its context: it served as the common ground of a social elite, which was defined according to secular criteria in a world without a single, overarching religious ideology. But it does seems strange that in a different, Christianized world, where as a matter of ideology *nothing* could be religiously neutral, grammar should remain so. Why? It is tempting to seek an explanation in the authority of the ancient grammars themselves; for that authority clearly continued to weigh heavily well into the period under investigation (see, e.g., the comments of Boniface quoted by Law at p.110). But such an explanation only prompts more questions. 'Authority' does not exist in a vacuum: acceptance of authority implies that one thinks of oneself as standing in the same tradition. Why were the 'Christian grammarians' ready to think of themselves in this way? Such questions require that we pass from the history of grammar to the history of culture more generally. At the moment, we seem to be faced with a paradox: a St.Augustine could shrug off the authority of traditional grammar precisely because he could take it for granted that people would continue to speak good Latin without it; but in circumstances where Latin, good or bad, was not the common language at all, Augustine's posterity embraced that authority for all it was worth.

This reminder of the changed linguistic circumstances of Law's period brings me to the other general question that the book repeatedly evoked: just how well did these texts serve "pupils of Celtic or Germanic mother-tongue" (p.106)? Here I can simply register my uncertainty: for it is far from clear to me how these texts — and especially the 'elementary' grammars — would have done the job they were supposed to do for students who "could never hope to hear Latin used as an ordinary everday language" (p.viii). Heaps of paradigms, long lists of examples (with attention paid to ecclesiastical vocabulary), a full survey of nominal declension: all these things were obviously needed. But even given this intensive regard for inflectional morphology, it is at least difficult to imagine how "the elementary grammarians provided the student with sufficient knowledge to make sense of a Latin text" (p.81). Granted that it would probably be too much to expect the Insular grammarians to develop a syntax for their students, especially since Priscian's treatment of that subject, in his *Institutiones grammaticae*, was unknown to them. But setting the complexity of whole clauses aside, we can still ask: what about adverbs? Conjunctions? "Insular elementary grammars are characterized by their concern with the inflecting parts of speech, *sometimes to the complete exclusion of the non-inflecting parts*" (p.54; my emphasis: R.A.K.). Or again: "there is a marked tendency to eliminate all information not directly relating to accidence, *even at the expense of facts essential to the construction of a correct Latin sentence, like noun-gender*" (*ibid.*; *item*). These procedures seem simply bizarre in teachers faced with an audience of non-native speakers; and I must admit that my sense of the bizarre was not diminished on seeing Law characterize these procedures as a "paring away of unnecessary [!] information" (p.54). Though the book is "above all [...] about pedagogy" (p.viii), it is sometimes too oblique, sometimes rather strange in its treatment of that topic; and overall it raises far more questions than it answers.

But as I have already noted, it was one of the main purposes of the book to raise questions. So let us leave it at that, and take the preceding few paragraphs as a partial measure of the book's success in that respect. Let us also, once again, express the hope that the research it seeks to stimulate will be undertaken, and that the questions it raises will find answers in the coming years.

Reviewer's address:

Robert A. Kaster
Department of Classical Languages and Literatures
The University of Chicago
1050 E. 59th Street
CHICAGO, IL 60637, U.S.A.