

Book Review

Wolves in Ireland **A natural and cultural history**

Kieran Hickey. Open Air imprint of Four Courts Press. 2011.
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€20.00

The author has produced an interesting history of the Irish wolf (*Canis lupus*). The book, a slim volume of 155 pages, gives a well-researched record of the rise and decline of the wolf in Ireland. The wolf was both feared and respected by the native Irish people. The howling of wolves has been described by someone as one of the most terrifying sounds in nature and by others as one of the most exhilarating. An individual wolf is a beautiful, strong and intelligent animal and when you consider that they hunt in packs of five to ten animals they become a dangerous efficient predator. In this country their prey was the Irish elk, the boar, and domestic animals and on occasions humans -in particular children. Yet individual animals were tamed and used for hunting, skins were a prized possession for warriors; teeth were used as good luck charms and various body parts for medical potions.

The wolf pre-dated the presence of humans in Ireland by around 20,000. The earliest confirmed date for the wolf in Ireland was that of a mandible or jawbone radiocarbon-dated to $27,500 \pm 420$ years BP. There is some difficulty in distinguishing wolf bones from dog bones but this problem only arises post-human colonization of the island. Traces of wolf, along with many other wild animals, have been found at many Mesolithic campsites from 9,000 years ago. Wolves, probably pups reared by humans, were used for hunting and many types of dogs have been bred from the wolf including the Irish wolf-dog or the later Irish wolf-hound. Ringforts were built partly as defense against wolves and to protect livestock. The bawns of castles were used to house livestock for protection against thieves and wolves, while the poor brought the animals into their cabins at night for safety.

A fascinating chapter deals with the heritage we have inherited in the form of wolf related names. The author has identified forty-six place names in eighteen counties with a wolf component based on the Irish names for wolf and thirteen in nine counties with English language "wolf" place names. Reference to wolves can be inferred from a number of ogham stones in Ireland. Irish personal names can be associated with wolves. Conall meaning "strong as a wolf" where as Ó'Faoláin has been translated as wolf. Personal research will be required to establish the meaning of the author's reference to the "evil connotations" associated with Ó'Faoláin.

The wolf is feared in terms of superstition, being a favourite disguise of the Devil and linked to evil even in children's stories. Wolves, because of their ferocity and aggression, were often associated with battle. Yet the wolf occupied a special place in the literature of the early Irish saints. Wolves were one of three wild mammals (fox and red deer the other

two) considered as pets in the Brehon Laws. Wolf parts were used extensively in medicine to cure consumption, treat epilepsy and ailments of the eyes. The belief that some Irish could change into wolves and werewolves was often used as a political slur against the native Irish.

The Historic record of wolves in Ireland up to 1786 can be gleaned from a number of sources. Wolf incidents were recorded in the writings of the day especially by visiting monks. There was a series of regulations governing human interaction with wolves from the farming perspective, and a list of herdsman's duties with respect to wolves. Based on the customs books for ports in the UK, wolf skins were imported from Ireland. The number of skins varied each year, in 1558, a total of 731 skins were landed from Ireland. The invasion of Ireland by Cromwell in 1641 resulted in slaughter and destruction followed by a significant rise in wolf populations. By 1652, wolf-dogs were seized at ports for the purpose of hunting wolves. In 1653, organised hunts were arranged with a bounty of £5 for a male head and £6 for a female being paid. The attitude of the people had changed and new settlers wished to destroy all wolves, woodkerne (Irish rebels) and Tory. Woodland and scrub being the primary habitat of all three, efforts were made to reduce or destroy such areas. One by one, the isolated populations of wolves died out. This concerted effort resulted in the death of the last wolf in Ireland in approximately 1786.

Hickey uses three methods to estimate the wolf population in Ireland from 1492 onwards. The first method is based on the import of wolf skins from Ireland into the port of Bristol and other key trading ports. The number of skins imported declined at the close of the sixteenth century. To maintain the import level of wolf skins, a population of 600 to 1,000 wolves would have been necessary. The second assessment is based on the state of the Irish landscape around 1600 and human population levels. The total woodland cover around 1600 was 12.5%. A further 20% of the country remained uncultivated. The human population at this time is estimated at 1 to 1.5 million. The minimum available habitat for wolves should be approximately 27,000 km². A conservative estimate of population based on fifty packs of five to ten animals would give 250 to 500 wolves. A less conservative estimate based on average range size for a pack would give 390 to 780 wolves. The third wolf population estimate is based on bounty payments. The first is an extrapolation from kills in part of the West of Ireland giving a population figure for the whole island of 2,400. The second based on bounties paid between 1649 and 1656 gives a total population of between 450 and 800.

In his final comments the author discusses the possibility of the Irish wolf being a distinct sub-species. However, in the absence of any material from which to extract DNA this cannot be proven. He finds against the reintroduction of wolves in that the landscape has dramatically changed, public attitude would be negative and the cost prohibitive. Dr Hickey intends to continue with his research on this topic, so I look forward to more stimulating publications on the Irish Wolf.

John Whelan

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