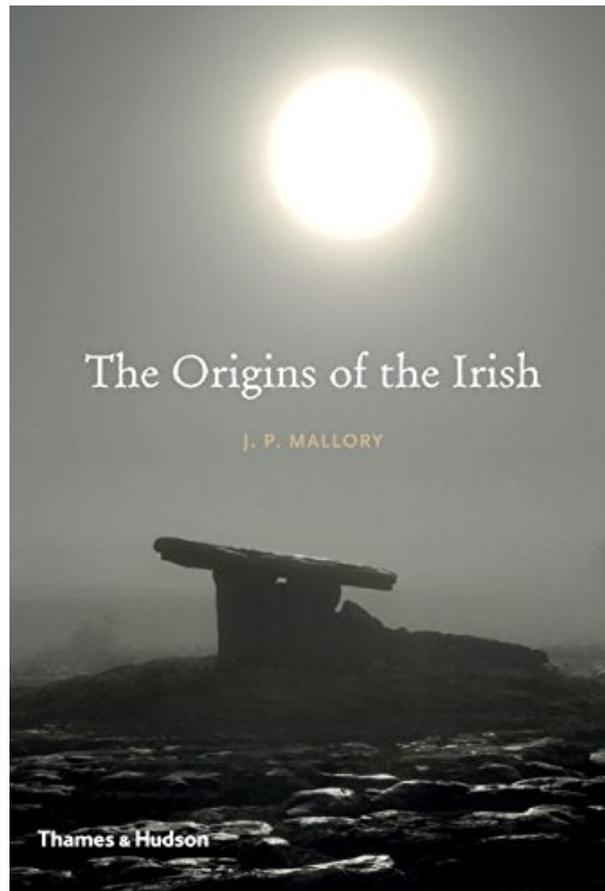
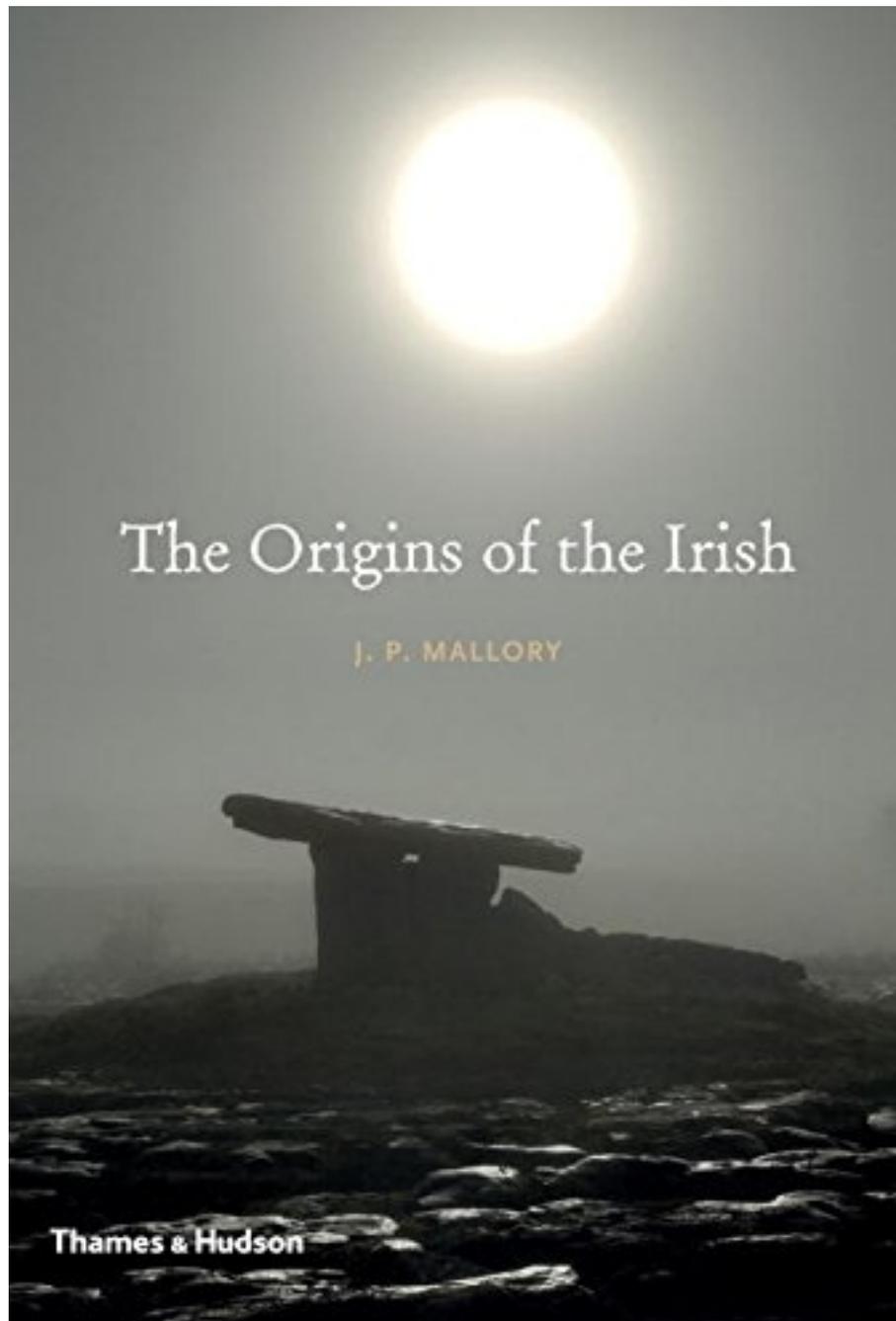


THE ORIGINS OF THE IRISH BY J. P. MALLORY



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Review

“This major achievement is the best, most gracefully written new study of earliest Ireland. . . . Mallory bravely ponders: how much of Irish culture was a local invention and how much was influenced by neighbors, especially Britain. . . . Essential.” (Choice)

About the Author

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THE ORIGINS OF THE IRISH BY J. P. MALLORY PDF

An essential new history of ancient Ireland and the Irish, written as an engrossing detective story

About eighty million people today can trace their descent back to the occupants of Ireland. But where did the occupants of the island themselves come from and what do we even mean by “Irish” in the first place?

This is the first major attempt to deal with the core issues of how the Irish came into being. J. P. Mallory emphasizes that the Irish did not have a single origin, but are a product of multiple influences that can only be tracked by employing the disciplines of archaeology, genetics, geology, linguistics, and mythology.

Beginning with the collision that fused the two halves of Ireland together, the book traces Ireland’s long journey through space and time to become an island. The origins of its first farmers and their monumental impact on the island is followed by an exploration of how metallurgists in copper, bronze, and iron brought Ireland into increasingly wider orbits of European culture. Assessments of traditional explanations of Irish origins are combined with the very latest genetic research into the biological origins of the Irish.

122 illustrations

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Most helpful customer reviews

40 of 41 people found the following review helpful.

Scholarly yet engaging

By John L Murphy

Combining archeology with linguistics, adding genetics to explain the connections between these two fields, this expert in Indo-European Studies turns to his homeland to wonder how its earliest inhabitants wound up on this North Atlantic island. With attention to demystification but with an affection for the myths, J. P.

Mallory builds on nearly a half-century of his research to present an academic study that anybody curious about his title will welcome. Learned but lively, Mallory's contribution remains throughout cautious in its surmises but diligent in his analyses.

He begins about as far back as the Big Bang, if in passing. Much of the first hundred pages explain how recently Ireland (and Britain, always its fractious or friendly neighbor) split off from the Continent--itself long in the making as the tectonic plates shifted slowly. Two parts of Ireland at one time faced each other, if from a distance as far apart as Australia from the island today.

After the last Ice Age, the land bridge between northwest France and Ireland cannot be firmly dated, but it broke apart over 12,000-10,000 years ago. That means whomever settled as what Mallory calls the "Irelanders"--prior to the relatively recent national formation of the "Irish" under Niall of the Nine Hostages, the first figure straddling legendary and historical times and allegedly the kidnapper of Calpurnius' Romano-Briton son to be known as Patrick--had to migrate into that thawed-out expanse after the melting glaciers filled the Irish Sea.

For only 1/43,000th of its existence as a land mass has Ireland occupied its present site and shape. Poorer in flora and fauna than Britain or the Continent, it could not have supported many prehistoric families. As few as 3,000 people may have lived in Ireland for the first 40% of its existence as we know it. Recently settled in Eurasian terms, colonists may have voyaged from the nearby Isle of Man as global warming wiped out part of that territory. Generally, Mallory favors looking closest--to the western Scottish and Welsh shores for those who would populate Ireland first.

As for farming, around 3800 BCE marks a revolution in agriculture. It may have spread rapidly, within two hundred years, and again probably westward from a British base. Brittany at the tip of today's France may have contributed, as the longer sea passages navigated back and forth in turn may have stimulated Irish-British trade all the more.

Any archeological treatment of Northern Europe debates the origins and provenance of the Beakers, the pottery goblets with a bell-like shape. Suffice to say Mallory delves into this with gusto and wit, no small feat for what can be deadly dull material for those of us outside the trenches. He loves citing his more imaginative predecessors to telling effect about the romantic interpretations of sherds and grooves. "Drink, fighting and the Irish Sweepstakes would certainly tally with Irish stereotypes," he comments as he surveys the eagerness of his gullible colleagues to imagine (ca. 2500 BCE) brutal invaders, tipsy warriors, and horse-drawn shock and awe descending upon cowering scrabblers.

Metallurgy ushers in the Bronze and Iron Ages, and the siting of dramatic hillforts may show cultural shifts for population changes and ritual behaviors at this time. While Mallory downplays the exotic or martial, he notes how, given hoards found, Continental foreigners could have visited or stayed. He consistently edges away from a scenario of invasion (despite the Irish legends and their "nine waves" of conquerors) to one of gradual diffusion of goods and contacts. Ironically, Niall's own inheritance centuries later would signal the end of this mythical time, as a cult from Southwest Asia and the customs and language of a dying empire would transform Ireland into the "Irish," whose legacy would be distorted by Christian interpretations of what has come to be known as a "Celtic" past.

Earlier than often assumed, by those celebrating Patrick's freedom from Niall's enslavement and his return to Ireland to convert its "pagan" natives, Roman influence entered Ireland as it had Patrick's homeland, wherever it was across the Irish Sea. In fact, perhaps by way of earlier slaves than that fabled missionary to the Hibernians in 432, Christians lived on the island; a bishop was sent there the year before Patrick to

minister to that flock. Niall and his ilk engaged in an active sea-slave trade.

Mallory shows that while a pre-Christian Roman presence left a fraction of what imperial centuries of occupation over Britain had, nonetheless Irish evidence for Roman trade and settlement can be marshaled. From the classical reports of Ptolemy and the Romanized variations on the savage British and Irish tribes and places, we get the first glimpse into what "civilization" regarded as Hibernia, a damp backward dump on the world's edge. "Why the Romans or indeed anyone else should have wanted to come to Ireland is a mystery if the early classical descriptions of the island had provided copy for Roman travel brochures", Mallory remarks with typical flair.

We also owe the classical historians another label, if an elusive one. They named the diverse peoples across Europe speaking similar languages as Celts. Mallory follows Kim McCone in matching this to a root meaning of "hidden" and therefore "offspring of the hidden one," identifying this allusion with the lord of the dead, Donn, the "dark brown one."

Speaking of enduring identifiers, generations looked south to Spain (anywhere but east!) for Irish origins, but this Latin confusion does not fool Mallory. He dismisses origin myths as modeled by monks on the biblical wanderings of the Jews. He also blames the Wikipedia equivalent of the 7th century, Isidore's Etymologies, with this persistent but false derivation of supposedly adjacent Hibernians from venerable Iberians.

Deepening his application of language, the latter third of Mallory's study finds him tackling the spread of the Celtic tongue into Ireland. These final hundred pages pack a tremendous amount of data--DNA as well as glottochronology--into a few chapters. Microliths give way to haplotypes.

He leaves us with two possibilities about the spread of Proto-Irish during the first millennium BCE. Mallory posits social prestige and identification with trend setters as likely explanations for a native adoption of a Celtic language. He suggests that an initial impact around 1000 BCE is one of two "most likely" windows of opportunity, in tandem with the emergence of hillforts. The second may be around the 3rd century BCE as Tara and other highly visible "ritual enclosures" dominated the landscape and consolidated a mental perspective that would endure as the "Irish" looked around in Niall's pivotal era to adapt the four provinces circling around a fifth center as their nation's model.

This valuable book does not leap from a petri dish or a soggy excavation to any bold conclusion. This Belfast-based professor knows his subject all too well to trust in what genetic findings from next year's lab or carbon dating from this season's dig may override. Mallory relies on commonsense and judicial balancing of the more fervid proposals of his colleagues. "The Origins of the Irish" serves as a trustworthy, eminently scholarly but accessible guide past tricky diversions and evasive directions.

15 of 17 people found the following review helpful.

Intriguing, detailed but complicated

By Tollyboy

If you want to know for sure how the Irish became Irish then you'll have to wait. The Irish, as the author calls them, probably arrived about 8,000 BC, based on archaeological evidence. The Irish, that is those speaking the Irish language, came anywhere from 1BC to 1AD.

So is there a one-line answer to the book's title? Not that I can make out.

Each chapter deals with archaeological and linguistic evidence, and as Prof. Mallory is an expert in both fields he lays out the many theories and claims based on what is known, and each chapter ends with his Conclusions, which summarize what he has said and spells out what he believes is factual.

The book is entertaining, for sure, but has an academic feel to it, which is really not surprising given that he

is a professor at a Belfast university.

Mallory also has a sense of humor, which he slips in from time to time.

Am I glad I read it? Absolutely yes. Would I recommend it? Absolutely yes.

But do I know the answer contained in the book's title? Kinda, sorta, but not really sure.

I still have another history-of-the-Irish book to read, which I sense without opening it will have a less academic approach to the subject.

Bottom line: The subject is a very complicated one, and Mallory's academic approach and professional accomplishments are used to their full to nail down the answer.

Possibly reading it again (NOT an easy thing to do) would bring more enlightenment.

9 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

Origins of the Irish

By D. Vaughn

Quite different from the Irish "histories" I read as a child. Solidly based on science and provable history, and entertaining as well.

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