It is extraordinary to have two books published almost simultaneously about this late sixth and early seventh century Christian saint about whom very little had been readily available. Fortunately, these two accounts are very different. Both are worth reading!

Our tertiary Kate Tristram writes to share one whom she clearly admires, who was a historically important leader and whose significance for us is reflected in his writings and life as an Irish monk. This is supplemented by her other major source, the life written by Jonas of Susa, a monk who had joined Columbanus' monastery in Bobbio, in Northern Italy, only three years after the saint's death. Kate's concern is to draw out the influence Columbanus had in carrying the Gospel from Bangor to Luxeuil and through Milan to Bobbio. She describes his rule, his austerities, and she clearly enjoys his literary qualities and scholarship - having taken the trouble personally to learn the language of Early Irish. It is a praiseworthy effort based on the fruits of her own life's study of the influence of the Irish Church throughout Europe, including on ourselves.

Carol Richards writes with a greater emphasis on the historical and political history that surrounded Columbanus in Gaul. She also explores the possible roots and motivations for Columbanus' strong stand for the Celtic position, citing both Druid and Egyptian philosophies which influenced those who held out against the Roman position in the formation of Christian thinking. She enjoys investigating, in fairly lengthy accounts, Columbanus' influence on the local kingdoms with their customs, laws and political attachments which brought about such turbulence in that dark period of history.

Both books are written with passion for their subject. Kate provides a clearer analysis of the saintly monk's mind and purpose. Carol offers a wider perspective, fascinating theories, a more secular read. Both utterly held my attention.

Damian SSF