



Eirelan

Liam O'Shiel

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Now that “doorstop” books are nearly commonplace, thanks to J. K. Rowling, Stephenie Meyer, Susanna Clarke, and others, novels of this size are less likely to give potential readers pause.

Liam O'Shiel presents readers with a century-long slide toward the dissolution of humanity during the latter part of the third millennium. Overburdened by reliance on machines, increased population, human-engineered genetic changes, global environmental shifts, collapsed political systems worldwide, humans are forced into feudal systems and other less organized forms of rule. Gaelic-speaking peoples, however, have been able to maintain their cultures and shape new political systems for themselves. In 2974, the Province of the Twenty Clans is formed to promote economic and political stability as well as mutual defense from other clans who have taken to brigandage to survive.

Eirelan focuses on Clan Laigain's struggles to convince the other Province clans that war is coming on more than one front. Liadan and Etain—two sisters who are clan leaders and political opponents—convey through their personal lives the Province's efforts to keep their chosen way of life safe from those who would steal it. Liadan and her allies work for the Province's survival while Etain seeks to wrest political power for herself and her progeny.

Such a large tapestry can easily become tangled or fall apart. *Eirelan*, even at 700 pages, never shows a sign of either. O'Shiel is a master storyteller. The novel's main characters are vibrant, highly individualized people who will appeal to a wide range of readers. Their believability is bolstered by their complexity: the “good” characters have their flaws, and the “bad” ones aren't completely evil. The dialogue is natural sounding and purposeful, the backstory information deftly inserted, and the setting vivid and easily imagined. All of these elements hang upon a plot that is exciting, well-designed, and told in an effortless style.

Relationships drive the narrative, and bring readers into the characters' public and private lives. Long-standing grudges, family secrets, romances, and the joys and sorrows of military life are interwoven with historical information in the form of quotes that open each chapter. Throughout the novel, the history of Eirelan is conveyed through excerpts from historical records, personal journals, ships' logs, and poetry.

The only problem readers may have with this book is the pronunciation of Gaelic names. Fortunately, help along these lines can be found on the Internet.

The best news for readers who enjoy this type of novel is that five more are planned for the series. Later installments will include both prequels and sequels to *Eirelan*. Fans of battles on land and sea, of anything Gaelic, or of scintillating, well-told tales won't be disappointed.

J. G. STINSON (January 20, 2012)

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