
To think of ‘Ireland’ and ‘Renaissance’ together in one frame involves a slight effort of focus. Perhaps before discussing Thomas Herron and Michael Potterton’s very welcome volume it may be worth enquiring why this should be, and why in spite of the numerous excellent studies of the ‘Early modern’ period, the word ‘Renaissance’ still appears in imperfect resolution. If we think of the Renaissance spreading by ripples emanating from an Italian epicentre, then Ireland, reached through England and later than England, seems more marginal than Mexico. If we imagine the Renaissance as characteristically civic, secular and orderly it hardly fits well with the religious and military chaos of Irish history under the assault of the Tudor monarchs, or with the battered remnants of the material culture of the time. If we see it as marking a clear break with medieval backwardness, the archaism of Irish society, the intransigent Catholicism, especially as viewed through the rhetoric of the Protestant Reformation, appears to resist Renaissance modernising influences. It is not so much even the pervasive influence of an Anglocentric outlook, but the history of the intervening centuries too, that makes it hard, mentally as well as physically, to piece together the fragments which might testify to a Renaissance Ireland.
But as we know the Renaissance all over Europe was warlike, eccentric, fascinated by the antiquities of many nations and deeply involved with Christianity. Spanish ale and wine from the royal pope (scilicet religious, diplomatic, scholarly and military information and hardware) reached Ireland directly by sea, as well as through England, and the Earls of Kildare and Ormond and the chiefs of Tyrone and Tirconnell had the same political acumen and the same taste for magnificence as was relished by Castiglione and Machiavelli. There were petty courts at Enniskillen and Donegal and Carrick-on-Suir, there was decorous civil life in the cities, there were libraries, and descriptions of learned dialogues, and translations between the various spoken and written languages. It is true that the university, the greatest cultural innovation of the later Middle Ages, and the printing press that made humanist texts available to grammar schools everywhere, were late arrivals in Ireland, but the inhabitants of a varied culture, in Thomas Herron’s words, ‘made the classics part of their own heritage’ in poetry, history and learned allusion. It is notable that whereas there is no entry in the index of the collection for ‘Trinity College Dublin’ there are four for ‘Troy and the Trojans’.

We may need to remind ourselves, in order to shake it off, of the form the Anglocentric outlook took throughout the last century. There is a convenient passage in Lytton Strachey’s
Elizabeth and Essex (1928) where the English viceroy in Elizabethan Ireland appears as a bemused tourist:

“The strange air engulfed him. ... What state of society was this, where chiefs jostled with gypsies, where ragged women lay all day long laughing in the hedgerows, where ragged men gambled away among each other their very rags, their very forelocks, their very ... parts more precious still, where wizards flew on whirlwinds, and rats were rhymed into dissolution? ... the Lord Deputy, advancing further and further into the green wilderness, began ... to catch the surrounding infection, to lose the solid sense of things, and to grow confused over what was fancy and what was fact.”

The evident debt to Spenser’s View of the Present State of Ireland (composed indeed by a client of Essex) does not account for all of the bizarre exoticism of Strachey’s imagination. The miasma that engulfs his Essex owes more to the twilight of the British empire in the 1920s than to the harsh practicalities of Renaissance war and diplomacy. A late twentieth-century image, adduced (only a little unfairly) by Herron in his introduction to the book, may complement Strachey’s green fog: it is from Elizabeth Eisenstein’s seminal The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe; a map of Europe which simply does not show Ireland at all, the country obscured by the informative cartouche.

Ireland as invisible, or as exotic, but more particularly as abnormal, exception - it is to the six centuries before the Cromwellian wars that such blindfolding categories seem especially to apply. If a religious prejudice underlies much of this
attitude - and surely it must, however deeply submerged, it is also relevant that it is in these centuries that the modern nation states of Europe emerged and thus that the denial of an Irish Renaissance is also a political denial of historic national status. Rather than pursuing such an argument into the age of revolutions, however, it is a relief to turn away to the many virtues of the collection of essays under review, which amount to a restoration to Irish readers of ‘their’ Renaissance, cultural, artistic, literary and religious (mostly Catholic religion it has to be said, though Anglicans and Presbyterians do get a look in at the end).

One of the pleasures such a collection can offer comes from the almost-coincidence of studies around a number of significant figures and themes. The work of Ciaran Brady and others on Sir Henry Sidney, the attention drawn, especially by Richard McCabe, to Thomas, Earl of Ormond, the work of Mícheál Mac Craith on Irish-language sources and culture, all publishing fresh studies since 2000, have contributed to a foundation on which fascinating connections can be made between English, Anglo-Norman and Irish strands. Thus Sidney appears as hero in his own memoir, as villain in the strange Old English compilation *The Book of Howth*, as patron *passim* of humanist scholars, and as the planner and iconographer of the bridge of Athlone with its sculptured celebration of Elizabethan power. Ormond’s houses in Kilkenny and Carrick-on-Suir, his family’s tomb-building, the lesser urban
houses in Kilkenny of the Shee and Rothe families and the humanist school opened in the city by Peter White, combine to flesh out the sense of that city as a thriving cultural hub. Discussions of Gaelic and Latin biographies, of grammars, of correspondence between Ireland and Rome, remind us of how international Gaelic culture had long been, and certainly remained, as the pressure from English power increased, by virtue of its association with the international Catholic Church.

Historiography emerges from many of the studies I have mentioned as a perennial site of disagreement and divergence. Several among the six essays grouped under the heading ‘artefacts’ help us to see the (now so often ruined) tower houses, fortified houses and town houses, that were once brightened by Renaissance luxury, as the centres of activity they were in their days.

The general standard of the essays is extremely high. Thomas Herron’s *Introduction* would really serve as an initiation for those who have never thought about the subject. Colm Lennon’s account of Peter White has the sober interest of his many studies of the literate Anglophone Catholic culture of Dublin and the Pale, which together make up a surprisingly complete picture. Willy Maley is characteristically hyperbolical but also suggestive in his investigation of the forgetting of Munster place-names – perhaps not the places themselves – in Henry Sidney’s *Memoir of*
service in Ireland. (While he teasingly quotes more than once Philip Sidney’s reference, in *Astrophil and Stella*, to his father’s rôle in making Ulster ‘half tame’, the sonnet where the words occur mentions wars, divisions and revolts involving Turkey, France, Holland, Scotland, Poland and Russia; not just Ireland. The concentration on the relationships of colonialism is legitimate, but those are not the only ones.) Valerie McGowan-Doyle develops the historiography of the Pale in her account of the role of elements from the fifteenth-century English poet Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes* (which figures also in the library of the ninth Earl of Kildare) in the *Book of Howth*, compiled by Christopher St Lawrence, seventh baron of Howth, whose spell at Lincoln’s Inn reminds us that the law too was an international system, centred in this case largely on London.

Jean R. Brink on the poet and colonial administrator Sir John Davies disappointed me, in what seemed a slack management of ideas of rhetoric and of the nature of Irish majority acceptance of the English crown (they did accept it up to a point); I have argued elsewhere that her theory that Spenser is not the author of the *View of the Present State of Ireland* is flawed - she returns to the theme here, though its relevance is doubtful. Richard McCabe’s account of two historians, Lughaidh Ó Cléirigh and Peter Lombard, is a delight: deft, adventurous, clear, gauging the impact of Renaissance historiography and the political pressures to which it
responds in the writing of Irish biographies. He turns from these accounts to an apparently more archaic enterprise, the so-called *Annals of the Four Masters*, correctly *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann*, to show that those writers too were working to promote a contemporary political agenda. The study of Gaelic Ireland in its European contacts (Lombard wrote in Rome) continues in Salvador Ryan’s account of post-Tridentine provision for catechising and sacramental life in the difficult conditions of the seventeenth century. Ryan points out the continuities, ubiquitous in Catholic Europe, with medieval practice – the works of the medieval Florentine theologian St Antoninus were circulating in Donegal but also in Strasbourg, Paris, Lyon and Naples, into the eighteenth century. Clare Carroll takes the story of exiled scholars of Irish language and metrics to the late seventeenth century, showing how even away from the major centre at Louvain there were sporadic eruptions into print of the learning that in Ireland remained in manuscript.

The fraught relationship with England is well illustrated by Stephen O’Neill’s account of the depiction of Irish characters on stage in the play of *Sir John Oldcastle* in the London theatre. The essays on artefacts and archaeology by John Bradley (the bridge at Athlone), Paul Cockerham (funeral monuments, especially in Kilkenny), James Littleton (Renaissance features, perhaps even including gardens in the Renaissance style, in tower houses in
Gaelic Offaly, Clare and Cork), Tadhg O’Keeffe (Sir Walter Ralegh’s house in Youghal) help us to resist the temptation to see all ruins generically. Hanneke Ronnes in her account of the fortified houses that succeeded the ‘castles’ or tower houses shows that if we look at a frequent feature, the carved stones with dates and initials, they can suggest a ‘Renaissance’ approach even to vernacular building by the people who marked their names (not infrequently the initials of husbands and wives) on their houses. She argues interestingly that this and other Renaissance features have not been given due attention because of a demarcation between archaeologists who deal with castles and art-historians with non-military, thus often later, buildings. Art-historical themes surface also in Thomas Herron’s essay, which bridges the poetry of Spenser, the elegantly ornate maps of Richard Bartlett, who celebrated the achievements of Lord Mountjoy in Ulster, and the sculpture of Bernini, the last perhaps as an equally ornate and provocative flourish.

Two concluding essays raise interesting questions about the role of élite women in war in the 1640s (Elizabeth Dowdall née Digby, an English colonist, and Lettice Fitzgerald, heir to the Kildare and Offaly titles) and about the impact of the coronation rituals of 1661 in Dublin, when (in the absence of Charles II whose actual coronation was taking place in London) two archbishops and ten bishops were consecrated in St Patrick’s. The book is well
produced, as we expect from Four Courts Press. The illustrations are excellent, often of unfamiliar buildings and scenes; though those of the Kilkenny tombs are sad documents of neglect and vandalism. I caught only one misprint.

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