

The Woods of Ireland: A History, 700–1800. Nigel Everett.
 Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014. xii + 314 pp. €50.

As Nigel Everett tells us on the opening page of his preface, “Ireland’s forest cover is still ‘only ten percent’ (less than 2 per cent broadleaves) — the lowest level in Europe outside Iceland” (xi). Many of these forests are stifling, homogenous conifer plantations. To write a book on the woods of Ireland is, therefore, a catalogue of loss and a crime investigation more than a celebration: who stole and destroyed Ireland’s trees? Who so deeply scarred this gorgeous land?

The traditional answer, enshrined in Irish folklore, song, and scholarship, is the English. In particular, the Elizabethans, Cromwellians, and their Williamite progeny, greedy planters whose iron mills, royal navy, and far-reaching slave trade thoroughly depleted the forest fastnesses of Kilcash, Shillelagh, and other ancient, massive groves. As the forests died, so did the Gael, and vice versa. This hallowed thesis has a long pedigree in nationalist discourse over centuries and was bolstered in the twentieth century by Eileen McCracken, Eoin Neeson, and William Smyth, as shown by Everett’s excellent introduction.

What Everett argues, convincingly albeit ploddingly, is much more complicated: that many more players than simply English newcomers exploited Ireland’s woods for their own advantage and that of others, and certainly not always for the monolithic “state” of England. Indeed, suggests Everett at his most provocative, “It might even be argued that, far from carelessly wrecking a great arboreal patrimony, the English conquest and the rising ascendancy introduced conservative standards of forest management until then neglected” (15). Not everyone who took the land destroyed it or milked it for short-term profit, in other words; some newcomers brought useful and valuable management practices with them. As the final chapter (“Demesne Portraits”) makes clear, they also brought artists in their wake who gloriously captured in Claudian or Gainsborough-like golden tones the landscapes in “equally earnest expressions of romanticism and improvement” (271); Everett reproduces some of these splendid tableaux in the book’s ample number of well-produced plates and on the book’s attractive cover. These include works by Thomas Roberts and William Ashford’s stunning *View of Powerscourt Demesne* (ca. 1789) (plate 18), to which Everett adds a clear varnish of fine analytical prose.

This nostalgic gallery concludes the book, somewhat deceptively. For Everett also catalogues at length Ireland’s protracted, difficult history with its woodlands: “What appears primarily to have taken place in the medieval and early modern eras was the steady erosion, by many parties, of a long-diminished woodland resource, operating in circumstances of minimal regulation” (279). Everett provides many, many examples of malefactors, abusers, swindlers, opportunists, and well-meaning planters and businessmen of every stripe and political allegiance who came regularly to exploit Ireland’s woodland (and other) resources, thanks in part to weak or corrupt regulation. Simultaneously, the cultivators provoked and endured native counterattacks and despoliation of their mutual inheritance. Ample attention is paid to the figure of the bandit- and rebel-in-refuge, the

much-discussed and much-hunted “woodkern” and (later) “Tory” (176–79). A key omission in the book’s discussion of visual representations of Irish woods, however, is any mention of John Derricke’s *Image of Irelande* (1581), whose famous plates show the disconsolate rebel Rory Og O’More lamenting his treason in dark midland woods.

Everett nonetheless employs a vast range of primary and secondary resources, including admirable attention to literary authors and philosophers such as Swift, Goldsmith, and Burke. Everett focuses mainly on the period after 1590 (only the first chapter, thirty-two pages long, covers “The Ancient Forests, 700–1590”). Everett is careful not to make generalizations, given that “available documentation permits remarkably few certainties regarding the overall balance of destruction, planting, waste, recovery and conservation in Ireland’s woods” in the Tudor period, for example (83). The book can, however, be faulted for piling on evidence with too little analysis and at times reads like an elaborate list of citations. The argument can, indeed, get lost for the trees, and many sections end abruptly on factual notes rather than concluding thoughts. It needs a better index: various names of places and people are omitted. The book nonetheless has a convincing argument and functions well as a landmark revisionist study with plentiful primary sources.

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