

L. M. Cullen. *Economy, Trade, and Irish Merchants at Home and Abroad, 1600–1988*.

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Almost singlehandedly, in a series of books and articles that commenced in the mid-1960s, L. M. Cullen rewrote the economic history of post-medieval Ireland. The traditional narrative, owing more to the polemical writings of successive nationalist movements than to any systematic investigation of the economic data, attributed what was seen as Ireland's chronic condition of underdevelopment to the island's political subordination to Great Britain. Cullen, turning instead to the evidence of customs records, bankers' ledgers, and estate accounts, offered a radically different picture — of an economy that had, at periods in its history, grown with remarkable speed, and of a pattern of success and failure in which political factors played only a very limited part.

Taken as a record of this one-man historiographical revolution, *Economy, Trade and Irish Merchants* presents as a rather arbitrary, and in some ways puzzling, collection of texts. One purpose of the collection is clearly to make accessible work currently available only in obscure locations, such as volumes of conference proceedings from minor publishing houses in Continental Europe. This is the case, for example, with the illuminating account of the role of colonial produce during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in reshaping not only Irish diet, but also, through the potato, aspects of Irish farming practice. There are also some unpublished papers. These include an analysis of the wills of Irish farmers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, casting valuable light on issues of wealth, status, and inheritance practices, as well as a characteristically penetrating reassessment of Irish famine history in the light of the opposing doctrines of Thomas Malthus and Amartya Sen.

Other editorial choices, by contrast, are less easy to understand. The first item in the volume is the introduction to the highly influential series of radio lectures later published as *The Formation of the Irish Economy* (1969). Its inclusion and placing might suggest an element of intellectual autobiography. But why not then include, alongside what was by its nature a fairly sketchy overview, one or two of the more substantial programmatic articles from the 1960s, such as the devastating 1964 exposé of the shortcomings of contemporary pamphlets as a source for the economic history of eighteenth-century Ireland, or the critique of the concept of a Gaelic “Hidden Ireland” that appeared in 1969? The inclusion of four newspaper articles from the 1980s, placing the economic difficulties of that decade in historical perspective, is a reminder that Cullen has been a trenchant commentator on contemporary as well as past economic issues. But the relevance of these items today, when the Irish economy has passed through a whole further cycle of boom and bust, remains open to question. One further article originally intended for the volume, a long paper on the port of Galway published in Irish in 1958, would have been of considerable interest, both for its content and in historiographical terms. The revelation that it was in the end left out due to “scanning problems” adds to the sense of a rather casual piece of book making.

Whatever its limitations as a representative selection, however, *Economy Trade and Irish Merchants* contains ample evidence of Cullen’s formidable range and authority. An article on the local background to an early nineteenth-century diary from Callan, County Kilkenny, provides a vivid case study of the changing fortunes of a provincial town. A detailed examination of the Scottish exchange on London in the eighteenth century displays the author’s mastery of technicalities that intimidate even his fellow professionals. That paper also illustrates Cullen’s willingness to look beyond the history of Ireland, a willingness seen again in a lengthy essay on the eighteenth-century French banking system. Articles on smuggling and on Irish merchants abroad likewise draw on extensive work in French as well as in British and Irish archives. Specialists long familiar with Cullen’s work will find this volume useful as a convenient means of accessing specific items. Newcomers will get a glimpse, fragmentary, unbalanced, but nevertheless impressive, of a body of work

that remains the starting point for any serious attempt to understand the real contours of Irish economic history.

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