

to expect of the Irish Manuscripts Commission, a body that has in recent years established itself more and more firmly as a crucial facilitator – perhaps one might in the present context say a crucial ‘proclaimer’ – of the value and importance of Irish historical scholarship in all its richness and diversity.

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ELITE WOMEN IN ASCENDANCY IRELAND, 1690–1745: IMITATION AND INNOVATION. By Rachel Wilson. Pp xii, 208. Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press. 2015. £60. (Irish Historical Monographs series).

Recent decades have seen a pleasing flurry of publications on women’s history with respect to England and Scotland. Although the subject has not been completely neglected by historians of Ireland – one might in particular mention the pioneering work of Mary O’Dowd – it has featured less prominently in scholarly examinations of Ireland’s past. Rachel Wilson, in this excellent study of elite women in ascendancy Ireland between 1690 and 1745, has made a distinctly valuable contribution to our understanding of the role of women in late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century Ireland. That she is concerned – as the title indicates – with elite women has more to do with the sources that are available than with agenda of any kind. As a result, neither the poor nor the middle orders make an appearance, nor (except in very minor ways) do Catholics or Presbyterians.

The particular importance of this book lies in the fact that it is more than a case study and that it adopts a tighter timeframe than that employed by existing general analyses. ‘The book’, Wilson announces, will question how far women’s ‘lives changed, and situate its findings within the wider historiography on the rest of the British Isles to establish to what extent women in Ireland were influenced by their closest neighbours’. Indeed, throughout an awareness is shown of the fact that, while ‘the lives of these women may have been informed by and in some cases mirrored that of their English and Scottish counterparts, they were not dictated by the British example’.

The book is divided into seven chapters, each concerned with a significant aspect of the matter in hand, and this thematic arrangement works well. Wilson opens with a discussion of marriage, its preliminaries, its experiences, and (occasionally) its collapse. Some of the findings are unsurprising, not least the importance of money and status. Yet even so Wilson convincingly insists that the likes and dislikes of the women involved were never entirely disregarded even by parents determined on making a ‘good match’ and that this became more and more obvious towards the end of her period. Here and elsewhere she is an acute observer of the complex and ‘national’ positions occupied by the Irish ascendancy: not completely Irish, certainly not completely British, perhaps at best located in some indeterminate no man’s land often marked by nervous uncertainties and worrying relationships. The chapter on marriage is followed by equally interesting and well-informed discussions of mothers and children, the lady’s position in the house, widows, guardians, and estate managers, ‘society queens’, and institutional philanthropy. All contain valuable findings and equally valuable interpretations. And this is so because Wilson, in addition to her scholarly expertise, never loses sight of the human aspects of what she is about. Thus, in the discussion of mothers and children, she includes a wonderfully touching comment by William Connolly Junior (1706–54) on the birth of a daughter (he and his wife had hoped for a son): but four weeks old ‘the little one can already express her thoughts, or at least we pretend to understand her’.

Without ever losing focus Wilson lays out her findings so as to cast light on all sorts of related matters: child mortality, finance, relationships between and within families, education, female networks, ‘alliances’ and tensions between spouses, women managing

landed estates, etiquette, visiting friends, entertainments, and so on and so forth. Her chapter on politics shows that, while elite women clearly occupied a 'subordinate' position, they were by no means marginalised and played a more important role than is usually allowed. Elite women did not, she insists, 'stand on the political sidelines. Throughout the period they influenced politics, and politics influenced them. Events like the Glorious Revolution merely gave them greater scope to act and brought their activities into sharper focus.' Again, in the field of philanthropy – the establishment of hospitals, charity schools, and the like – their contribution 'was considerably greater than has previously been revealed'. All in all, their importance 'was manifested in different ways to that of men, but was no less real, for the creation of a new ruling order, composed of members of the country's minority religion, required a group effort in which these ladies had a key role'.

Two minor points: the references to manuscripts in the bibliography are sometimes excessively terse, while the fact that, in the opening quotation to the first chapter, a 'Miss Burton' is mentioned without a first name does not, as Wilson seems to think, suggest any brusqueness, for, should she have been the eldest or only daughter, this was precisely the correct form to use – only younger daughters would have had their first names indicated (see Jane Austen, herself a younger sister). But these are minor quibbles in relation to a book which is consistently interesting and which makes a real and important contribution to Irish history and to the history of women generally.

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UTOPIANISM IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY IRELAND. By Deirdre Ní Chuanacháin. Pp xi, 260. Cork: Cork University Press. 2016. €39 hardback.

This rich and interesting book argues not just for the importance of utopian themes in eighteenth-century Irish writing, but also for the existence of a 'utopian propensity' in Irish culture from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries.

Ní Chuanacháin's first chapter reviews various taxonomies of the concept of utopia, leaning on the work of Lyman Tower Sargent, Timothy Millar, Philip Gove, James T. Presley and others. For example, Sargent settled on nine types of utopia, ranging from unreal societies that were intended as models for the improvement of one's own, to satires on the concept of the ideal society, to real communities of people seeking to live in an improved manner. Ní Chuanacháin decides that a literary utopia must have three elements to merit the name: the society described must be unreal; this unreal society must undergo evaluation by the author; and finally this literary construct must encourage new thinking about the real society in which the author and his or her readers live (p. 23).

Succeeding chapters review a wide range of texts moving across genres and languages. Chapter two tackles *aisling* poetry, narratives of journeys to Hy Brasil, Michael Comyn's *Laoi Oisín ar Tír na nÓg*, and later eighteenth-century accounts of disappearing islands. The next short chapter introduces George Berkeley, bishop of Cloyne, and argues for a 'utopian impulse' common to Berkeley and Dublin's philosophical clubs. Ní Chuanacháin suggests that utopianism constituted a 'structure of feeling', something less concrete than a worldview or ideology, in 1720s and 1730s Dublin. Chapter four juxtaposes a treatment of Berkeley's plans for a settlement in Bermuda, which was to contribute to the evangelisation of the British colonies in North America, with Theobald Wolfe Tone's plan for a British military colony in the Pacific. Chapter five explores societies of the upper atmosphere and moon, as described by Jonathan Swift, Murtagh McDermot, Margaret King Moore, Countess Mountcashel, Francis Gentleman, and others. Chapter six is devoted entirely to Samuel Madden's *Memoirs of the twentieth century* (1733). This remarkable work described a world in