

No work is perfect, but this book—together with related research of Broadberry and others—represents the synthesis and culmination of the work of generations of economic historians of Britain and a significant research effort of the authors in their own right. It is the most important contribution made in the last quarter of a century toward establishing the facts that may one day permit answering that which is perhaps the most important question of all social science: Why are the societies we live in so much richer than it was the case in the past?

*Nuno Palma*, European University Institute and University of Groningen

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Despite the last half century's vast growth of academic interest in early modern European witchcraft, the subject has attracted few commentators on aspects of the phenomenon in Ireland. Indeed, the last in-depth treatment of the subject is now more than a century old. Therefore Andrew Sneddon's *Witchcraft and Magic in Ireland*, a synopsis of recent work on Irish witchcraft, alongside his own original insights, is very timely. As he remarks in his opening comments, it is not difficult to see why so many have been reluctant to engage with the subject, the destruction of so many official records in 1922 making the historian's task hugely problematic. The lack of sources is, of course, a constant source of frustration for early modern historians of Ireland, but as eminent specialists like Toby Barnard and Raymond Gillespie have demonstrated, it is not an insuperable one. Sneddon's work is written in the same spirit, and he is to be congratulated on uncovering a whole range of new materials, many hitherto disregarded, with which to shed light on the nature of Irish witchcraft.

Sneddon's broad approach is to attempt to place Irish witchcraft within the context of developments within Europe generally at this time, particularly in as much as they impinged upon the formation of elite thinking on the subject. Clearly, a key factor here is religion. Early modern Ireland was deeply divided along religious lines, and Sneddon sensibly traces how the different denominations—Roman Catholic, Anglican Protestant, and Presbyterian—developed their own unique approaches and attitudes to the sin and crime of witchcraft. In doing so, he also acknowledges the importance of developments in England and Scotland, as settlers from both were increasingly influential in shaping the political, socioeconomic and cultural settlement of Ireland in the early modern period. Nowhere was this more important than in the establishment of a legal framework for the examination and punishment of crimes such as witchcraft, which, as Sneddon shows, were largely in line with English precedents. However, there is little doubt that the lack of surviving legal records makes the task of analyzing the impact of such developments upon official and popular attitudes to witchcraft almost impossible. Indeed, we only have reliable, in-depth information for two Irish witchcraft trials—at Youghal in 1661 and Islandmagee in 1711 (itself the subject of a monograph by Sneddon)—with only the scantest of references to other trials.

It is nonetheless fair to conclude, as Sneddon does here, that despite the fragmentary nature of the surviving evidence, Ireland did not experience sustained witch-hunting or witch trials in the early modern period. Why so? This is perhaps the single most important question to emerge from the book, and not surprisingly various explanations have been proposed. None fully convince, though I have a personal preference for Elwyn Lapoint's thesis, first propounded in 1992, that the Roman Catholic majority were largely unwilling to entrust the prosecution of witches in their midst to Protestant courts, which they saw as inimical to justice. Such

antipathy reflected broader themes in confessional disputes of the period for, as Sneddon notes, citing various contemporary commentators, Protestants were ideologically predisposed to equate witchcraft with “popish superstition” and thus see Catholics as naturally susceptible to the wiles of the devil. Something similar may have shaped the response of the Presbyterians in Ulster in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. It certainly seems to have been at work in England after 1660, when nonconformist advocates of witchcraft grew increasingly wary of bringing accusations before a legal establishment and machinery dominated by loyal Anglicans.

The rise and decline of witchcraft in early modern Ireland thus forms Sneddon’s core chapters, though it is neatly bookended by his helpful discussion of both the medieval precedents for witchcraft and the continuing appeal of such beliefs into the nineteenth century. Here, for the first time, we have a broad overview of the subject that is informed by rigorous interrogation of a wide variety of sources. Clearly, there are still many questions to pose and answer. Thanks to Sneddon, however, the framework is in place for further analysis and discussion, which, it is hoped, will follow smoothly from this pioneering attempt to comprehend the role of witchcraft in early modern Irish society.

*Peter Elmer*, Exeter University