

*The Jacobean Plantations in Seventeenth-Century Offaly: An Archaeology of a Changing World.* James Lyttleton.

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The early modern English conquest of Ireland wrought profound transformation in Ireland. Plantation served as one of the strategies central to English control, and accordingly larger plantation schemes in Munster and Ulster have received considerable attention. James Lyttleton extends this important field regionally and chronologically with this study of the Jacobean plantations in south and west Offaly. Lyttleton's particular concern is to assess transformation within this phase of plantation as reflected in the archaeological record. The emphasis here is on architectural remains that, Lyttleton argues, offer the key to more nuanced and objective assessment of plantation's role in "the social and cultural processes at work" (259), rather than overreliance on a biased archival record and its potential for problematic interpretation by historians.

Chapters are devoted to historical background on south and west Offaly, traditionally controlled by the O'Carrolls; background on the history and ideology of plantation in the midlands; English interventions in Offaly and its impact on lordship and settlement patterns; a discussion of the human landscape, including issues such as agriculture and features such as bogs and forests; and a conclusion that considers what church remains and cemeteries reveal of the Reformation's impact on practiced faith. The core of the study, however, rests on three extensive chapters, two addressing "defensible accommodation" (tower and fortified houses) and one on "non-defensible" housing.

Lyttleton's discussion of each housing form is augmented handsomely by numerous photographs, maps, and diagrams, many of them in color.

While changes in the built environment over time are meticulously documented, it is Lyttleton's sensitivity to the lived experience of each housing form — architecture's conveyance of its inhabitants' mores, behaviors, and relationships — that significantly deepens his assessment of architecture as so richly reflective of change. Tower houses in particular, he argues, proved flexible in their use and meaning for both natives and newcomers, functioning as structures onto which “new ideas on social identities and class could be projected” (63). The rise of fortified houses, which have not received as much scholarly attention as tower houses, similarly served as “material expressions of mentalities” that “allowed for the negotiation and manipulation of various identities such as ethnicity and class” in a period of profound transformation (108). Lyttleton resists traditional identification of fortified houses as a transitional architectural phase between tower and country houses and challenges their former interpretation through an either narrowly martial or social lens. Their defensive features, though important, were of limited functionality, evident in the overturning of the Offaly plantations during the 1641 uprising. Additionally, their location is not suggestive of defensive concerns. Rather, he argues, it reflects the shift to a capitalist-oriented economy serving the needs of reconfigured English control.

Housing was transformed again in the later seventeenth century in the aftermath of the Cromwellian land confiscations. Few native landowners survived the confiscations, although those who did continued to occupy tower houses. “Non-defensible” housing now dominated, designed to meet the concerns of a new, predominantly British, service-oriented elite. The shift to more centralized authority saw consequent shifts in local social structures reflected in housing and its contents. For instance, hospitality (long the fulfillment of responsibility), power, and status within the household as public space declined, and along with it the nature of elite houses. Privacy became the central concern, wherein gardens, parklands, and moveable goods such as furniture and decorative items instead served as displays of status to the privileged few.

A particularly welcome aspect of this study is its consideration of gender in the analysis of tower and fortified houses. While defensive structures have been traditionally understood as masculine given their relationship to inheritance and power, Lyttleton argues persuasively that greater attention to gendered space within these households permits reassessment of “socially constructed notions” of masculinity and femininity (93). Gendered space is evident in female responsibility for hospitality, for instance, as essential to displays of power and status as military capability. Sustaining attention to gendered space and roles within consideration of “non-defensible” housing would have profitably revealed whether gender roles were also restructured within this new architectural form.

VALERIE MCGOWAN-DOYLE, *Lorain County Community College*