

IRISH HISTORICAL STUDIES

Vol. XXXVIII No. 149

May 2012

Introduction

The contributions to this special issue of *Irish Historical Studies* originate in the twenty-ninth Irish Conference of Historians, devoted to the theme 'Power and History', which was organised by historians from the Centre for Historical Research at the University of Limerick and Mary Immaculate College and which took place in June 2009. The conference explored the theme of power in a wide variety of international manifestations and a selection of papers has appeared, as is customary, in the *Historical Studies* series.¹ The present collection is based on a discrete strand of the conference which addressed aspects of power in Irish history, with the addition of two papers written for the Special Issue. Together these papers consider contestations of power in relation to the operation of institutions (county infirmaries, workhouses, and the Clonmel borstal), censorship, religion, sexuality and infant mortality. The papers present innovative research, which draws on developments in recent historiography to evaluate the nature, operation and limitations of power in Ireland from the eighteenth century to the twentieth century.

The operation of power is a central, if under-articulated, aspect of history and of Irish history in particular. As Christopher Clark has succinctly put it: 'Power is at once the most ubiquitous and the most elusive theme of historical writing. Questions of power lie at the centre of most historical narratives, but the concept is rarely interrogated or analysed as an autonomous category'.² The acquisition, maintenance and exercise of political power have, of course, long been central concerns of Irish historians. Yet the nature and operation of power is frequently taken for granted, while other articulations of power have received less overt attention. In the absence of an explicit historiography of power, historians have turned to the French philosopher-historian, Michel Foucault, for guidance on how power in the past might be interrogated beyond superficial models of the empowered/powerless kind. In spite of resistance within the historical profession to Foucault (indeed, historians have remained the most resistant among scholars to Foucault³), his approach as exemplified in a series of key works from the 1960s and 1970s⁴ has nonetheless informed social and cultural historical

¹ Anthony McElligott, Liam Chambers, Ciara Breathnach and Catherine Lawless (eds), *Power in history: from medieval Ireland to the post-modern world* (Historical Studies XXVII) (Dublin, 2011).

² Christopher Clark, 'Power' in Ulinka Rublack (ed.), *A concise companion to history* (Oxford, 2011), p. 131.

³ Clare O'Farrell, *Foucault: philosopher or historian?* (Basingstoke, 1989).

⁴ Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison: histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris, 1961); idem, *Naissance de la clinique: une archéologie du regard médical* (Paris, 1963); idem, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris, 1969); idem, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris, 1975); idem, *Histoire de la sexualité, tome 1: la volonté de savoir* (Paris, 1976).

accounts of power, in all its manifestations and locations, but particularly where institutions, knowledge/discourses, gender and the body have been sites of contestation. What was then a young generation of historians accommodated Foucauldian thinking easily with empirical practice to produce richer histories during the late twentieth century.⁵ Today, Foucault does not elicit so much academic steam as two decades ago. Indeed, Foucault's examination of power represents one among a multitude of approaches offered by political scientists, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers and others.⁶ Nevertheless, Foucault has remained important, if only because his forays into history have required historians to rethink how they go about engaging with the past and about the nature of power in particular. Foucault's influence – rather like power as he constructed it – can be diffusive. Thus the articles in this collection explore the nature of power through a series of case studies that either directly or indirectly owe something to the Foucauldian paradigm of power, particularly in relation to the role and development of institutions.

A central concern of Foucault's work was the power dynamics of medical and penal institutions. He located the origin of what he famously called 'the great confinement' in the establishment of 'houses of correction' and similar institutions across Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to deal with perceived problems caused by poverty and vagrancy.⁷ In Ireland, no formal equivalent to the early modern English poor law system was created. Nevertheless, the eighteenth century witnessed a growth in the number of institutions involving the kind of 'confinement' envisaged by Foucault.⁸ It is therefore appropriate that this Special Issue opens with Andrew Sneddon's contribution, which traces the development of an important element of eighteenth-century medical infrastructure: the county infirmary system.⁹ He shows how the implementation of the 1760s legislation establishing the system involved 'a protracted negotiation between central and local power'. While institutionalisation was well underway in the eighteenth century, the dramatic expansion of regulatory institutions dealing with health, welfare and punishment was a hallmark of the nineteenth century. Though a sizable number of institutional histories have appeared over the past forty years, few consider the impact the process of institutionalisation had on the populace or how the interaction of people and power, involving both church and state, changed over time.¹⁰ Due to the nature of extant records, many histories of power-brokerage invariably adopt a top-down approach. Although notoriously difficult to

⁵ Michael Ignatieff, *A just measure of pain: the penitentiary in the Industrial Revolution, 1750–1850* (Harmondsworth, 1989).

⁶ For a primer which introduces a range of theoretical approaches to power see Mark Haugaard (ed.), *Power: a reader* (Manchester, 2002).

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Madness and civilization: a history of insanity in the age of reason* (London, 2001), pp 35–60.

⁸ David Dickson, 'In search of the old Irish poor law' in Rosalind Mitchison and Peter Roebuck (eds), *Economy and society in Scotland and Ireland 1500–1939* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp 149–59.

⁹ For the developing historiography of early modern Irish medical history see James Kelly and Fiona Clark, 'Introduction' in James Kelly and Fiona Clark (eds), *Ireland and medicine in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries* (Aldershot, 2010), pp 1–16.

¹⁰ R. B. McDowell, *The Irish administration, 1801–1914* (London, 1964); Mark Finnane, *Insanity and the insane in post-Famine Ireland* (London, 1981); Virginia

reconstruct, insights like those included in the contributions of Peter Gray on the establishment of the workhouse system and Conor Reidy on the Irish borstal at Clonmel, will expand our understanding of how the Irish became institutionalised, or succumbed to become what Foucault terms ‘docile bodies’.¹¹ It is because of the notable absence of such discussion that Catherine Cox recently suggested that the history of Irish institutions is in its infancy.¹² Gray and Reidy explore issues of control, power structures, relationships with external authorities (particularly the state), and, in the case of Gray’s article, the architecture of power.¹³

Another classic *locus* of debates about the operation of power is censorship. Donal Ó Drisceóil’s article addresses an important lacuna in the historiography of censorship in Ireland: the late 1910s. He argues that ‘sporadic press suppressions’ before 1916 were followed by a moderate censorship regime after the Easter Rising, which in turn gave way to ‘a more repressive and authoritarian phase of British policy’ from 1919.¹⁴ The crisis of the late 1910s occasioned other under-explored expressions of power. John Borghonovo contributes an important case study of the nature and operation of communal power in the same period. He argues that an unusual configuration of events gave rise to a moral panic expressed in the Cork anti-sailor riots in 1917–18.¹⁵ Ciara Breathnach and Eunan O’Halpin offer another revealing and unconventional examination of power structures in early twentieth-century Ireland. Their article addresses ‘unknown’ infant fatalities in Ireland, specifically the startling and disproportional number of male cases. Breathnach and O’Halpin’s detailed research illustrates the relationship between contemporary attitudes to law, medicine and sexuality and the development of power structures in the new southern Irish state. In independent Ireland, the power of the new state was expressed in the articulation of an Irish identity with strong religious overtones. However, the nature of state/church power relations was carefully balanced. John Walsh explores the changing nature of this relationship in the area of education. He shows that there was a decisive (if subtle) shift in this balance of power in a relatively short period in the 1960s and early 1970s, which sheds important light on the nature and operation of state and church power.¹⁶

Crossman, *Politics, pauperism and power in late nineteenth-century Ireland* (Manchester, 2006).

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (London, 1991), pp 135–70, 231–56.

¹² Catherine Cox, ‘Institutionalisation in Irish history and society’ in Mary McAuliffe, Katherine O’Donnell and Leeann Lane (eds), *Palgrave advances in Irish history* (Basingstoke, 2009), pp 169–90.

¹³ The authors draw on ongoing research: Peter Gray, *The making of the Irish Poor Law 1815–43* (Manchester, 2009); Conor Reidy, *Ireland’s ‘moral hospital’: the Irish borstal system, 1906–1956* (Dublin, 2009).

¹⁴ For censorship in a later period: Dónal Ó Drisceóil, *Censorship in Ireland, 1939–1945: neutrality, politics and society* (Cork, 1996).

¹⁵ Related work includes: Maria Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish society, 1800–1940* (Cambridge, 2007); Susannah Riordan, ‘Venereal disease in the Irish Free State: the politics of public health’ in *Irish Historical Studies*, xxxv, no. 139 (May, 2007), pp 345–64; Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of sin: sex and society in modern Ireland* (London, 2009).

¹⁶ For related issues: John Walsh, *The politics of expansion: the transformation of educational policy in the Republic of Ireland, 1957–72* (Manchester, 2009).

The essays collected here draw on distinct Irish periods and historiographies to interrogate the workings of power in the past. In doing so, they draw attention to the significance of power as an historiographical tool and, through a series of case studies, offer models for further research. The Foucauldian themes addressed by many of the articles below (institutions, medicine, sexuality, the body, censorship) indicate the abiding impact of Foucault's work, though this does not mean the slavish adoption of his conclusions.¹⁷ This Special Issue intentionally pays less attention than usual to the operation of political power. However, this remains, and should remain, a fundamental research topic for Irish historians. Indeed, more than ever, historical investigation of the operation and manipulation of political power by elite groups in Irish history is necessary. The purpose of this Special Issue is not to detract or to distract from that task. Rather, it points to the utility of a tacit category, power, that can be deployed in other ways to make connections across and, hopefully, to open up new areas of research.

CIARA BREATHNACH

Department of History, University of Limerick

LIAM CHAMBERS

Department of History, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

ANTHONY McELLIGOTT

Department of History, University of Limerick

¹⁷ On the application of Foucault's ideas to the history of Irish sexuality, see Tom Inglis, 'Origins and legacies of Irish prudery: sexuality and social control in modern Ireland' in *Éire-Ireland*, xl, no. 3/4 (fall/winter 2005), pp 9–37; idem, 'Foucault, Bourdieu and the field of Irish sexuality' in *Irish Journal of Sociology*, vii (1997), pp 5–28.