

This book is a significant contribution to our knowledge of an extraordinary period in Irish history, and to our knowledge of a man who played an important but long-forgotten part in that era.

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SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY IRELAND. Edited by Juliana Adelman and Éadaoin Agnew. Pp 180. Dublin: Four Courts Press. 2011. €55.

This is a very broad-based collection of essays – so broad, indeed, that it is hard to pick out an overall theme beyond the fact that all throw some light on the area defined in the title. The field is actually somewhat broader than the title implies, because one essay also takes us into the field of the history of medicine in Ireland: this is Elizabeth Neswald’s account of the introduction of the ‘water cure’ in Cork, which charts the complex reactions of different communities to hydropathy. The medical professionals, for instance, were suspicious of new ideas being introduced from outside sources, but the temperance movement was supportive. This essay illustrates the best aspects of the collection in that it emphasises the need to study the motives of different communities and social interests that shape their reactions to scientific and technical developments. There can be no universally applicable model for the interaction of science and society.

In the area of technology, we have Seán Ó Duinnshléibhe’s analysis of ‘The Parliament of Weavers’, an Irish-language poem that celebrates the lives of the Cork weavers. In addition to describing their everyday experiences, the poem also contains information about the actual practice of weaving at the time. At the very opposite end of the spectrum of technological sophistication, Ian Elliot provides a brief account of the renowned telescope-making firm founded in Dublin by Thomas Grubb. Something of an outlier is Tadhg Ó Keefe and Patrick Ryan’s reconstruction from Ordnance Survey maps of Dublin’s notorious red-light district, ‘the Monto’. Had this thrown some light on mapping techniques it might have fitted in better with the volume’s theme, but as it stands it is more a contribution to social history.

Several essays engage in a sophisticated way with public reactions to moves to create a greater space for science in Irish public life. Clara Cullen’s account of the Royal College of Science for Ireland throws valuable light on this much-neglected institution, which provided a high-quality technical education under very difficult circumstances. Sherra Murphy describes the 1857 meeting in Dublin of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, noting how the local press from all sides of the political spectrum rallied round to provide support, thus seeking to present Ireland in the best possible light. Vandra Costello analyses the movement in 1861 to have the Glasnevin Botanical Garden opened to the public on Sundays; the supporters of public education triumphed over the opposition of evangelical sabbatarians only when the government threatened to withdraw its subsidy.

The remaining essays all relate in one way or another to my own interest in the debates surrounding the more radical theoretical innovations of the time. Thomas Duddy takes another look at the by now well-worn theme of Irish responses to Darwinism. He divides the reactions into four categories: supporters, objectors, accommodators and compartmentalists. Referring to John Tyndall’s notorious Belfast Address of 1874, he insists that Tyndall was a supporter of Darwinism, not – to use a term coined by this reviewer – a pseudo-Darwinist. T. H. Huxley was a pseudo-Darwinist in the sense that he praised natural selection in public but ignored it in his scientific work. The problem with Tyndall is that he was a physicist, so there is no way of telling whether his support went beyond mere rhetoric. In this context, James H. Murphy’s demonstration that Tyndall’s physics was actively promoted at Castleknock College despite the Catholic Church’s opposition to

his materialism is significant. Éadaoin Agnew's account of Mary Ward's popular-science writing on microscopy and natural history notes her involvement with opposition to the new materialism. The essay situates Ward in the broader discussion of women and popular-science writing by modern historians, but the lack of a reference to Bernard Lightman's recent book on the topic means that the surprisingly high profile of other female anti-Darwinists is not recognised. Patrick Maume describes a very different line of opposition to Darwinism from the evangelical writer Dominick McCausland. He notes that McCausland's biblical literalism, although alien to most modern readers, struck a real chord with other evangelicals of the time, including W. E. Gladstone.

There is thus much of value in this volume despite the somewhat scattered nature of its contents. It forms a useful addition to the growing body of literature on the responses to science within Irish society and culture.

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THE MUNICIPAL REVOLUTION IN IRELAND: A HANDBOOK OF URBAN GOVERNMENT IN IRELAND SINCE 1800. By Matthew Potter. Pp xviii, 491. Dublin: Irish Academic Press. 2011. €49.95.

In choosing the title for his book, Dr Matthew Potter has surely short-changed himself. 'Handbook' conjures up the image of a dull compendium of data, the raw material for history rather than history itself. And his book does indeed offer a detailed guide through the complexities of successive legislative and administrative measures, from the 1828 Lighting of Towns Act to the 2001 Local Government Act, along with a detailed appendix listing different categories of municipality. But there is also a wide-ranging analytical survey of two centuries of urban history. References to Weber on bureaucracy, Bourdieu on government, and Foucault on 'governmentality' mark this out as a work of intellectual ambition as well as compilatory diligence.

The story Potter tells is of a municipal revolution betrayed. Between the act of 1828 and the First World War, the population of Ireland shrank but became more urban. In response, there was a steady increase in the number of municipal authorities and in their functions, while control of their workings passed from narrow, Protestant, local oligarchies to a more broadly based urban elite. From an early stage, however, these achievements were threatened by the prevailing nationalist view of local government as part of the apparatus of British rule – worth capturing as a stage in the campaign for independence but of no value in itself. This instinctive hostility continued after 1922, sharpened by the very success that Sinn Féin had recently enjoyed in using the institutions of local government as an instrument of subversion. In addition, the anti-urban ethos of Irish cultural nationalism curtailed willingness to attend to the specific problems of towns and cities. As a result, municipal institutions withered in the new state, with damaging consequences for the physical fabric of urban centres and for the quality of life of their inhabitants.

Dr Potter's account of the transformation of urban government is a carefully balanced one. He notes, for example, that political change in many municipalities came gradually; indeed, the detailed case studies that he offers of developments in eleven individual towns provide vivid confirmation of Hoppen's depiction of the 1850s and 1860s as an Indian summer of Protestant political power. Potter also concedes that central government under the Union – wary both of sectarian divisions and of the rising power of Catholic nationalism – allowed Irish local authorities far less freedom of action than their British counterparts.

Yet it has to be asked whether the term 'municipal revolution', even with these qualifications, is really sustainable in an Irish context. Potter's account of the extent to which even medium-sized Irish municipal authorities became significant providers of gas, water, housing and transport is in many ways a revelation. Yet, with the exception of Belfast,