

### ***Improving Culture***

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*A review of:*

Toby Barnard, *Improving Ireland? Projectors, Prophets and Profiteers 1641-1786*, Four Courts Press, 192pp, £55.

In this fascinating collection of essays Toby Barnard sets out to chart the ideas and practices of 'improvement' in Ireland from the 1640s to the later eighteenth century. Although many of the ideas and methods examined here were common to what was essentially a Europe-wide movement, the Irish experience of improvement remains in many ways distinct. With an approach which could be overtly colonial, underpinned by assumptions of cultural and confessional superiority, the improvers of the mid-seventeenth century saw Ireland not only as a front line in the battle between civility and barbarism, but as a practical laboratory for putting the various theories of improvement to the test. Barnard's approach to this diverse and complex subject is episodic, with each of the seven essays collected here providing a detailed case study of a particular individual, group, or aspect of improvement. These various perspectives are united by a number of common themes, most notably the relationship between theory and practice (and in some cases reputation and reality), and the ways in which improvement related to a re-imagining of the Irish past.

Beginning with an overview of 'the cults and cultures' of Irish improvement, Barnard highlights the massive land transfers that followed the Cromwellian reconquest as a key moment in the process. With eight and a half million acres of land confiscated and over half the most profitable land moving from Catholic to Protestant hands, Ireland in the 1650s could be presented by projectors as 'a white paper' (76), a land ready to be remade. Informed by the detailed surveying and mapping of the country that followed, the new settlement gave the opportunity for improvements that aimed not only to bring material gain to the soldiers and speculators that were its main beneficiaries, but also to pacify and civilise the natives, and in doing so, transform the country, as one projector put it, into 'West England' (80).

A key proponent of this view was the polymath Sir William Petty, author of *Political Arithmetic* and keen practitioner of empirical improvement. Using the insights gained overseeing the Cromwellian survey, Petty built up substantial estates scattered across Ireland. Barnard traces his involvement in the improvement circles active in the interregnum before examining in detail his attempts to put his ideas into practice, particularly upon his extensive holdings in the south-western county of Kerry. Hampered by the remoteness of the area and unable to attract the English Protestant tenants he hoped to 'plant' there, Petty's attempts to foster industry and commerce largely failed, leading him to conclude that only government intervention could provide the framework for an improved, Anglicised Ireland. Indeed, Barnard argues that Petty's career as a landowner serves as a prime example of the 'gulf between intention and

achievement' that characterised the attempts of many of the improvers discussed here. (47)

As well as examining the work of such individual improvers as the first earl of Cork, Richard Lawrence and the earls of Egmont, Barnard's account broadens out to include the social circles in which they moved, the ideas that influenced them, and the institutions that supported them. This includes the role of the English (and then British) state, the Irish parliament, and perhaps most significantly, the various learned voluntary associations such as the Dublin Philosophical Society, the Dublin Society and the Physio-Historical Society, which played a key role in the dissemination and promotion of improving ideas. Fair weight is also given to the various Irish Catholic improvers, such as Charles O'Connor in Roscommon and Thomas Browne in Kenmare, whose reforming zeal was directly at odds with the consensus amongst most Protestant improvers that Catholicism was inherently incompatible with improvement.

A particularly rewarding aspect of these essays is Barnard's holistic approach to the wider 'culture of improvement'. His concept of improvement in its widest sense encompasses not only the intellectual background to the practical attempts to reform agriculture, stimulate commerce and inculcate the moral reforms believed necessary to 'civilise' the natives, but also includes the developing material culture of the improvers themselves. From their mansion houses, remodelled castles and planned gardens to the more 'trivial' domestic improvements in furniture and household goods and paintings, Barnard painstakingly recreates the changes in fashion and taste that signalled not only their participation in the growing culture of consumption but also the move towards personal improvement and refinement that became an integral part of the improving creed. This approach is most fully realised in his treatment of the eighteenth-century improver, Robert French of Monivea. By bringing together the various strands of his public and private lives, areas usually examined separately (if at all), Barnard successfully integrates the various 'worlds' French moved in, from his Galway estate and neighbourhood, to the society of Dublin law and politics, and his visits to England, producing a much more rounded and nuanced account of the man and his outlook than has hitherto been produced.

Another important theme running through these essays is the relationship between improvement and the rediscovery of the Irish past. Here Barnard argues that the emerging interest in 'dark age' Ireland and the growth of antiquarianism and history writing arose partly from the belief that a fuller understanding of the Irish past would aid the improvement of the present; rather than contradicting the modernising creed of the improvers, this renewed interest in the past was 'a paradoxical result of the desire to improve Ireland materially and morally' (90). The exploration of this theme (most extensively in chapter four of the book, 'Improving Ireland's Past') leads on to another of this collection's concerns: the relationship of 'improvement' to the growing sense of 'Irishness' that emerged amongst the Protestant ascendancy during this period. Whereas the earlier improvers saw themselves clearly as 'the English interest' in Ireland,

with their prime interests and ambitions remaining firmly focused in England or Britain, Barnard charts how improvement became imbued with a distinct and patriotic sense of 'Irishness', a sense rooted in historical difference, albeit one which for the most part firmly excluded the Catholic majority.

Although Barnard does not really challenge the view of this period as one of marked economic and social change, he does suggest the contribution of the improvers to Ireland's 'transformation' should be considered a limited one, and draws attention to the 'persistence of pessimism' (168) amongst the improvers themselves, both in terms of the limited nature of their successes and the apparent fragility of what had actually been achieved. This highlights what Barnard concludes might be one of the most paradoxical consequences of improvement in Ireland – that a creed originally intended to pacify and integrate, may, through raised expectations, have ultimately served to agitate and even politicise.

Perhaps inevitably with such a collection of previously published essays, there is some repetition (particularly in the first three chapters) and some of the material on the rediscovery of the Irish past seems less strictly relevant to the overall theme of improvement. Taken as a whole, however, this remains a consistently engaging and eminently readable book that makes an important contribution to our understanding of the culture of improvement both in, and beyond, Ireland.