

Dining for Ireland?

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A review of

Martyn J. Powell, *The Politics of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Macmillan: Houndsmills, 2005), ISBN: 978-0333973554, viii +293pp

Luxury is fashionable today, at least in academic circles. The intellectual debates of early-modern Europe surrounding its definition and consequences are being reconstructed by Christopher Berry and a hive of scholarly bees swarming around Bernard Mandeville. Scottish Enlightenment scholars such as John Robertson and Istvan Hont have published important interventions on the moral conundrums caused by political economy and international trade. And, led by innovative work by John Brewer, Peter Borsay and others, English scholarship has energetically explored the material culture of imperialism and exoticism. When attention turns to the third kingdom, the results of such labour have been rather more scant, although the archival scouring of T.C. Barnard has produced a remarkable overview of how the Protestant Ascendancy lived in, among and around objects. (*Making the Grand Figure: Lives and Possessions in Ireland, 1640-1770* (2004)

Now Martyn Powell, author of an iconoclastic study of Ireland's place in the British Empire, offers us a study of the political context and content of Barnard's environment. It is certain that Ireland provides a rich harvest for those willing to till this particular field. The Protestant Ascendancy was, as is amply documented here, avid consumers of luxury items, from alcohol to silver cutlery, clothes and high (and low) culture. But they were also intensely worried by their lack of financial probity, fretting over the impact of absentees (as in Arthur's Dobbs' notorious list of truants from the Irish domestic economy) and the cost of imports – notably claret and brandy. They worked hard to establish local industries, linen being the foremost of them, and to regulate the extremes of consumption out of existence.

Powell has worked hard to bring a semblance of order to this eclectic mix of objects of desire and abhorrence, and to place the act of consumption into a clear political frame. However, the schema is predictably artificial, and the connection between the sections devoted to certain types of consumption – food, or books for instance – and the later chapters which try to confront attitudes towards consumption – protest and identity are dealt with explicitly – are not always fully achieved. Part of the difficulty lies with the kind of anecdotal evidence on which Powell is forced to rely. Statistical evidence drawn from economic history textbooks is forsworn, as Powell seeks out attitudes and arguments. This involves him scouring newspapers and books for indicative illustrative vignettes. The result is to create something of a pastiche, a pointillist watercolour of the period that, by necessity, is blurry and seemingly inconsequential on first viewing. The book abounds with the comic consequences of drunkenness and the tragic aftermath of insulted fops and angry mobs, all of which seems to generate a rather clichéd portrait of the subject. Irish Protestants (Catholics are somewhat occluded throughout) come across as peculiarly prone to over-consumption, propping up the cliché of the feckless landlord found in Edgeworth and a multitude of London stage-plays. How far this is a consequence of Powell's regular use of such literary artefacts to buttress his arguments is a moot point.

Yet, one literary conceit dominates the text, and this leads to a serious reconsideration of the whole book, for Powell's essay acts as an academic's reflection on Swift's Modest Proposal, that macabre equation of consumption with cannibalism. How accurate was Swift's contention that the Irish were effectively eating themselves to oblivion? Powell's nuanced answer to Swift's proposition is to be found in the very last of the multitude of quotations and episodes he brings to light. Quoting Lord Auckland in 1796, Ireland is described as being 'like a drunken man, who staggers unhurt and miraculously many a mile, amidst waters and precipices, without drowning himself, or breaking his neck.' (p.233) What this hints at is that the drinker knows his limits and can carry himself safely homeward. What then is explored is not the self-destructive impulses of luxurious over-consumption, but the desire for good living. For every fool at play, there is a sermon warning against the folly of fashion. For all the duelling amongst the highest ranks, the mob regularly rioted against what they deemed economic exploitation. Whiteboys protesting at the tithe were the twin of the sociable drinking clubs of the city. But of course Auckland was wrong. Two years after this pithy observation, the drunkard finally stumbled and fell into the hellish pit of rebellion and the oblivion of union. Whether the death was from a 'surfeit of drink' or some other luxury is still unclear.