

*The richest man in Ireland*

Raymond Whelan (Aberdeen)

A Review of

Patrick Walsh, *The Making of the Irish Protestant Ascendancy The Life of William Conolly 1662-1729* (Boydell; Woodbridge, 2010, x + 229pp, ISBN 978-1-84383-584-4).

William Conolly (1662-1729), a man from relatively humble origins in County Donegal, single-handedly established an Anglo-Irish dynasty and upon his death in 1729 was reputedly the wealthiest man in Ireland, allegedly worth £17,000 p.a. Patrick Walsh's treatment of Conolly in *The Making of the Irish Protestant Ascendancy The Life of William Conolly 1662-1729* is the seventh in Boydell's 'Irish Historical Monograph Series' and an invaluable source of information on the life of George I's *de facto* Prime Minister of Ireland. Walsh, in keeping with traditional historical methodology, traces Conolly's social, economic and political endeavours and the book is divided into these categories respectively.

In particular, Walsh focuses on Conolly's wealth accumulation and, if economics be the way to study history, Walsh has used this methodology excellently in chapters three, four and five. The Williamite war and its aftermath had greatly benefited certain individuals, in terms of land confiscation. Walsh, in the words of Professor S.J. Connolly reckons that William Conolly was the most speculative and strong-willed adventurer of the 1690s in buying forfeited Jacobite land. Walsh meticulously traces Conolly's financial dealings, his earnings and family connections in the first part of the book through a plethora of contemporary sources. It makes for intriguing reading, and although the chapter titles upon first inspection seem to be prejudiced towards Conolly, the subject matter and conclusions remain almost completely impartial. Only a few ambiguities are apparent, such as Walsh's dismissal of Swift's assertion that Conolly bribed the lord lieutenant, the earl of Wharton, with £3000 for a place on the revenue commission in 1709. Walsh concludes that Conolly's appointment to the commission was a reward for his endeavours in parliament and not as Swift claimed '... one ill bargain ...'; however neither claim can be proven beyond doubt.

There were numerous attacks made on Conolly's character, as would be expected towards a commoner who was rising in status and wealth, and Walsh has traced the proceedings of several throughout the book, for example the Parker case of February 1701. This involved a John Parker who allegedly had a claim over a mortgage on the earl of Tyrconnell's estate with papers forged by Conolly. There were also accusations of insider trading and perjury against Conolly, however with no allegations were substantiated.

Walsh wishes to revise the traditional view of Conolly's fortune, articulated in David Hayton's observation that Conolly's 'mushroom fortune ... was thought to have its origins in trafficking in forfeited estates' and Patrick MacNally's idea that Conolly's fortune was founded on successful land speculation. Walsh's investigation goes far beyond these notions and traces how Conolly amassed his fortune through not only his forfeited estate empire but his connections to individuals such as James Bonnell, Henry Conyngham, William King and Thomas Broderick among others. Walsh highlights many reasons for Conolly's meteoric rise in wealth and status. Notably he had trustworthy aides in his employ; he had extensive involvement with Derry Corporation; and he held an electoral interest which was extremely strong due to his land holdings.

The book is a vital aid to any study of Conolly's wealth or political character. Walsh treats Conolly's political persona in chapters five, six and eight and traces his rise to the speakership of the Irish House of Commons through his formative years. Walsh comes to the conclusion that Conolly was respected for his sheer determination and hard work. Conolly seemed to have been, according to the evidence that Walsh presents in the book, an exclusively Irish figure, not venturing into England for politics or business, apart from taking on a small land holding, which was thought to have been purchased to assist one of his friends. Conolly focused all his efforts on Ireland and his reputation was for putting politics before family, as Walsh illustrates in certain areas of the book. Conolly's position as the most dominant of the revenue commissioners gave him immense influence but according to Walsh he did not abuse this power; instead he wished to place honest and experienced workers in the vital collectors' positions. This was apparent when some unsuitable candidates who were connected to Conolly or his supporters were overlooked in favour of a more suitable and experienced individual.

The chapter on Conolly's involvement on the revenue board is the most important as it cemented Conolly's position as an influential politician and a businessman. It certainly makes clear Conolly's industrious nature and how he was the most active and stalwart member of the revenue commission which in turn reveals much about his character and why he was so respected. This was an area that has not been thoroughly analysed before, even though Conolly has been attributed the credit for the politicisation of the revenue system in Ireland by other historians.

In the final chapter Walsh examines the Castletown country house that Conolly built not long before his death. This was a symbol of Conolly's wealth and status and has already been examined by previous authors in relation to erstwhile occupants. Walsh finishes with the central theme of the book the Protestant ascendancy, and acknowledges Conolly, Archbishop William King and Lord Midelton as the architects of this movement. Conolly's influence and importance are excellently illustrated in this work with many sources useful for not only the study of Conolly but others around this time. The book is at times over laden with figures about the amassing of Conolly's fortune but this is understandable as the author is attempting to show how the central figure became the richest man in Ireland at his time.