

Aspects of Irish Aristocratic Life

Sheena L. Hogan (University of Aberdeen)

A review of

Terence Dooley, Patrick Cosgrove, Karol Mullaney-Dignam (eds)

Aspects of Irish Aristocratic Life. Essays on the Fitzgeralds and Carton House.

(University College Dublin Press, 2014) ISBN 1906359717, 9781906359713,

Hardback, xix, 220 pp; £ 48.

The interest for this reviewer lies in recently having finished a PhD on eighteenth century Ireland and Scotland and the quest for contextual material that was an important feature of writing that PhD. The nineteen chapters of this book certainly provide contextual material and a lot more besides. It is essentially a chronological presentation, spanning almost one thousand years of history of the Earls of Kildare, the pre-eminent Irish noble family of Fitzgerald. Maynooth, Carton House, the Fitzgerald family's ebb and flow of power are the underpinnings for studies of culture, material artefacts and even the landscape.

The key issue with this book is how it is read. Reading this book reflects, in some respects, its delight and its difficulty with its diversities and commonalities that emerge in Terence Dooley's initial chapter that broadly outlines the Fitzgerald's history from 1169-2013. He is contextualising the subsequent chapters and indicating links to the further enquiry in the light of the 'Fitzgerald' legacy: what Dooley also reveals is the broad parameters that the book ahead contains and the problem of reading it 'cover to cover' as opposed to selection based on one's interests. For the purpose of this review this reader opted for the 'cover to cover' approach and found it hard going because of the different writing styles and areas of study that did not particularly resonate but were eminently worthy studies in their own right. It would indeed be hard to edit nineteen chapters by such a wide range of authors and achieve a homogenous result.

The uneven tenor that emerges in the 'cover to cover' approach is typified in chapters that feel constrained because of the necessity of the short word count. This was particularly evident in Liam Chambers' twelfth chapter 'Family Politics and Revolutionary Convictions'. Chambers reframes accounts of Lord Edward FitzGerald life (1763-98) and republican revolutionary actions. Despite having access to FitzGerald papers, more about the family influence upon his revolutionary leanings would have offered balance. There was a similar 'constrained' story for Thomas Nelson's examination of Lord Frederick Fitzgerald (1857-1924) in chapter seventeen. Perhaps this constraint was for the different and intriguing reason of a conscious lack of 'provenance' left by the last of the Fitzgeralds. Nelson, having to turn to resources outside family papers in some respects was therefore left with a drier study than could have been otherwise.

Three chapters that in their diversity flow together and not just because of a chronological proximity are those of Mary Ann Lyons, Carol O'Connor and Colm Lennon in chapters three, four and five respectively. They form a group that apart from providing an insight into the perils and spin-offs of power broking in Tudor and Elizabethan times, reveal a family who were assured in their pre-eminence and who were therefore able to foment revolt to preserve this assurance. What this group of studies highlights is the role of women in the FitzGerald historiography and that their chroniclers have recorded their part albeit by default. These precede chapters on landscape, music, furnishings and servants all of which provide a rich source of contextual material and indeed interesting reading for the general reader. Terence Dooley's study of rules governing servants in the eighteenth century is fascinating and

indicative of a familial approach to governing a household that is comfortable and recognisable; make Mrs Beaton's methods a century later seem oppressive and draconian by comparison!

Maynooth's football tournament of 1888 heralded the rise of the Gaelic Athletic Association and Lord Frederick Fitzgerald gifted a football park to the people of Maynooth in 1900: in the context of the family and their relationship to Maynooth this is a recognisable circumstance. But times were changing and the role of the Fitzgeralds was declining in tandem. This is particularly evident in Cormac Begadon's chapter that indicates the 2nd Duke of Leinster's role in the establishment of St Patrick's College. The Old Etonian Duke's support, if rooted in limited sympathy for Catholicism, is set in a time of retrenchment in revolutionary Europe by the Irish Bishops and finances for education limited by law to tuition fees was fortuitous. In a chapter that amplifies this charting the decline in many respects of 'the old Order', Carton and the Fitzgeralds in contrast to the advent of Maynooth Arnold Horner outlines how both were changing forever. The narrative of the 'Big House' began to be lost in the events of the early twentieth century. The largely Nationalist and Catholic revolutionary events of the first years of the twentieth century in Ireland have served to, in some ways, occlude the historic role of the Anglo-Irish class: this book goes some way to redressing this balance.

As to the initial dilemma as to how this book should be read or used perhaps this well presented book, that any bibliophile would enjoy owning, having a hefty price tag of £48 would be difficult to afford on a student budget. So to perhaps enjoy this book as

an important library resource and as such it is therefore available to call upon the wealth of information therein as the reader needs.