

Consumption and Culture in Sixteenth-Century Ireland

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A review of

Susan Flavin, *Consumption and Culture in Sixteenth-Century Ireland*

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Susan Flavin has achieved an excellent and original study of changing patterns of consumption and material culture in sixteenth-century Ireland. The book's focus is on south-east Ireland where, well outside the Pale of Dublin and centralised English control, Gaelic customs and language flourished. Flavin constructs a detailed account of these changes by integrating quantitative analysis of the English exchequer and customs accounts - the most important Irish economic records to survive - with qualitative sources such as wills, archaeological evidence, pictorial evidence, contemporary legislation and literature, linking the consumption of goods to Irish people of various types. The book is organised in three parts; the expansion and dynamics of Irish trade followed by an exploration of the consumption of goods relating to dress and diet.

Unravelling Ireland's history is a particularly challenging task since research is hampered by the lack of documentary evidence, particularly for the period 1485 to 1641 during which crucial developments took place; for example, the Kildare ascendancy, Tudor re-conquest and Tudor plantation. Until the early twentieth century, there was no single repository for Irish records and many had deteriorated from mismanagement or neglect: by 1828 only ninety-seven of a putative four hundred and sixteen Chancery Rolls from 1307 to 1509 survived. Not until 1920 were Irish records

brought into an ordered and manageable state with the establishment of the Public Record Office in Dublin. Tragically, the Public Record Office, along with most of its archives, was destroyed by fire in the Civil War of 1922. Charred documents were blown by the winds across the city as far away as Howth, some ten miles north of Dublin. The records included all pre-1900 legal documents, original wills dating to the sixteenth century and many more items relating to the social, political and cultural history of Ireland.

However, British and continental sources often yield significant information by which the narrative of Irish history may be expanded as Flavin demonstrates in her book, developed from her PhD thesis. The 'particular' accounts of Bristol, produced before 1565, list every item of recorded trade, regardless of size or value, imported to or exported from Ireland, mostly including information about volume, size, nominal worth and ownership. The later Port Books additionally provide details of packaging, the domicile of merchants and the port of arrival or departure of goods. Flavin acknowledges the limitations of the incomplete Bristol customs accounts and port books of which only eleven remain for the sixteenth century; even if complete, the accounts would not present a true picture of Irish trade as they represent only a fraction of new European goods imported to Ireland. Unrecorded trade is known to have taken place between Ireland, Spain and the continent: certain luxury goods found in other records are not shown as Bristol exports to Ireland; Ireland exported goods to Bristol from trade in France and the Low Countries (marmalade and Seville oil, for example); Waterford and Cork were given special licence in 1576 to trade with Spain and France in time of war. As Flavin suggests, the impact of continental trade on Irish consumption awaits further study. Voyages of discovery to the Americas, Africa and Asia resulted in the rapid development of international trade bringing a large variety of new goods to

European markets and changes in consumer demand in the process. New wares were widely distributed by Irish merchants into the hinterland from the ports of Cork and Waterford and from smaller ports as far west as Sligo. Imports to south-east Ireland reflected changes in consumption across the Pale, England and Europe.

Access to new textiles, such as silk and light weight woollen cloth, and the development of tailoring, brought significant changes to sixteenth-century European dress, changes which have been the subject of many recent studies and academic debates, but there has been little investigation into the material culture of dress in Ireland. Native Gaelic dress, for all classes, consisted of trews for men and, for both sexes, a yellow linen tunic, worn long by women, a shaggy wool mantle and flat brogues of soft leather. These locally made clothes were eminently practical for the wet Irish climate, especially the mantle which could be shaken dry. The Bristol accounts, however, indicate a lively Irish desire for new fashions demonstrated by the diversity of fabrics, haberdashery and *passemblerie* imported to Ireland and an interest in grooming by the combs, mirrors, and soap included in the cargoes.

Flavin draws on contemporary sources (costume books, wills and so on) for evidence of what the clothes looked like and who wore them. Wealthy Anglo Irish wore fashionable English and European apparel as did the Gaelic elite when appropriate, usually to conform to the dress expected on a particular occasion or worn to display civility and wealth. Irish chiefs were obliged to wear English dress when attending the Dublin parliament and did so reluctantly; Manus O'Donnell, chief of a powerful and ancient Gaelic family, dressed magnificently in crimson velvet and satin trimmed with gold and silver when, in 1541, he met with St. Leger, the Lord Deputy, to offer his submission to the Crown. New fashions filtered down to the lower social classes causing the Waterford Corporation to forbid servants from wearing fur fringes, silk or lace; it is

probable that later cheaper versions of hats, combs and lace were destined for the less affluent. The Irish took ideas from the Continent as well as from England, modifying styles to suit their own tastes, eventually developing a distinctive costume of their own.

While new fashions were embraced with enthusiasm, there seems to have been less interest in new foods. Increased imports of certain luxury foods was probably due to the arrival of 'New English' settlers in Munster in 1594, but there was little significant change to the variety and value of goods imported after their annihilation four years later. For instance, the accounts show that the range of spices brought into Ireland remained more or less static from the 1541 to the end of the century and, with the exception of aniseed, the quantities were low. Contemporary writers noted the Irish preference for less seasoned food so it is probable that spices were primarily intended for medicinal use. Dried fruit, including large quantities of raisins, was imported seasonally for consumption at Christmas and Lent but the increasing range of fruit and vegetables available to English markets had little impact in Ireland. According to William Good, a Jesuit missionary in sixteenth-century Limerick, the Irish had a partiality for 'greenstuffs', mushrooms and roots, mostly growing in the wild, and may have felt no need for cultivated supplements.

Wine remained the favoured drink of the Anglo Irish and wealthy Gaels; Shane O'Neill was reported to hold 'two hundred tonnes of wine in his cellar.' The Bristol accounts do not reflect the actual amount of wine imported to Ireland but numerous references in the State Papers suggest that the vast majority of wine was brought directly from the Continent, particularly from Spain. Imports of hops increased as the demand for hopped beer rose, perhaps initially driven by the influx of English soldiers and by European influences.

The Bristol accounts are useful for fleshing out the consumption of perishable items which do not survive in the archaeological record, lightweight fabrics for example and domestic goods of insufficient value to appear in wills such as children's bibs and bottles, herbal remedies and cooking ingredients. The quantity of imported saffron far exceeded any culinary requirements, indicating that contemporary writers were correct in saying the spice was used to dye linen yellow, a colour favoured by the Gaels.

The book is nicely produced but would have benefited from more illustrations in the dress section in place of the hazy images of writing from port books and 'particular' accounts, and a more detailed map of Ireland for reference. The tables and bar charts are clear and informative, the appendices comprehensive.

Flavin argues that Irish tastes were changing before the influence of the settlers, demonstrating from evidence in the accounts that the upward trend in Irish consumption of luxury goods started prior to English plantation. Her book adds new knowledge to the study of trade and consumerism in sixteenth-century Ireland and opens up avenues for further research in this neglected area.