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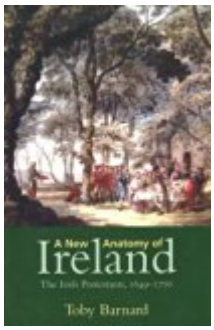
Toby Barnard. *A New Anatomy of Ireland: the Irish Protestants, 1649-1770.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003. xvi + 489 pp. $32.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-10114-0.



Reviewed by Alan Ford

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The recent death of Anthony Sampson, that journalist who was much more than a journalist, points to an obvious modern analogy for Toby Barnard's book. Sampson wrote a series of anatomies of Britain in which he held a mirror to the nature and changing attitudes in the latter half of the twentieth century. Barnard has done the same for late seventeenth and eighteenth century Ireland, offering us a detailed study of the structures of protestant society. In Sampson's case there was the excitement of learning how the society you were living in actually worked; Barnard offers a similar frisson, except here it is that much more elusive country that we inhabit as historians--the past. What he provides is a dissection of the whole of Irish Protestant society, arranged by class and employment, from the lord lieutenant down to the landless laborer. His ambition is simple and modest, but at the same time enormous, "to discover what it was like for Protestants to live in Ireland" (p. iv) or, as he puts it later, "to be more precise ... about the briefly dominant Protestant population of Ireland ... how they made an English Ireland work and how they worked to make money" (p. 330).

This clearly constitutes a major challenge. Anthony Sampson or William Petty (the real source of Barnard's title) at least lived in the societies they were anatomizing and had developed the insider's feel for how they worked. Barnard has first to overcome the deficiencies of the sources: both the general problem of early modern records with their inevitable bias towards the literate and the upper classes, and the particular defects of Irish sources--thanks to the bombardment of the Irish public record office in 1922. This he triumphantly does, by exploiting his long immersion in the Irish archives, his deep knowledge of Ireland in general and Munster in particular, and his particular gift for gaining access to manuscripts in private hands, enabling him to recover a remarkable depth of primary material. This task of discovery and accumulation by itself is an heroic achievement.

But his success as a researcher merely increases the scale of the second challenge--how to organize the mass of sources he has accumulated.

Obviously, as befits an anatomy, he eschews narrative history and instead resorts to a thematic approach, dissecting society from the top to the bottom, starting with the peerage and the "people of quality," going on to examine the clergy and the professions, office holders, soldiers and sailors, land agents and the middle station, concluding with an analysis of "the lower people." The result is undoubtedly a tour de force, offering a reconstruction in microcosm of the various elements of Irish Protestant government and people which gives the reader a real insight into how late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ireland actually functioned.

Barnard is not interested in modish theory. There is no anthropological analysis, there are no Weberian turns, no examination of the structural transformation of the public sphere. This is a resolutely pragmatic work, concerned with describing and counting, accumulating detail in order to illustrate *wie es eigentlich gewesen war*. Many of the pleasures of the book are almost incidental--Irish society had more than its fair share of wastrels, scoundrels, and eccentrics, and Barnard's pointillist approach gives us numerous examples. Equally, his grasp of the primary sources enable some of the hitherto hidden figures of Irish history to emerge from their previous obscurity, such as the wonderfully named servant, Cupid Gallop, or the Limerick agent, Nicholas Peacock. The portrait of the latter is a perfect example of the strengths of this book. Based upon a hitherto unused diary in the National Library of Ireland, Barnard offers us a portrait of the multifarious activities of this middleman and self-taught agricultural expert as he helped to run the estates of two prominent local families, showing how he interacted with central and local authority, accumulated news and gossip, related to Limerick society, served the Church of Ireland whilst preserving good relations with the local Catholic priest, developed his intellectual interests, bought and consumed, and catered for his growing family.

Behind the weight of sheer detail important themes do emerge--how society in Ireland was both the same as, and subtly different from, its counterpart in England; the lurking presence of the Catholic majority, ultimately untrustworthy in protestant eyes, but utterly indispensable if protestant society, households, and farms were to function; the processes of social enhancement and degradation; the relationship between different social strata. Perhaps the most important conclusion from Barnard's anatomy lesson is the "haziness of the frontiers in eighteenth-century society" (p. 254)--as repeatedly his detailed knowledge of individual cases and examples challenges and undermines crass generalizations and neat binary distinctions.

The strength of the book is also, though, its weakness. The gift for discovering sources and the relentless pursuit of detail provide us with a wonderful series of individual portraits and thematic analyses. But the inevitable abandonment of chronology comes at a cost. In particular, it makes it difficult to place the analysis of change in a meaningful context. Barnard is too good a historian not to be alert to the significant shifts in attitude in the hundred years after 1649, as Protestant allergy to Catholics was replaced by a cautious tolerance, as hostility to Irish barbarism softened into more reasoned reflections on Irish backwardness, as Irish placemen squeezed out English from profitable offices. But these insights are scattered almost randomly throughout the book and are not really summarized in the relatively short conclusion. The overall impression of the book, in other words, is syncretic and synthetic, usefully bringing together large amounts of material from various localities and periods under a particular head, but tending to smooth over difference and discontinuity. Given the Irish obsession with politics and violence, and the inevitable rigidities and biases which narrative and

chronological history imposes, Barnard's book can perhaps best be seen as a welcome antidote to earlier historiographical obsessions.

One final and, alas, all too frequent lament. From the academic's point of view it is a difficult book to read--endnotes rather than footnotes; and, the cause of repeated cursing from this reviewer, no bibliography. Given Barnard's wide reading and his extraordinary ability to dig out new manuscript sources, it is a matter of great regret that there is no simple way of assessing what he has consulted and where apart from plowing through the endnotes.

In the best Irish fashion, two final final points. First, this volume should not be judged alone. Such was the wealth of material, that Barnard has had to divide his anatomy into two. Its twin, *Making the Grand Figure*, deals with Protestant material culture and ideas.[1] And second, it is perhaps important to stress that this is indeed an anatomy--with all the faults and strengths of that form of dissection. For this reviewer, the strengths hugely outweigh the weaknesses. There is a reassuring physicality about this book, a sense of the recovery of life as it was lived, which blazes a new and welcome path in Irish history.

Note

[1]. *Making the Grand Figure: Lives and Possessions in Ireland, 1641-1770* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). See also his forthcoming *A Guide to the Sources for Irish Material Culture, 1500-1900* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005).