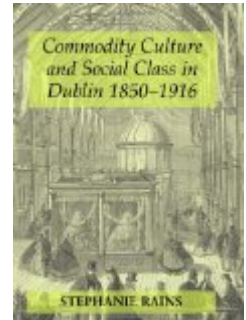


Stephanie Rains. *Commodity Culture and Social Class in Dublin 1850-1916*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010. 226 pp. \$74.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7165-3069-5.



Reviewed by Margaret Preston

Published on H-Albion (March, 2011)

Commissioned by Nicholas M. Wolf (New York University)

In the summer of 2010, David Dickson published an article in *Éire-Ireland* on the state of the historiography of Dublin. While Dickson was positive about the growing wealth of scholarship on Ireland's capital city, he nevertheless suggested that it has two clear weaknesses: first, Four Courts Press remains the dominant publisher of Dublin history and second, most scholars have focused on "Dublin's history in isolation and therefore ... suggest that its development was exceptional." [1] While Stephanie Rains's new volume *Commodity Culture and Social Class in Dublin 1850-1916* reflects some elements of the second of Dickson's criticisms, it is nevertheless an important addition to our understanding of the history of the city's middle-class population—a population that sought to control Dublin's evolving commercial culture in order to express their increasing social, political, and economic power.

Each of Rains's chapters (most divided into single decades) begins with an interesting discussion of the changes to the geography of Dublin's shopping landscape. The first chapter opens with

the mid-century development of the "monster" stores that were increasing in number throughout Dublin's city center. Those who supported their growth asserted that the development of large stores was the free market at work, while critics volleyed back that often such stores' goods were of poor quality and not Irish-made. Coloring these debates, suggests Rains, was both Britain's growing industrial complex, which was spreading into Ireland as part of its continuous push for new markets, and the government's role in the economy as related to the Famine. What Rains shows here is how, in relation to its commodities market, mid-century Ireland was already wrestling with its place in the union as well as a political authority that was strongly committed to the ideals of free trade. What we learn is that by the early twentieth century, Irish stores and what they sold (and its provenance) had a part to play in the national debate on Home Rule.

Subsequent chapters elaborate further on these themes. Each chapter, for example, provides an interesting discussion of Dublin's evolving in-

ner-city transportation system, showing how, by century's end, Dublin's electric tram system made it "one of the best public transport services in the world" (p. 129). Nevertheless, what Rains also shows is that the barons of Dublin's transport system were more interested in serving Dublin's growing middle class than making public transportation an affordable option for the city's workers, and, up until the last decades of the century, the tram system was almost exclusively moving Dublin's wealthier citizens. Importantly, we learn that such men as James Fitzgerald Lombard and his son-in-law, William Martin Murphy, who were powerful figures in Irish department stores, also came to control Dublin's transport network through their creation of Dublin United Tramways Company. The Tramways Company came to have a "near monopoly on the major routes in the city centre" and its lines, by 1885, were carrying over eighteen million passengers per year (p. 88). Here, Rains convincingly argues that, by the turn of the century, a very small coterie of people had come to control Dublin's commodities and transport scenes and were, as a result, important players in the city's politics.

Turning to the Irish Industrial Exhibition of 1853, Rains details how organizers sought to place Ireland among the world's exhibitors. It is through these events that Rains shows how the men who planned them wrestled with imitating other international exhibitions while at the same time creating something thought to be considered uniquely Irish. In addition, as the century wore on, these exhibitions became increasingly politicized, with unionists seeking to maintain a royal imprimatur while nationalists worked to remove it. As the popularity and profitability of such events diminished over time, they were replaced with large charitable bazaars. Here, Rains also shows how the middle-class women who volunteered at these events, while not invited to the planning table, could respectably have a public role at them. Yet the women who volunteered at a bazaar's various booths and eating establish-

ments were clearly "playing at" the jobs of their working-class sisters, while experiencing few of the actual hardships. Rains reveals that such volunteer opportunities offered middle-class women the chance to step out of their traditionally limited social role, "casting off many of the usual restrictions of social norms and conventions" (p. 163).

As we watch the middle classes gain social power as expressed through the purchase of and control over local commodities, Rains also offers a look at those who worked in the stores. As the shop clerk position shifts from male to female dominated, a gendered response on the part of middle-class clientele evolved. Thus, in the mid-century, the middle class characterized the male shop worker as an overly masculine, dangerous, Fenian fighter, while, by century's end, as females came to dominate the role, the male clerk's masculinity was so scrutinized that salesmen sought to be "almost excessively manly in their physical appearance" (p. 66). With regard to female clerks, the middle class was increasingly concerned that these young women were vulnerable to the whims of store owners as well as the enticements of the darker side of the big city. In addition, we learn that, like nineteenth-century nurses, until century's end department stores housed workers. While this remains an area open for further discussion, Rains offers a glimpse into how this allowed the stores to control workers' lives both on and off the job. Thus, for example, on-site housing limited an employee's ability to marry, as stores sought to house an unmarried workforce. So too conditions in which workers lived, while certainly Spartan, could be dangerous, as when in 1902 the Todd, Burns & Co. fire killed three female employees.

Throughout the century, sales clerks fought to improve working conditions, and while Rains shows that a "labour aristocracy" between large and small store sales clerks developed, this did not mean a lack of collaboration or sympathy be-

tween workers as together they pursued redress of grievances. Over time, workers sought to limit weekday hours worked and gain earlier closing on Saturday—a benefit that ironically had the greatest impact on the city’s working class whose only chance to shop was usually Saturday evening. However, not until they moved beyond the gentleman’s club model to the Irish Drapers Assistants’ Association, a proto-trade union, did they finally have a modicum of success.

Commodity Culture and Social Class in Dublin adds to our understanding of the role of Dublin’s middle classes and how they sought to express their increasing social power through control of the city’s commodities scene. However, as Dickson’s criticism identifies, Rains maintains her focus almost exclusively on Dublin. While Rains does state that this is her plan, we nevertheless learn of Dublin in near isolation as Rains offers only a cursory glimpse of how the commodity culture of other large metropolitan areas developed. Yet, ironically, Rains fails to utilize the more recently published sources on Ireland and on Dublin specifically. One of the more egregious examples of this may be seen in her discussion of how vulnerable young women from the country came to Dublin to work in the shops, but might also have been lured into prostitution. Arguing that there is very little evidence that the middle classes were concerned about the moral salvation of the shop girl, Rains cites Judith R. Walkowitz’s *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (1992). Yet Maria Luddy’s *Prostitution and Irish Society 1800-1940*, published in 2007, would have been the better choice for this discussion, and Luddy seems to contradict Rains’s argument that the middle classes failed to focus on the moral health of local shop girls. Additionally, in her introduction, Rains makes a sweeping generalization that little has been written on Ireland’s urban middle class and that this book will help fill the gap. While this book certainly does add to our understanding of Dublin’s middle class, absent from

Rains’s bibliography and endnotes are more recently published works that offer a discussion of the Irish urban middle classes (for example, Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh’s *Kathleen Lynn: Irishwoman, Patriot, Doctor* [2006], Oonagh Walsh’s *Anglican Women in Dublin: Philanthropy, Politics and Education in the Early Twentieth Century* [2005], Margaret Preston’s *Charitable Words: Women, Philanthropy and the Language of Charity in Nineteenth Century Dublin* [2004], Carmel Quinlan’s *Genteel Revolutionaries: Anna and Thomas Haslam and the Irish Women’s Movement* [2002], Maria Luddy’s *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century Ireland* [1995], and Maria Luddy and Mary Cullen’s *Women, Power and Consciousness in 19th Century Ireland* [1995]). Finally, and most surprising, while Rains rightly relies on Mary Daly’s timeless *Dublin, the Deposed Capital: A Social and Economic History 1860-1914* (1985), there is no suggestion that she ever utilized *Dublin Slums 1800-1925* (1983), the award-winning book by her Maynooth colleague Jacinta Prunty.

Rains’s *Commodity Culture and Social Class in Dublin* is a well-written and interesting read that is an important addition to our understanding of Dublin’s evolving middle-class population. It follows Dublin’s middle classes out to the city’s expanding suburbs and tracks how they expressed their desire for social power through commodities offered in Dublin stores, exhibitions, and bazaars. Rains reveals that, by the turn of the century, Dublin’s middle classes were wrestling with national identity and shows how one’s political position could be expressed through the power of the pocketbook. Finally, this book adds to our understanding of the increasing public place for both working- and middle-class women, as jobs for females in stores increased in number while their female patrons used shopping as another, albeit limited, opportunity for public expression of economic power.

Note

[1]. David Dickson, "The State of Dublin's History," *Eire-Ireland* 45, nos. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2010): 207.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Margaret Preston. Review of Stephanie Rains. *Commodity Culture and Social Class in Dublin 1850-1916*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. March, 2011.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31930>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.