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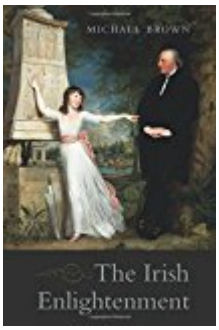

Michael Brown. *The Irish Enlightenment.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 640 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-04577-4.

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Only three years ago, Ian McBride asked, "Was there an Enlightenment in Ireland? Was there even a distinctively Irish Enlightenment?" regretting that "few scholars have bothered even to pose this question."[1] Having contemplated the question long before McBride's positing, one scholar had indeed been at work investigating the possibilities of just such a specifically Irish Enlightenment. A project of many years, Michael Brown's ***The Irish Enlightenment*** is undoubtedly an important and valuable publication, building on the work of others to demonstrate clearly, and irrefutably, that there was indeed an Irish Enlightenment, and that it was important.

The Irish Enlightenment is a wonderfully approachable work, providing a much-needed synthesis of existing work on Ireland, encompassing material on the country's social, cultural, political, and literary history, as well as engaging with those focused on Ireland's intellectual credentials. The monograph's structure is carefully considered, delineated, and achieved. Brown has divided his sifting of huge volumes of primary productions into religious, social, and political Enlightenments, but this is more to aid the reader than to exclude reflection of each subject elsewhere. Thus, we helpfully see how early forms of associational life, such as the Belfast Society, founded in 1705, might anticipate gatherings in the 1750s, or how clubs and societies of the mid-eighteenth century informed interactions in the more radicalized 1790s. Brown communicates a multitude of discourses, a variety of philosophical debates, and offers extensive quotations from pertinent literary sources to support his fundamental thesis that Ireland was a central player in producing Enlightenment thought.

In part 1, we learn how different religions engaged with Enlightenment methodologies to interpret their individual situations after the Williamite-Jacobite War. We receive an interesting analysis of the penal laws through an Enlightenment framework, after being offered different examples of writers seeking to legitimize Anglican rule in Ireland using Enlightenment methods, and receive a very useful overview of the split be-

tween subscribers and nonsubscribers regarding how best to obtain toleration. As Brown turns his attention to clubs and societies in part 2, he rightly recognizes that "not all voluntary associations were enlightened in purpose" (p. 262), but we are treated to an extensive display of forms of associational life and a useful synthesis of the work of those currently investigating it. Here, Brown offers helpful and lengthy quotations on elocution, explains how trends for politeness manifested themselves in dance halls and ballrooms, and offers an interesting analysis of Trinity College Dublin's role in Enlightenment thought and debate. The provincial public sphere is not excluded, with Cork's social life touched on, and a helpful description of the locations of coffeehouses across Ireland proffered.

One of the main elements held up for emphasis in part 2 is the ability of these various gatherings of people to overcome confessional antipathy, with the Social Enlightenment allowing mutual toleration and practical coexistence, impossible earlier in the century. However, Brown's central argument for the final third of his monograph is, in effect, that politics shaped intellectual life for the remainder of the eighteenth century. The final section begins with a useful inclusion of novels and plays alongside antiquarian debate, as Brown transmits Clare O'Halloran's studies of cultural politics in Ireland. His chapter on the volunteers, "Fracturing the Irish Enlightenment," is particularly engaging, although women's input in the patriotic movement is reduced to admiring Volunteer uniforms, rather than, say, promoting Irish manufacture (p. 354). Brown does not shy away from Irish-language material throughout the work, and Irish-language poems are here used to register a shift in opinions relative to the Volunteer movement. Taking an innovative view of the 1798 rebellion, Brown leaves aside such issues as population growth and demographics, to present the events of that year as an opposition between rationalists and empiricists, as the middle ground presented throughout part 2 has given way to violence and antipathy.

Keeping his reader in mind at all times, Brown reiterates central arguments when necessary, and assists our analysis of quotations, with phrases such as "notice here how" (p. 40). He brings forward familiar texts in an accessible way, carefully communicating with those who may be less familiar with some Irish source material. The arguments of Joseph Boyse and Francis Hutcheson are interrogated and well explained for those not conversant with their positions, for example, while events of the Williamite-Jacobite War are recounted for those who might need reminding. Brown narrates historical events in succinct fashion, and weaves summaries of imaginative prose and philosophical treatises seamlessly for an extensive audience, never presuming too much knowledge. One feels he can be a tad generous at times, such as when ***Gulliver's Travels*** is summarized at length (pp. 63-71), but in general the reader feels carefully guided through an impressive variety of primary material.

The source material for this work is indeed explicitly printed primary, with support from an extensive catalogue of secondary material. Brown openly acknowledges the absence of epistolary exchanges and manuscript writings, "of necessity, set aside" (p. 11), and certainly this is already a lengthy book. However, the exclusion of archival material, and correspondence in particular, has a larger impact on the monograph's engagement with both gender and network theory, and is perhaps one reason why so few women feature in the study. As Melanie Bigold has extensively argued, eighteenth-century women writers often chose to opt for manuscript circulation rather than print, for a variety of reasons.[2] They also committed much of their reflections on current debates, literary musings, and recordings of encounters with recognized Enlightenment figures to paper rather than to print, and Brown's exclusion of this source material unavoidably shapes his work's argu-

ments and conclusions. It also limits the consideration of Ireland within a wider sphere, as part of a larger pan-European Enlightenment. Cultural transfer and exchange are generally wanting in the work, as Ireland is considered in isolation, as a separate case study. This is of course extremely worthwhile in terms of highlighting the special case of the country, but many of those who participated in Enlightenment debate and discourse in Ireland imagined themselves as part of something larger. By excluding examples from a wider Republic of Letters, we are presented with an Irish Enlightenment divorced from contemporary trends and realities, and disengaged from larger debates. Although excluded "of necessity," the work consequently portrays the Irish Enlightenment as more insular and more male than it actually was.

The absence of archival material aside, this is an immensely welcome text. It confidently interacts with and presents a wealth of information, and affords a convincing overview of eighteenth-century Ireland--not an easy feat to achieve. It omits little from its engagement with printed material, and is remarkably accessible despite this range. All of us engaged in the teaching of Irish studies will welcome its publication, as will a generation of undergraduate and postgraduate students. One hopes it will no longer be possible to dismiss the incontrovertible reality of the existence of an important Irish Enlightenment.

Notes

[1]. Ian McBride, "The Edge of Enlightenment: Ireland and Scotland in the Eighteenth Century," *Modern Intellectual History* 10, no. 1 (2013): 135-151.

[2]. Melanie Bigold, *Women of Letters, Manuscript Circulation, and Print Afterlives in the Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

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