



Lindsey Earner-Byrne. *Letters of the Catholic Poor: Poverty in Independent Ireland, 1920-1940.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xii + 284 pp. \$99.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-107-17991-2.

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The Catholic Poor in Ireland

Priests and penury are perhaps *the* two most dominant tropes of Irishness in the twentieth century. “Poverty” is practically a recurring character in a considerable range of Irish novels and plays, from Sean O’Casey or Frank McCourt to Myles na gCopaleen’s lampooning *An Béal Bocht* (*The Poor Mouth* [1941]). Irish political leaders often romanticized their country’s poverty, as in Eamon de Valera’s (in)famous 1943 St. Patrick’s Day speech in which he spoke of Ireland as “the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit.”[1] And indeed in the decades after formal independence in 1922, poverty was endemic in what was a relatively poor country (at least by west European standards). Catholicism was similarly so prevalent within Irish national culture that it also bordered on being a tired cliché. Lindsey Earner-Byrne’s *Letters of the Catholic Poor: Poverty in Independent Ireland, 1920-1940* is a sophisticated probing of both categories, showing the social complexities and political tensions that hid behind these seemingly monolithic tropes.

The book is built around a considerable wealth of material drawn from a single archival

source at Dublin Diocesan Archives (one of the main Catholic archives in Ireland): hundreds of letters written by Catholic supplicants to their clergy, mainly in Dublin, seeking charitable aid in the two decades after Irish independence. Earner-Byrne presents this both chronologically and thematically, tracing the subtle shifts in tone in the letters, as well as the negotiations, threats, and self-representation in which the letter writers engaged from 1920 to 1940; there is a commendable grounding in comparative analyses, and the book’s engaged methodology draws on epistolary research from other (mainly European) national contexts.

While the elite, including that of the church, divided the poor into binary categories—“the ‘worthy and unworthy’, the ‘deserving and undeserving’, the ‘respectable and the incorrigibly idle’, the ‘shamefaced and the toucher’” (p. 29)—letter writers showed both an awareness of these categories as well as an ability to subtly critique them. And yet the poor, by engaging in and reiterating such language, still remained trapped “in the very semantic web that ensnared them” (p. 30). The poor also had to learn to negotiate the bureaucracies that managed them: “it is apparent from these letters that being poor required patience,

strategy, negotiation skills and knowledge of the various welfare and charitable options. One had to be prepared and able to fill in forms, dodge the gaps in the system, accommodate the ‘waiting periods’, ensure that charity was not counted against your relief entitlements and convince the charity people that you had received your due from the state” (p. 56). Those *déclassé bourgeois* who suddenly found themselves poor were at a certain disadvantage, “not versed in the ways of poverty, or accustomed to the contours of struggle, the wiles of begging, and the inconsistencies of charity” (p. 139). But tellingly, the archbishop of Dublin, Edward Byrne, gave far larger sums to such people, often enough to fund their children in private schools. Charity cases from the tenements were never treated to this largesse and the middle classes were always less suspect in the eyes of the church.

Across the class spectrum, letter writers, unsurprisingly, asserted their religiosity or discussed how they had “received inspiration from God or their religion to write and seek help” (p. 68). Yet proletarian writers could also drop subtle threats, the threat of converting to Protestantism being a regular one. A shocking number of writers also stressed their sheer nakedness, punctuating a poverty so extreme that it had left its victims literally stripped of clothing. This in turn appealed to certain moral codes about nudity and sex. Writers could also seek to shame a church that might refuse to aid them. There was a “religious bargain” here, based on a kind of social contract; the loyalty of the Catholic poor required a paternalistic hierarchy that would protect those poor masses (p. 112).

Identifying these intricate dynamics, Earner-Byrne rightly points out, allows for a fuller understanding of the nature of poverty and of the power disparities between rich and poor: “While it is essential to appreciate the limits of any agency the poor may have managed to extract, in examining the letters of the poor as places where power was

contested we can gain a much deeper understanding of the reality and limitations of that power” (p. 14). This archive, she also argues, gives a highly realistic image of the experience of poverty in the free state. “Individual letters provide particularly vivid personal stories, which still pulsate with emotional undercurrents, and taken together they represent a broader experience, shedding light on the status and meaning of poverty in twentieth-century Ireland” (p. 91).

Hanging in the back of this book, though, are a number of unanswered questions; first, why so much poverty? Earner-Byrne presents these letters in a kind of void. Events such as the Wall Street Crash and the Anglo-Irish Trade War of 1932-38, which exacerbated poverty, are not really incorporated into her discussions, though she does recognize how poverty was increasing across the 1920s. Thus, poverty is presented—perhaps accidentally—as a kind of universal phenomenon. Remaining tightly focused on the internal meanings of the letters allows for important questions about agency and text, but it also means we lose sight of the concrete political economy in which they were produced.

Second, what kind of state seemingly cedes all this power and social control to the church? Earner-Byrne herself identifies how the state wished to engage in “rigorous policing” of the poor, a task of particular urgency after the social strife of the War of Independence and civil war of the early 1920s (p. 29). Left unaddressed, though, is the question of why that same state effectively outsourced that set of tasks to the ostensibly private machinery of the Catholic Church. Earner-Byrne, like many Irish social historians, tends to see the church as the driving force for social legislation and social control after independence, thus uncritically accepting the clergy’s idea that “the State is subordinate to the Church.” She argues that “acceptance of inequality, yet simultaneous abhorrence of any sense of ‘class war’, was fundamental to the Roman Catholic Church’s approach

to the poor” (p. 50). Which is true, for sure, but that was also true of the Irish state, an entity that was equally comfortable with wealth inequality; that the church may have been giving its divine legitimacy to the soft-authoritarian project of a right-leaning Irish government is not considered. These are perhaps the gaps in Earner-Byrne’s analyses or perhaps they are just the gaps in broader Irish historiography that her work signposts. Nonetheless *Letters of the Catholic Poor* is an impress-

ive work, immersed in a careful and multifaceted approach and raising important questions about how Irish historians might better read their primary sources.

Note

[1]. Eamon De Valera, “On Language and the Irish Nation,” in *Speeches and Statements by Eamon De Valera: 1917–73*, ed. Maurice Moynihan (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1980), 466.

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