Economy and Civility in Early Modern Towns

Urban history in the British Isles is alive and well, as many recent books in the field, including the one under review, demonstrate. Early modern towns in Britain are receiving a good deal of attention from historians, and the changing economy, society, culture, and politics of towns and cities have been detailed in an increasing number of studies. Provincial Towns in Early Modern England and Ireland adds to that growing literature, providing a rare comparative perspective. The eleven essays in the volume stemmed from a symposium, jointly sponsored by the British Academy and the Royal Irish Academy in 1998, which examined aspects of provincial urban life in the early modern period. Contributions range from individual town studies to analyses of market development to broader considerations of urban culture; six of the essays focus exclusively on Ireland, three on England, and two cross national lines. While the contributions are somewhat uneven in scope and impact, together they provide a useful comparative framework for understanding urban life and culture on either side of the Irish Sea.

It might seem obvious that of the "convergence and divergence" identified in the volume’s subtitle, divergence would be the major theme. And indeed, these essays make clear the significant differences between Ireland and England in terms of urban development. Ireland was much less urbanized than England, even by the end of the early modern period, and very small Irish towns might be characterized as urban centers in a way that a similarly sized English town might not be. Thus Susan Hood, in her essay on villages and small towns in Ireland, can classify places with as few as 150 households as urban and displaying “formal planning intent” in the eighteenth century. In addition, significant numbers of Irish towns originated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a result of plantation or of landlord “improvement.” W. H. Crawford’s essay on the creation of small towns in Ulster explicitly analyzes this phenomenon, arguing that urbanization in Ulster was primarily advanced by entrepreneurial landlords after the government abandoned plans to develop a network or corporate towns across the region. Several of the other essays also analyze the impact of plantation and, especially, landlord impetus as major factors in Irish urban development. In both Kilkenny and Kells (town studies by John Bradley and Anngret Sims, respectively), sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century town elites were displaced almost completely by colonizing newcomers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This pattern poses a strong contrast with England, where nearly all towns had their origins long before the sixteenth century and where urban networks were often well-developed by the seventeenth century. English towns had long traditions of self-government, and, while landed neighbors were a fact of urban life, gentle and noble landlords generally did not dominate town development in England as they regularly did in Ireland. This difference in background and development was made manifest in the writing of town histories in England and Ireland in the eighteenth century, according to Rosemary Sweet’s essay on the subject. Most English towns of any size had a long-standing urban cul-

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Published on H-Albion (December, 2003)
ture and had produced at least one memorialization the town’s foundation and early significance. While some Irish towns could boast of a cultural life on par with England in the eighteenth century, very few had produced town histories. Those that were written tended to suggest a cultural life derivative of London and Dublin rather than emphasize local uniqueness.

While differences were clear, these essays also indicate some areas of similarity between the English and Irish contexts. For instance, Peter Borsay’s piece on the rebuilding of Warwick after its great fire of 1694 indicates just how much influence a noble landlord could have on the development of an English town. The fortunate survival of records from Warwick’s Fire Court, which directed the rebuilding efforts, allowed Borsay to reconstruct the ways townsmen responded to the fire, how the town was redeveloped to reinforce its role as a regional capital, and how the center of town was transformed from a vernacular architectural idiom to a classical one. It also shows the extent to which Lord Brooke, who owned property in town, took a leading role in crafting the “new” town. Borsay grants the exceptional circumstances that affected Warwick, noting that few English towns in the late-seventeenth century had as active a noble patron as Brooke. But his case study indicates that strict dichotomies between English and Irish experience should not be quickly drawn. A similar theme of commonality within a differing context is apparent throughout Toby Barnard’s essay, “The Cultures of Eighteenth-Century Irish Towns,” perhaps the most interesting contribution to the collection. Using a rich array of anecdotes and examples, Barnard explores the many functions of towns—as centers for political activity, recreation and leisure, marketing, and sociability, among other things. While travelers characterized some towns as “wretched” and “ill-built,” others were described as “pretty” and “neat” (p. 196). Even quite minor towns aspired to urban sophistication, providing inhabitants and visitors with a variety of goods and services as well as such marks of genteel and polite society as musical evenings and dancing rooms. Playing on themes that have been increasingly important in English urban history, Barnard traces matters such as civic ceremony and urban sociability in the Irish context. While civic pride and unity can be found in Irish cities, antagonisms based on sharp religious division as well as political and social tensions are apparent. Barnard notes the importance of landlord influence on Irish urban culture, but also cautions that this influence was perhaps not completely dominant. Tenants also played an important role, a theme sounded by several other contributors, as well.

As they spin out the variety of threads—built environment, economy, social order, culture—that composed the urban fabric, the contributors to this volume make clear that early modern provincial towns in both Ireland and England were vibrant places. While some certainly faltered under the changing economic scene across the period, most held their own and played an important role in both market development and increased “civility”. Alan Dyer’s essay on small towns in England goes so far as to argue that these towns retained their social and economic significance, labeling the period 1660-1800 as the “highest point of [their] development” (p. 54). The volume offers a number of useful perspectives on urban life, though it does not provide a real synthesis of the subject. Aside from the editors’ able introductory essay, only one contribution is directly comparative in its approach. Themes of change, convergence, and divergence are discussed, but it is difficult to say which predominated. As noted above, the essays vary in interest, and some fit less firmly within the topic than others. Does an essay on villages and small towns in rural Ireland that focuses significantly on the nineteenth century really belong here? Nevertheless the book provides much food for thought, and the comparative framework has much to commend it. Scholarly readers will find it a useful addition to the growing literature of the early modern town.

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