

Review article: Problems and prospects: reflecting on Irish local history*

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The publication of the latest volumes in the *Maynooth Studies in Local History* provides an opportunity to reflect on the state of local history in Ireland. Superficially, it should not be too difficult to support the argument

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* THE EASTER RISING OF 1916 IN NORTH CO. DUBLIN: A SKERRIES PERSPECTIVE. By Peter F. Whearity. Pp 68. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013. €9.95.

THE SOUTH CIRCULAR ROAD, DUBLIN, ON THE EVE OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR. By Catherine Scuffil. Pp 64. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013. €9.95.

BORRIS HOUSE, CO. CARLOW, AND ELITE REGENCY PATRONAGE. Pp 68. By Edmund Joyce. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013. €9.95.

PORTMARNOCK AND THE PLUNKETTS, 1850–1918: THE PORTMARNOCK BRICK AND TERRACOTTA WORKS. Pp 64. By Alan Costello. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013. €9.95.

WOMEN, ARCHITECTURE AND BUILDING IN THE EAST OF IRELAND, c.1790–1840. By Ruth Thorpe. Pp 68. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013. €9.95.

DERRY LABOUR IN THE AGE OF AGITATION, 1889–1923, 1: NEW UNIONISM AND OLD, 1889–1906. By Emmet O'Connor. Pp 64. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014. €9.95.

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MEDIAEVAL FORE, COUNTY WESTMEATH. By Rory Masterson. Pp 74. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014. €9.95.

STRUGGLE AND STRIFE ON A MAYO ESTATE, 1833–1903: THE NOLANS OF LOGBOY AND THEIR TENANTS. By Michael Kelly. Pp 64. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014. €9.95.

NENAGH, 1914–21. By Gerard Dooley. Pp 76. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015. €9.95.

THE REVEREND THOMAS GOFF, 1772–1844: PROPERTY, PROPINQUITY AND PROTESTANTISM. By David Doyle. Pp 72. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015. €9.95.

GOWRAN, CO. KILKENNY, 1190–1610: CUSTOM AND CONFLICT IN A BARONIAL TOWN. By Adrian Empey. Pp 66. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015. €9.95.

EAST GALWAY AGRARIAN AGITATION AND THE BURNING OF BALLYDUGAN HOUSE, 1922. By Ann O'Riordan. Pp 70. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015. €9.95.

THE MIDDLE CLASS OF CALLAN, CO. KILKENNY, 1825–45. By Pierce Grace. Pp 60. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015. €9.95.

MARCELLA GERRARD'S GALWAY ESTATE, 1820–70. By Tom Crehan. Pp 64. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015. €9.95.

THE MEDICAL PROFESSION AND THE EXERCISE OF POWER IN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY CORK. By Neil Cronin. Pp 74. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015. €9.95.

CRIME IN THE CITY: KILKENNY IN 1845. By Fergal Donoghue. Pp 62. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015. €9.95.

that this sub-discipline has never been more popular. The stories and circumstances of towns and villages, communities and individuals, local history now permeates our everyday culture like never before. Bookshelves sag under the weight of the ever-growing number of publications dedicated to particular people and small places. Explanations such as increasing leisure time and wider educational attainment are now considered rather old-fashioned as to why local history has drifted out of the hands of its nineteenth-century scholarly and clerical producers. More important, in many respects, is the ‘digital turn’ in history. In the last twenty years, we have witnessed a revolution in the availability of primary sources. The use of electronic search tools on digitised sources, notably local newspapers, allows the accumulation in minutes of material that once might have taken weeks, months or even years to gather. If research is more accessible so are avenues of dissemination. The rise of social media, blogs, websites and ‘crowd-sourcing’ affords countless opportunities for anybody, from anywhere, to tell, record, curate, publish or display any aspect of their personal or local past. The marking of anniversaries and commemorations has become increasingly modish and popular with both the government and the general public. This fashion combined with a market-driven tourism and heritage sector, has fuelled a seemingly voracious public interest in the personal, the specific, the distinctive – in fact, the local – dimensions to great national events. In 2016, while the most lavish national spectacle to mark the Easter Rising was in Dublin, there were dozens of smaller commemorations on a more local and intimate level. The centenary of the First World War has followed a similar pattern of the large and national to the small and local.

It is undoubtedly the case that user engagement projects are exciting developments. Popular collecting, oral history recordings and other history from below initiatives help to subvert the tendency of current archival holdings to favour elite or institutional voices. There is, however, a downside to all of this public attention. The identity of local history – as a particular discipline with a distinct set of methodologies and approaches – has cracked, fragmenting into many parts. Local history is in danger of becoming, especially in the contemporary media, simply a useful catchword for anything to do with the olden times of a particular place. Newspapers, in particular, see local history as a popular pastime, something that local characters (with their lifetimes spent collecting quaint ephemera) or community groups (with their ‘Save Our Local...’ campaigns) pursue. But now there are so many new players in the local history marketplace, even this definition is starting to come under strain. Amongst others, archives, keen to promote user engagement agendas, and governments, anxious to appear inclusive in their leadership of sensitive political commemorations, have encouraged audiences to become active participants in their events, by bringing personal photographs and letters, by writing a reflection or recording a personal reminiscence. The availability of war diaries, military personnel records and census records online have revolutionised the ability of individuals to trace and track their ancestors’ involvements in great and not so great historical events. While these are innovative and creative initiatives, which will leave historians of the future with an unprecedented archive of personal testimony, they have turned local history in a decidedly individual and inward direction. It is of little surprise that the historical television strand that has captured the public’s imagination is the ancestor hunting *Who do you think you are?* Therefore, while the

minutiae of historical experience is now being recorded on a scale that most historians could never have imagined even twenty years ago, the problem is that local history is no longer about places, or even 'people in places', to quote Raymond Gillespie.¹ It is now, to coin a phrase 'all about me'.

That being said, these new individual directions for local history do not necessarily have to be all bad for the discipline, particularly as they have generated popular participation. But these trends have emerged at a time when so many of the pillars of traditional local history practice on this island have fallen on hard times. Both the Federation of Local History Societies (F.L.H.S.) and the Federation of Ulster Local Studies (F.U.L.S.), representing groups in the Republic, and across the province of Ulster respectively, have struggled to maintain a visible presence. They are reliant on the efforts of dedicated volunteers to keep going in the absence of significant funding at local or state level. Similarly, the Border Counties History Collective, a group of roughly twenty local history societies in the Cavan, Leitrim and Fermanagh area, which looked a promising development in the early 2000s, appears to be moribund with a website long out of date. Archives and libraries, the seams from which so much local history is produced, have been subject to closures, amalgamations and restricted opening hours in the economic retrenchment following the economic crisis of 2008, as they are seen as soft targets. The initiative of P.R.O.N.I. to establish an 'outreach centre' in Blacklion, Co. Cavan, which extended to other sites in the north and west, was a notable victim of the spending cuts. Even Irish universities, never great advocates of local history, have had to retrench. Notably, the B.A. in Local Studies / B.A. Community Studies offered at Maynooth University's flagship outreach campus in Kilkenny is not recruiting new cohorts (though it still runs on the Kildare campus). Now, apart from this, only the University of Limerick, in a joint provision with Mary Immaculate College, University College Cork and The Open University, with their part-time, evening or distance MAs, offer third-level qualifications in local history in Ireland. The scholarly foundations of Irish local history have taken a considerable beating since austerity came to town.

Famine has followed feast in the past for this Cinderella of historical fields. In Ireland, local history has been the beneficiary and then, inevitably, victim of passing political fads and fancies. In times of relative plenty, state money has flowed by a variety of means into such groups. On the other hand, it is usually the first of the low hanging fruit to lose its funding in times of austerity. Since the 1970s and 1980s, it has been frequently a focus for economic regeneration projects, which raised its profile enormously and allowed considerable amounts of state and European funding to find its way down to the grassroots. State training organisations, such as FÁS (in the Republic) and ACE (in Northern Ireland) aimed to get the long-term unemployed back into work using heritage and local history initiatives. In Cork, for instance, the regeneration of the old powdermills in Ballincollig in the 1990s is a good example of state agencies and heritage and local history groups working together on a project that had socio-economic (retraining, tourism) as well as historical aims. In more recent times, the tourism industry and local

¹ Raymond Gillespie, 'An historian and the locality' in Raymond Gillespie and Myrtle Hill (eds), *Doing Irish local history: pursuit and practice* (Belfast, 1999), p. 16.

government arts and culture agendas have driven the production of walking tours, historical signage, publications and exhibitions in an attempt to monetise local history and heritage, something that is notoriously difficult to succeed with. For every shining grandiose heritage Mecca, such as the Titanic exhibition and the Guinness Hopstore, there are dozens of smaller exhibitions and museums that live a hand-to-mouth existence. It is easy to be cynical about the efforts of politicians to generate economic returns from local history and heritage. Too many initiatives wither away once the funding has run out. Policymakers and politicians are always quick to move on to embrace the next shiny idea to appear over the horizon.

In the 1990s, particularly in Northern Ireland, local history projects had a political agenda. They, on occasion, provided the means around which a range of cross-community and reconciliation initiatives could coalesce. In 1989 the Department of Education explicitly linked local history to peace and reconciliation. That year it introduced the oft-criticised Education for Mutual Understanding (E.M.U.) and Cultural Heritage (C.H.) strands to the Northern Ireland school curriculum. This encouraged teachers to use local history as the basis for cross-community contact schemes. With similar ideas in mind, the Community Relations Council funded an office and two full-time positions with the Federation of Ulster Local Studies, in an age when money was freely flowing to such grassroots bodies. F.U.L.S., however, lost their funding in 2005–7. E.M.U. and C.H., moreover, are now shadows of their former selves. They barely survive in the current curriculum as ‘Personal Development and Mutual Understanding’ and the amorphous ‘World Around Us’.

Government money and academic interest have proven to be fickle friends but that being said, the local history ‘community’ has not always been its best advocate. At its worst, it has been a victim of its own parochialism, of its preferring of the local at the expense of the bigger picture. After twenty-five years of giving talks to local history societies, I am under no illusions about where the real expertise lies and who knows what really happened. In 2001, N.U.I., Maynooth and the Centre for Cross-Border Studies published the only scholarly investigation into the contemporary practice of local history on the island of Ireland. In their report, Jacinta Prunty, Raymond Gillespie and Maeve Mulryan-Moloney pointed out the poor level of communication that existed between local history groups, the federations, libraries and archives and universities. They discovered there were many local history groups across the country who had little awareness of others working in the same way, or of the institutions that could support them.²

It would be unfair to be overly critical of this insularity. Working with others, accessing distant resources and setting up partnerships is difficult. Knowledge exchange, while so often touted within government and higher education, is practically hard, especially for organisations and individuals with scarce and limited resources. The impact agenda of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) has contradictory effects. University bureaucracies, consequently, make bold claims surrounding their ‘impact’ and ‘engagement’ agendas. In theory these would appear to provide a major spur for academics

² Jacinta Prunty, Raymond Gillespie and Maeve Mulryan-Moloney, *The local history project: co-operating north and south* (Armagh 2001). Available at: <http://www.crossborder.ie/research/localhisthome.php> (accessed 5 Sept. 2016).

to get more involved with local history, with its obvious potential for economic impact. But the same university bureaucracies also have a tendency to work to constrain academics and make it hard for them to work outside approved (aka funded) channels. The pressures of the REF in the U.K. and the fashion for funding around named and time-limited projects makes it difficult to initiate and sustain long-standing relationships with local history interests.

What Irish local history needs now, is not more of this public and outward-facing activity, no matter how valuable and inclusive it may be, but more and better research. Good historical research is the bedrock upon which good local history is based. It is, furthermore, essential for the continued promotion and publication of well-researched and critical studies of Ireland's diverse localities. There is good work out there and applicable models are available. There is, strictly speaking, no direct Irish equivalent of the Institute of Historical Research's on-going Victoria History of the Counties of England (V.C.H.) which considering its travails is not necessarily a bad thing. It has now reached 230 volumes, after over a hundred years of effort. But William Smyth's excellent *History and society* series, going since 1985 and now with twenty-four counties covered, is to an extent a scaled down Irish replica. A venerable advocate for county and local history, crucially, the series acknowledges the importance of marrying academic perspectives with those of locally-based experts. Furthermore, a quick trawl of the scholarly reviews' pages reveals considerable recent work on Dublin and Belfast. Scholarly interest in Belfast was spurred on by its recent celebration of it becoming a city. There are also several useful edited editions of primary source material, e.g. the register of the Limerick House of Industry and minutes of the Antrim presbytery. Andrew Sneddon's account of the Islandmagee witch trials is a focused scholarly local history. That being said, a local history along the lines of Barry Reay's meticulous reconstruction of the Blean, in nineteenth and early twentieth-century Kent, is decidedly absent from the Irish history canon.³

Alongside this research should sit the longstanding Maynooth Studies in Local History series, ongoing since 1995. The series, which is edited by Raymond Gillespie, now has 127 volumes to its credit. Overall, it is an impressive collection of scholarly research and has promoted a particular vision of local history practice. In the editor's preface to the first volume (Paul Connell's *Parson, priest and master: national education in Co. Meath, 1824–41*), Gillespie highlighted the series' two key objectives. Firstly, local history, as published here, was not to be so much about 'particular places' as about 'the experience of different groups of people or individuals in the past', an idea which has been a cornerstone of the new English local history, as practised by the likes of David Dymond and Kate Tiller. Secondly, Gillespie also highlighted the potential that these local studies had to subvert and challenge the broad generalisations upon which much of political, and national, history are based. Successive years have softened certain aspects of this stance, but in his introduction to the volumes published in 2015 Gillespie remains passionate about the potential these detailed studies have to reveal 'how and why particular regions had their own personality in the past' and calls it 'one of the most exciting challenges for the future'.

³ Barry Reay, *Microhistories: demography, society and culture in rural England, 1800–1930* (Cambridge, 1996).

The focus of this review is on seventeen volumes published between 2013 and 2015. Although the distinctive Bembo font remains unchanged, there are some notable developments. The cover design has been attractively modernised, and each volume now includes a brief bio and photograph of its author on the reverse. The contributors are now a mixture. Many are students who have recently completed master's degrees but they are not now exclusively drawn from Maynooth's own programmes. Students from the M.A. programmes at Kilkenny, Cork and Limerick are now included. There are also established scholars, such as Emmet O'Connor, who provides a detailed account of Derry labour organisation and agitation at the turn of the twentieth century. This has broadened the geographical spread of the volumes on offer. Of the sixteen books, five focus on topics in the Kilkenny–Tipperary region, four on Dublin and the eastern seaboard, three relate to Galway and Mayo, two to the midland counties of Roscommon and Westmeath and one to Cork and Derry, respectively. Traditional approaches to local history, such as the classic urban or townland study, now sit side-by-side with newly emerging interests in architecture, medicine, crime and the local ramifications of national politics, such as the land war, the 1916 Rising and the Irish Civil War. While these volumes are not without their weaknesses – some of them lack a sustained critical edge, others get bogged down in excessive detail – they are all, in their own ways, impressive feats of original research. Methodologically diverse, meticulously connected to the existing scholarship, ruthless in their assessment of bias and value and each based on exhaustive research in the archives, these volumes represent the highest standards of scholarly research. They are, more often than not, models of good practice, which any aspiring historian ought to follow.

What is most impressive about these volumes, and the writers who produced them, is the challenge that they present to our practice as historians and to our understanding of key aspects of Ireland's past. For example, Edmund Joyce's study of the MacMurrough Kavanagh family and their renovation and furnishing of Borris House in Co. Carlow presents considerable new evidence for their motives and tastes and repeatedly corrects the sloppy scholarship of *Country Life* and other 'big house' publications. Joyce's research, based on solid archival research at Borris House and using considerable detective work, has uncovered the forgotten role of Walter Kavanagh. In so doing it has become the definitive account of Borris House and a practical example of the aspirations of eighteenth-century gentry families to secure their social position through architecture and patronage.

Several of the other volumes have focused on the architectural and design side of local history. Alan Costello's account of the Plunkett family and their management of the Portmarnock Brick and Terracotta Works while focusing on broader issues of the business's management, includes several pages on late nineteenth-century brick design and the Portmarnock Works' efforts to produce fashionable building materials. Ruth Thorpe's study, *Women, architecture and building in the east of Ireland, c.1790–1840*, also brings a distinctive design focus to her work on the architectural sketches and design books of three elite women in the east of Ireland in the early-nineteenth century. She shows how the architectural pattern book published by Lady Helena Domville in 1841, reflected the current fashion for 'cottage ornée' and influenced the design character of her estate village of Santry. Thorpe's focus on women – the only one in the collection to explicitly do so – also

demonstrates the way in which local history can redress the gender imbalance of broader studies of traditional male professions.

One surprising theme that emerges from these accounts is their reassessment of our traditional understanding of Protestant–Catholic and landlord–tenant relations. Neil Cronin’s fascinating account, *The medical profession and the exercise of power in early nineteenth-century Cork*, details a medical controversy between two doctors in 1820s Cork and reveals the complexities behind an ostensibly sectarian incident. Catholic surgeon William Bullen’s claim that John Woodroffe, a Protestant colleague, had committed medical malpractice in his operations on children for bladder stones is carefully contextualised. Using his own expertise as a medical doctor, Cronin concludes that Bullen’s claims were professionally unfounded, but reflected his frustration at Catholic exclusion from positions of status within Cork local government. David Doyle’s examination of the Revd Thomas Goff, a Church of Ireland minister and landowner who kept extensive diaries, *The Reverend Thomas Goff, 1772–1844: property, propinquity and Protestantism*, places this difficult and unsympathetic character into his proper context. Although his views locate him within an ultra-Protestant, Tory camp, Doyle is at pains to demonstrate how his religion, property and political outlook were wrapped up in the concept of ‘propinquity’, the success of Goff’s family and their wider circle to protect their mutual interests through the ‘vital’ maintenance of networks and connections.

Michael Kelly, *Struggle and strife on a Mayo estate, 1833–1903: the Nolans of Logboy and their tenants*, Tom Crehan, *Marcella Gerrard’s Galway estate, 1820–70* and Ann O’Riordan, *East Galway agrarian agitation and the burning of Ballydugan house, 1922*, each illustrate the complexities behind land conflict in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland. Crehan shows that the notorious Ballinlass evictions of 1846 and the controversy which erupted around them was driven, not by sectarian motives, but by the new landlord’s more active and modern approach to farming. Kelly makes the point that during the land war, even small-scale Catholic landlords, like the Nolans at Logboy, Co. Mayo, were vulnerable to tenant unrest. The ultimate aim of the land agitation at this time was ‘the abolition of landlordism, whatever its religious hue’. O’Riordan’s study, however, demonstrates how the determination of the Burkes to resist intimidation and to maintain their estate at Ballydugan in the 1920s contributed to ongoing resentment within the local community. All of the studies will at some stage be useful material for those who seek to draw wider island-wide interpretations.

In the accounts by Peter Whearity, *The Easter Rising of 1916 in north County Dublin: a Skerries perspective*, and Gerard Dooley, *Nenagh, 1914–21: years of crisis*, the local study demonstrates its potential to revise our understanding of national events. Whearity’s analysis of the fighting that took place in north Dublin, and the innovative ‘mobile’ tactics of Skerries’ Volunteer leader, Thomas Ashe, demonstrates that the battle of Ashbourne was more than just a marginal or subsidiary engagement. Dooley’s reconstruction of the demographic contours of Nenagh’s Volunteers shows the danger of conclusions based on the national picture. Unlike other studies, such as those by Hart and Fitzpatrick, Dooley found it was rural farmers in their thirties who made up the recruits to the Irish Volunteers, and who, when war was declared in 1914, abandoned the organisation in droves to join the British Army. Catherine Scuffil, on the other hand, focuses more on the demographics and

the socio-economic aspects of Dublin's South Circular road on the eve of the First World War in a study that makes full use of the 1911 census. It is a good example of the use that can be made of the revolution that has taken place in the availability of digital sources.

With hindsight it is possible to see that the 2001 report into Irish local history, *The local history project*, was published when local history practice was at its height. Its recommendations – a national register for local history societies, the production of a set of publishing standards for local history publications – now, more than fifteen years later, seems as far away as ever. Charting a realistic pathway towards a sustainable future seems an impossible task. Yet, the popular interest in local places and spaces continues unabated. Maybe, as historians and educators, as funders and policymakers, we might think to treat local history a little better the next time around. Commitments to high-quality digitisation projects and sustained support for archives and repositories are to be welcomed. But our greatest rewards, and the silent thanks of posterity, will come when we invest now to educate and train, support and direct a new generation of local historians. The research and scholarship presented by the budding historians considered here, and the survival of the M.S.L.H. series at all, is proof that such a commitment can deliver lasting and game-changing results.