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The Ulster Earls and Baroque Europe

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REFERENCES

Thomas O'Connor and Mary Ann Lyons (eds.), *The Ulster Earls and Baroque Europe. Refashioning Irish Identities, 1600-1800*, Dublin, Four Courts Press in association with The Pontifical Irish College, Rome, 2010, xv + 404 p., ISBN 978-1-84682-185-1

- 1 Recent years have seen an increasing trend in Irish historical studies, away from the strictly national context to a wider European frame. In particular, the “Irish in Europe project”, led by Thomas O'Connor (NUI Maynooth) and Mary Ann Lyons (Saint Patrick's College, Drumcondra), has resulted in an important exhibition (*Strangers to Citizens: the Irish in Europe, 1600-1800*) in Dublin, the compilation of databases of Irish soldiers and students in Europe, as well as conferences and publications exploring the experiences of Irish migrants in the early modern period. The fourth volume of the Four Courts Press “Irish in Europe” series follows a conference organized in the Irish Pontifical College in Rome on the occasion of the tercentenary of the Flight of the Ulster Earls in 1607. It contains a selection of the papers given then, as well as additional material. The focus is naturally upon Rome and Spain, with insights into Louvain, Prague, Germany and Scandinavia.
- 2 The title of the volume is somewhat misleading, as the book offers relatively limited attention to the earls themselves or to the practical organisation of the Irish exiles on the continent after 1607. “Baroque Europe” is used more to define a period than a specific politically coherent entity. The subtitle “Refashioning Irish Identities” is more relevant to the contents of the book. The plural is necessary here because of the heterogeneity of people (clergymen, students, merchants, soldiers, travellers), and the motives and outcomes (not all were permanently exiled) of Irish experiences in Europe.

- 3 One dominant argument of the book is to show how religion often came to dominate ethnicity in defining Irishness. The early seventeenth century context of the confessionalization of Europe, combined with the need for patronage, led the Irish earls and their followers to self-fashion themselves as Catholic champions in the hope of obtaining help from Rome and Spain. This was to no political avail since none of the Catholic powers wanted to undermine the newly found peace with England. Instead Ireland became a tool in the Counter-Reformation movement, while local political interests were brushed aside. Baroque imagination embraced the pragmatically fashioned Catholic identity of the Irish, often to the detriment of its ethnic dimension. This in turn forced the Irish émigrés to refashion their identity by weaving Irish history into classical or mythical traditions and stressing the importance of saints, language and poetry.
- 4 The book also explores the tension between self-perceived and ascribed identities. The presence of several articles about the Scottish presence in Europe is revealing of the importance of denomination in fashioning identities. For instance, competition for patronage and influence in Rome implied strong rivalry between Irish and Scottish communities, both claiming as their own the saints of the old 'Scotia', with diverging understandings of the term. Similar blurring between self-perceived and ascribed identities is to be found with Catholic Highlanders or Irish-born mercenaries of Scottish Protestant settler descent, all referred to as 'Irish' but claiming very different Irish identities, if any. The capacity and willingness of Irish émigrés, in particular soldiers, to retain any Irish identity are tackled in several chapters.
- 5 Ciaran Brady, in the concluding chapter of the book, notes that the 'flight of the earls' is an ambiguous "commemorative model", "an abstract conception whose very amorphousness has enabled it to absorb and sustain different and frequently conflicting interpretative meanings over time" (367). The material gathered here shows that the same can be said of the idea of Irishness in Baroque Europe, with the Irish themselves taking active part in redefining the term.