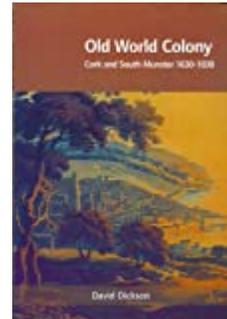




David Dickson. *Old World Colony: Cork and South Munster, 1630-1830.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005. xvii + 726 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-21180-6.



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Religion, Land and Rivalry

This groundbreaking study by one of Ireland's foremost social and economic historians, focuses on one of Ireland's wealthiest regions in the early modern period, South Munster, and traces its fortunes over two hundred years.[1] The region's strengths were its agricultural resources and its prime Atlantic location; the rise of the city of Cork from insignificance to international importance was both critical in the exploitation of this wealth and symbolic of a new commercial order. Cork's wholesale hinterland embraced much of counties Kerry, Waterford and Cork itself, as well as the southern-third of Tipperary and Limerick, and the study examines the whole of this region.

Colonization and commerce transformed the region, but growth came at a price. Many of the problems of pre-Famine Ireland—gross income inequality and land scarcity—were obvious in South Munster. This study highlights the more familiar landmarks of the nineteenth century—agrarian conflict, structural poverty, and the collapse of food supply—in a new and more complex landscape.

At the outset, Dickson emphasizes the wide scope of

this work, and the length of its genesis—it is in fact over thirty years in gestation.[2] The research for this book was done in “two great pulses, separated by some twenty years,” and we are all the richer for it. It is organized into three parts. In the first section, two chapters trace the totality of seventeenth-century developments (before and after the momentous year of 1641 respectively). Subsequent chapters in section 1 are thematic and focus on social and economic change between the mid-seventeenth century and the 1760s. They also examine land ownership and the world of the gentry in the wake of the great seventeenth-century revolution in land ownership (chapter 3); the timing and character of commercial change in town, countryside and on the high seas (chapters 4 and 5); and the rural estate system and the working out of agricultural change (chapters 6 and 7). The second section reflects on the surface tranquility of south Munster before the late eighteenth century, set against evidence of profound underlying tensions. The third section examines thematic developments between 1770 and 1830: the more rapid transformation of agriculture and demography (chapter 8); the changing power relationships in rural society (chapter 9); trade and manufacturing (chap-

ter 10); and urbanization and infrastructure (chapter 11). The concluding chapters return to a political and cultural narrative, and trace the origins of the crisis of the 1790s (chapter 12), and the bitter post-Union period culminating in the denouement of 1829 (chapter 13).

In *Old World Colony*, Dickson traces how rural society and farming evolved, and surveys the world of landowners and of the marginalized, of wealthy merchants and the teeming masses in the city of Cork. He seeks to integrate what is usually separated—social, economic and political history—in a fresh and unfamiliar panorama of material and public life, across the heartlands of “the Hidden Ireland,” from the era of civil war and expropriation in the seventeenth century to the era of Catholic emancipation in the 1820s. In terms of layout, readability and contemporary illustrative material, the book is a masterpiece. It is beautifully presented and organized, and there are many evocative chapter sub-headings that engage imaginatively with the task at hand. However, it is in the 110 illustrations, 8 maps and 20 informative tables that Dickson makes such a novel contribution, particularly in terms of the illustrative materials he has brought together in an enviable corpus of work—mainly comprising prints, engravings and paintings from public and private collections, and depictions from estate maps. No less impressive, are his hugely detailed 140 pages of notes and references, his 21 pages of appendices and his 40-page bibliography: these three features combine to show the huge depth of Dickson’s scholarship, his ease with the sources and his painstaking work in forty archives, besides numerous field excursions and trips to collections held in private hands. His knowledge and use of contemporary printed sources, newspapers, manuals and periodicals, as

well as his use of all manner of secondary sources, serves also to emphasize the wide range of his reading and assimilation of the literature. My only gripe centers on a personal preference for footnotes—particularly useful in the historical sciences, but sadly not espoused by University of Wisconsin Press or its European counterpart, Cork University Press. It is so frustrating to have to go to the back of the book to seek further elaboration on a source. On the other hand, the publishers are to be commended on the quality of their product, and particularly on the successful integration of contemporary illustrations and maps into the text.

Dickson set out in this book to reconstruct the framework of a pre-modern regional society in a way never before attempted for Ireland, and to demonstrate how that society worked. He has certainly achieved this in an in-depth, stylistic manner, that is clearly organized, and both easy and enjoyable to read. His findings are of national significance and will also be of comparative interest to students of pre-industrial European and colonial American history.

Notes

[1]. David Dickson is Associate Professor of Modern History in Trinity College, University of Dublin. He is author of *Arctic Ireland* (1997) and *New Foundations: Ireland 1660-1800* (2nd ed., 2000); he has recently co-edited *Refiguring Ireland: Essays in Honour of L. M. Cullen* (2003) and *1798: A Bicentenary Perspective* (2003).

[2]. His doctoral thesis, entitled “An Economic History of the Cork Region in the Eighteenth Century” (Ph.D. diss, University of Dublin, 1977), forms the basis for this book and his life interest in the subject area.

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