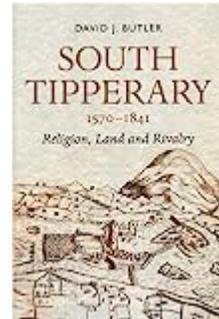




David J. Butler. *South Tipperary 1570-1851: Religion, Land and Rivalry.* Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006. 336 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85182-891-3.



Reviewed by S. J. Connolly (School of History and Anthropology, Queen's University, Belfast)

Published on H-Albion (March, 2007)

Historians and Geographers

Modern Irish history owes a great deal to geographers. The work of J. H. Andrews on early modern maps and map makers, of W. J. Smyth on landholding, and of T. Jones Hughes on nineteenth-century settlement patterns have all cast important light on the dramatic reshaping over time, not just of Ireland's landscape, but of its social structure and political organization.[1] David Butler's study of South Tipperary between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries is a work in the same tradition. Taking as his starting point a Gramscian notion of hegemony as "a ceaseless endeavour to maintain control over the hearts and minds of subordinate classes" (pp. 267-268), he sets out to show how the contest between a dominant Protestant minority and a dispossessed Catholic majority found expression in the human-made landscape: the houses and demesnes of the landed classes; the rival networks of churches, Catholic and Protestant; and the military and police barracks erected in response to recurrent violent resistance.

Genuinely multidisciplinary research is demanding, and those who undertake it deserve respect. To provide the raw material for his spatial and cartographical

analysis, Butler has processed an impressive volume of historical data, including official records, estate papers, parish registers, diaries, and private letters. His survey brings out continuities and discontinuities in the distribution across his chosen region of the New English population. He establishes with a new precision the origins of what became the dominant Protestant landowning class, pointing to the high proportion whose wealth was based, not on grants of confiscated Catholic land, but on subsequent purchases financed by the profits of commerce. He is particularly strong on the organization of the established church, demonstrating how the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, often written off as a period of religious torpor, in fact saw the rationalization of an unwieldy parish structure and the construction of new churches. None of these efforts were sufficient to allow Irish Anglicanism to escape from its indefensible status as the church of a privileged minority. But that is the perspective of hindsight. In the early nineteenth century, as Butler demonstrates in a striking passage, no less than one-quarter of the pews in the parish church of Clonmel, the region's main urban center, were held by families converted from Catholicism or

dissent. Against this background it becomes somewhat easier to see why some, within the Church of Ireland, never wholly abandoned the dream that their nominal claim to be the church of the whole nation could some day be made a reality.

The implicit warning against the seductive attraction of hindsight is not, however, one to which Butler himself pays much attention. For all its energy and range, his survey of two and a half centuries is fundamentally unhistorical. The problem does not lie in the scattering of minor errors—forgivable, and possibly unavoidable, in a work of this scope. Instead what must cause disquiet is a prevailing tendency to simplify and foreshorten, presenting a one dimensional and teleological narrative. The opening chapter, for example, dutifully cites the work of Brendan Bradshaw, Alan Ford, and others who have explored the ambiguities and compromises that characterized the religious choices made by many in the decades immediately following Henry VIII's breach with Rome. Yet Butler himself continues to think in terms of a straightforward conflict between clearly defined Catholic and Protestant positions. The teleology extends to giving the region its first Catholic martyr, a friar hanged in his habit at Waterford, at the improbably early date of 1538. (The only extant record describes the man in question as a "thief"; while it is not impossible that it was really opposition to the recently proclaimed royal supremacy that brought him to the gallows, there is no apparent warrant for Butler's assumption that this represented the traumatic execution of "a friar much beloved for being of the people" [p. 25].)[2]

Later the Ulster revolt of the 1590s, another episode whose complexity has been analyzed in a range of recent works, becomes a straightforward war by the "Irish" "against English occupation" (p. 37). The same instinct to impose a simple, forward-looking pattern on complex events is evident in later chapters. Again and again snippets of "evidence"—often quoted at second hand from a secondary source—are presented in ways that wholly ignore their context: a derogatory classification of the first Duke of Ormond as an "Irish papist," supposedly demonstrating the precarious position of a convert from Catholicism within the Protestant elite, in fact comes from the period when Ormond was the leader of Protestant royalism in opposition to the short-lived Cromwellian regime (p. 67); and a request for troops from the mayor of Clonmel, cited as evidence of the chronic insecurity of the Protestant minority, derives from the crisis year of 1746. A reference in a polemical pamphlet to "nests" of friars and priests "swarm-

ing" over the kingdom is solemnly paraphrased as indicating that the Catholic clergy "were compared with swarms of insects and portrayed as less than human" (p. 201). Even the detailed census of elementary schools carried out in 1834 by the Commissioners of Public Instruction, undertaken in preparation for an attempt to set up a state funded educational system acceptable to all religious groups, is recast here as part of a continuous history of "state sponsored surveillance" extending back to the early eighteenth century (p. 267).

The unsatisfactory nature of Butler's account can in part be attributed to his personal preferences. He has read widely in the historical literature. But it is clear that his heart is with older, more traditional works, such as W. P. Burke's 1907 *History of Clonmel*, from which he quotes freely and, at times, uncritically. Yet some, at least, of the problem is more deeply rooted in the different characters of the two disciplines within which he seeks to work. The geographer, essentially a social scientist, is concerned with long-term patterns of development, with the way in which the past became the present. The historian, by contrast, is concerned with the past in its own right, with the nuances and contradictions to be found in any particular time and place. The resulting difference in perspective is evident, not just in Butler's work, but in that of his mentor W. J. Smyth. Here too an insistence on the colonial and unremittingly divided character of early modern Irish society contrasts sharply with the approach of historians like Michael MacCarthy Murrough and Raymond Gillespie, for whom episodes of violent conflict must be balanced against the variety of interactions that took place across ethnic and religious boundaries.[3] This being the case, it is perhaps best for historians to express their thanks to Butler for visiting their territory, and for performing an undoubted service in mapping some of its contours, rather than complain that he has not cultivated its fields as they themselves would have done.

Notes

[1]. J. H. Andrews, *Shapes of Ireland: Maps and Their Makers 1564-1839* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1997); W. J. Smyth, *Map-Making, Landscapes and Memory: A Geography of Colonial and Early Modern Ireland c.1530-1750* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2006); and W.J. Smyth and K. Whelan ed., *Common Ground: Essays on the Historical Geography of Ireland Presented to T. Jones Hughes* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1988).

[2]. The sparse and contradictory evidence on the point is reviewed in R. D. Edwards, *Church and State in*

Tudor Ireland (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1935), p. 87.

[3]. Michael MacCarthy-Morrogh, *The Munster Plan-*

tation: English Migration to Southern Ireland (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986); and Raymond Gillespie, *Seventeenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2006).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: S. J. Connolly. Review of Butler, David J., *South Tipperary 1570-1851: Religion, Land and Rivalry*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. March, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12903>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.