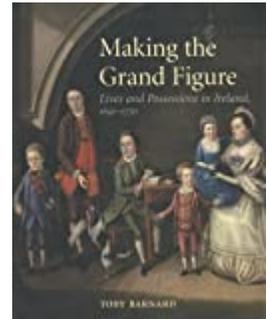




Toby Barnard. *Making the Grand Figure: Lives and Possessions in Ireland, 1641-1770.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. xxii + 497 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10309-0.



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The “Baubles” of the Ascendancy

Toby Barnard, arguably the leading scholar of eighteenth-century Ascendancy Ireland, has done it again. In his most recent book, *Making the Grand Figure*, Barnard has produced the most in-depth study we are likely to have of the possessions, diversions, and in some case obsessions of the class that ruled Ireland during its “golden age.” *Making the Grand Figure* explores in exhaustive and extraordinary detail the ways in which Protestant elites adopted the fashions of empire and the Continent, and what one historian has called the “baubles of Britain” to fashion who they were.[1] This is a labor of love that admirably stands alongside Barnard’s recent *A New Anatomy of Ireland*, that as its clever title suggests breaks down Protestant Ireland’s eighteenth century in anatomical fashion.[2] While the earlier volume dealt with confessional identities and politics, *Making the Grand Figure* luxuriates in the niceties of material culture. “This book,” he states at the outset, “tackles subjects usually relegated to the margins, if not ignored, in histories of Ireland” (p. vii). The same, of course, could be said for the Irish eighteenth century in general. It too clings to the margins of Irish history, a period that on the surface appears far less critical than the century that pre-

cedes it and the one that follows. Although Barnard does not rescue the century, he does accomplish what he sets out to do. After his comprehensive treatment, no one can say any longer that the “baubles” of the Ascendancy have been ignored. If anyone doubts that Protestant Ireland, or at least its highest strata, participated in an Atlantic-wide consumer revolution, Barnard has provided the definitive answer to the doubters.

The book is lovingly produced. Yale University Press has published a handsome volume, filled with wonderful illustrations that lend Barnard’s vivid prose further interest. These range from reproductions of prints, tapestries, and advertisements of spurs for cock fighting to photographs of manor houses and spoons. The book focuses on the quirky, the alluring, and the quotidian. It jumps from the social calendar of the lord lieutenant in Dublin to the goods that members of the Ascendancy consumed, the fine houses they built, the places they traveled, the pictures they collected, the gardens their servants tended, the clothes they wore, and the type of “society” they sought to foster in a place they regarded from time to time as savage and marginal. In Barnard’s eyes, they suc-

ceeded admirably in creating a culture well informed by the latest of European and English high culture. Theirs were the first ears, after all, that heard Handel's *Messiah* performed (in 1742).

The detail of the book astonishes, as does its research. And Barnard has mastered the most intimate details of Ireland's ruling elite. In *Making the Grand Figure*, we learn of diversions as various as the hunt, breeding setters, the ins-and-outs of "the season" in Dublin, taking the waters at Bath, and garden design. Uncovered are the types of handkerchiefs elites fancied, the heraldic and expensive funerals that marked the passing of one of their caste, the architectural genealogy of the mansions they designed, and the quality of the silver they imported. No stone of conspicuous consumption goes unturned in this study. We discover, for example, how wigs were manufactured, the manner in which men shaved their heads before donning them, and how, in Ireland, wigs differed in quality reflecting various stations. These were discerning shoppers. As Barnard argues, "the differences in price were reflected in the look of wigs. The knowing identified costly imports and cut-price copies" (p. 275). Barbers tended to wigs, and only the foolish failed to hang them on a stand after a day's work or an evening's entertainment. *Making the Grand Figure* also uncovers what we would regard as unlikely contributors to this Ascendancy culture of consumption. A "young gentlewoman" by the name of Susannah Drury made a name for herself as an artist, gaining renown for her views of the Giant's Causeway on the Antrim coast. In this way, a small number of talented women "of gentle birth," as Barnard puts it, were able to achieve some sense of independence in an otherwise male-dominated world (pp. 164-165).

Barnard understands that a mania for self-fashioning premised on what you did, what you wore, and how others perceived such activities extended far beyond Dublin and the country estates scattered about the kingdom. Provincials in the American colonies, of course, indulged in similar behavior. Most conspicuously, planters in Virginia were donning fineries, racing horses, buying all things English, and building mansions that spoke to their status as the natural rulers of the colony. Barnard is right to say that "Habitation remained one of the readiest reckoners of worth, both monetary and ethical" (p. 37). Yet, he believes that we should not take the parallels between the two societies too far. "Building," he notes, "carried some of the same resonances for settlers in north America and Ireland. But aspirations, attitudes, and achievements in Ireland more often resembled those among the prospering and consciously re-

spectable of Britain and continental Europe" (p. 37). On one level, that of the types and grandeur of the buildings each group constructed, he is spot on. Although Americans also aped the styles ascendant in England, the great homes in the colonies reflected metropolitan standards more dimly than those constructed in Ireland. At the same time, American attempts were marked by less flair and less confident originality. Nor were they as lavish as some designed for Protestant Irishmen. But on another level, these Irishmen were up to same things as their colonial cousins. Indeed, as a number of scholars have recently argued, the meanings of consumption—what Barnard might mean by "resonances"—cannot be divorced from aspirations, attitudes, or achievements. For truth be told, although they may have differed in particulars or incidentals, the attitudes, aspirations, and achievements of the Ascendancy in Ireland and planters in Virginia were one and the same. And therein lies the looming question this volume begs but does not address. Just as Virginia's gentry used goods to rule a society divided by race and status, Ireland's, it would seem, did so to rule one divided by confession and status. Types of goods, designs of homes, and enthusiasms for particular pastimes reflected the peculiar nature of provincial status of each society, as well as the distinctive challenges to elite rule. Arguably, the Ormandes and the Connollys were Ireland's Byrds and Carters. The Connollys may have built grander dwellings than William Byrd's Westover. But the aims and results of each differed little.

Any historian of Virginia, especially he or she that looks at material culture, cannot ignore the often "Black majority" toiling to make it all possible for elites. The same could be said for Ireland. No doubt, detailing the ins-and-outs of Ascendancy culture on its own terms can be a valuable exercise. But for this period, it is difficult to escape the question "what of the other 75 percent of the population?"—the many who had little with which to consume and the fewer who merely aspired to emulate those in their own kingdom. How did consumption affect them, even if they could not participate? How did the elite's desire to obtain goods sustain a hold over the many? For a scholar as careful and as accomplished as Barnard, these are, of course, tiring and predictable questions, but ones that, if addressed, would have given the book a greater pay-off. Self-fashioning, after all, is about power. The horse racing, the interiors, the studied use of inflection represented more than attempts to strike the grand figure. They were means of ruling and by implication subjugation. As an American historian, Kathleen Brown, argues, therein lies the meaning of the

houses Virginia's rulers built and the diversions they entertained. Forms, as she finds among an anxious patriarchy in Virginia, follow function. We also know, to go back to the American example, that goods could have a democratizing influence, challenging elites but allowing new groups of people to participate in the economy and in some cases in politics. As T. H. Breen and Jack Crowley illustrate, goods have many meanings that must be explored.[3] If anything of the sort happened in Ireland, we cannot say. For these are not Barnard's interests. No doubt, Barnard has amassed a veritable treasure trove of detail for those interested in Protestant Ascendancy material culture and diversion. Nonetheless, we are left with the question of the larger meaning of consumption, and by implication, the book.

Near the end of the volume, Barnard notes that "forms of sociability in Protestant Ireland could not be uncoupled from politics and ideology" (p. 369). And at this point, the reader surmises, Barnard is preparing to offer his take on what all this detail means for the eighteenth century, to answer the question pregnant in his analysis. But he does not. Instead, he observes how Charles Lucas, a hero of Dublin's Protestant tradesmen and middle-class Protestant nationalists, did or did not participate in the world Barnard recreates. Fair enough. But that he does not look much further than Lucas says a great deal of this book's telling silences. To his credit, from time to time, Barnard concedes that the poorer sort or the vast majority of Catholics could not participate in the world he details. "The brilliance of the few coexisted with, and maybe thrived on, endemic underdevelopment, poverty and recurring famine" (p. xix). One could argue that simply stating this truth amounts to an opportunity lost for a volume that details the symbols and practices of power. If, as Barnard argues, Catholics did not have the means to take part in the world of consumption, their

absence certainly could have informed the way the study is framed or the conclusions it draws, adding greater urgency to studying what is still the forgotten century of Irish history.

On the one hand, we cannot ask Barnard to write the book he has not envisioned. To do so would be unfair. On the other, the silences implicit in *Making the Grand Figure*, it must be acknowledged, do not peculiarly define the work of Barnard. They limit the ways in which many historians of Ireland's "golden age" approach the century, explaining—perhaps—why this period remains under-studied and interesting details, such as the diversions of the ruling elite, have been up to this point ignored.

Notes

[1]. T. H. Breen, " 'Baubles of Britain': The American and Consumer Revolutions of the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 119 (1988): 73-104.

[2]. *A New Anatomy of Ireland: The Irish Protestants, 1649-1770* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004). See Alan Ford, "Review of Toby Barnard, *A New Anatomy of Ireland: the Irish Protestants, 1649-1770*," H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, January, 2005, <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=109131115131826>.

[3]. Kathleen Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); T. H. Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution: How Consumer Politics Shaped American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and John Crowley, *The Invention of Comfort: Sensibility and Design in Early Modern Britain and Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

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