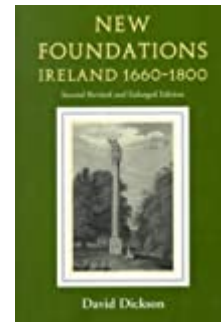


David Dickson. *New Foundations: Ireland 1660-1800*. Second revised and enlarged edition. Dublin and Portland: Irish Academic Press, 2000. xvi + 248 pp. \$49.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7165-2637-7.



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When the first edition of David Dickson's *New Foundations: Ireland 1660-1800* was published in 1987, it was warmly received for a number of reasons. It was the first textbook written on the period since Edith Johnston's brave but thinner effort, *Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* (Dublin, 1972). More importantly, it sought to take cognisance of and, in so far as possible, both present and integrate the findings of a rising generation of scholars. To this end, Dickson sought not only to embrace recently published work but, unusually for a book of this kind, to integrate the finding of much that then lay unpublished in thesis form in history departments and university libraries throughout the British Isles. No less unusually, the author deployed his exceptional familiarity with the extant manuscript record to particular effect in illuminating his analytical narrative with a rosary of quotations that appositely glossed his reconstruction of the familiar and, in many instances, broke new interpretative ground. As a result, Dickson's *New Foundations* was not only one of the most impressive, it was one of the most original works in the series, *The Helicon History of Ireland*, of which it was a part.

Since its publication, the reinterpretation of early modern Irish history has not just proceeded apace, it has accelerated, and the need for an up-to-date synthesis is long overdue. For a time, it appeared that this would be

provided by the Gill and Macmillan History of Ireland series, but the limitations of the volume appertaining to the seventeenth century and the delay in producing the eighteenth-century volume in the series has meant that this is not yet an option. In its absence, Dickson's *New Foundations* has continued to serve successive cohorts of students exceptionally well, but since it had gone out of print in the early 1990s, they were obliged to rely on increasingly tatty second-hand copies, and to compete with their peers for access to the thin stock in College libraries. For these reasons, the publication of a second, revised and enlarged edition of one of the minor classics of modern Irish historiography will be welcomed warmly by students, teachers and scholars alike. It remains the most reliable introduction to Ireland in the era of what is commonly called "Protestant ascendancy".

That said, it will not pass the notice of those familiar with the first edition of this work that—the protestations of the publishers apart—this new edition bears close comparison with the original. For instance, the chapter structure that served the author well in 1987 is retained, and large swathes of text are reprinted verbatim, or with only minor verbal modifications. Dickson is fully aware that "entirely new areas of study" have been opened up in the interval (in the introduction, he cites "crime and the legal system, dueling, popular religion, family and gender,

the book trade, political patronage and the Irish house of lords" among a list of themes that have been the subject of investigation); he is equally conscious of the import for his reconstruction of "a handful of synoptic monographs of greater interpretative sweep" and of "several major political biographies" (pp. xi-xii). However, the realization that their integration "would have required a major reconstruction" of the text prompted him to take the more limited course of revising rather than rewriting his text.

The work before us, therefore, remains "an essentially chronological study of the history of public affairs, a narrative introduction to the period and to the interpretative problems that vex those that are seeking to understand it" (p. xii). As such, it commences appropriately with an original (and important) account of the Restoration era—still inadequately researched in many respects—that is notable for the strength of its analysis of public finance and reconstruction of the fateful course of the Williamite/Jacobite wars. The dominant theme is the establishment of what is generally denominated "Protestant ascendancy," though it is significant that Dickson does not appeal to that term. This is entirely appropriate, not least because of the implication (with which he is not in agreement) that "Protestant ascendancy" was inevitable once Oliver Cromwell had completed his crushing military conquest (1649-51) and ruthless efforts to consolidate economic and political power in Anglophone hands. Historical change is seldom so clear cut, and one of the virtues of Dickson's nuanced narrative is the skill with which he makes this point. Thus, the reluctance of many Irish Protestants to forsake James II in 1685-89, and the fitful emergence of the Penal Laws against Catholics in the decades that followed is amply and carefully delineated. To be sure, there are some inconsistencies; for example, the revealing analysis of the kingdom's finances during the restoration era (chapter one) is not emulated with similar accounts for later periods. Similarly, Irish Jacobitism is accorded perceptive consideration, but not one proportionate to its importance.

Yet as this suggests, conformable to his wish to retain the structure he employed in the first edition, Dickson seeks both to notice and (in so far as is possible) to embrace new areas, new interpretations, and new information into his narrative. The result is somewhat mixed. It

works well in respect of his commentaries on the motives of early Hanoverian politicians (especially pp. 81-3) and the politics of Catholicism and Presbyterianism (pp. 103-6), which are slotted in seamlessly. However, the 1987 narrative is not always so amenable to such interpolation, and this is particularly evident in the chapter on "the economic base" which does not lend itself to expansion to encompass much recent work. It may seem churlish to criticize what is, in many respects, a *tour de force*, except that (as the author himself acknowledges) it lacks a developed material and, I would add, a developed social dimension.

Caveats can also be entered with respect of the reconstruction offered of patriot and radical politics from the 1760s, knowledge and understanding of which has grown considerably in the past decade. When his narrative is at its strongest – as, for example, in the accounts of the Townshend administration, agrarian disorder, the origins of the Volunteers, the embrace of martial law in the 1790s—Dickson not alone provides an exceptional summary of current understanding, he illuminates it with shrewd, perceptive and original observations. Yet, there are a number of areas—such as the politics of the 1780s and the appeal of radicalism in the 1790s—that are less deserving of praise. That this is so is a measure of the ongoing reinterpretation that has, and is, taking place with respect to these and other allied and related issues. It is also a measure of the challenge facing anybody contemplating preparing a textbook covering the time period embraced by *New Foundations*.

But, lest there be any doubt, this is a valuable and important work both for its information as well as its insights and interpretations. If there is a third edition, it ought, as the author acknowledges, to be a different book, but pending that day we have good reason to be grateful for a new and improved version of a familiar standard.

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