

Charity Movements in Eighteenth-Century Ireland. Philanthropy and Improvement

Review Number: 2121

Publish date: Thursday, 15 June, 2017

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ISBN: 9781783270682

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £84.11

Pages: 208pp.

Publisher: Boydell & Brewer

Publisher url: <https://boydellandbrewer.com/charity-movements-in-eighteenth-century-ireland-hb.html>

Place of Publication: Suffolk

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In the conclusion to this ambitious, and timely, attempt to develop an integrated interpretation of the charitable and improving agenda that was a defining feature of 18th-century Irish society, Karen Sonnelitter observes that the 18th century witnessed a shift from 'a close traditional philanthropy motivated solely by social or religious obligation ... towards rational and constructive charity' that was actuated by the wish to 'address and correct the roots of social problems' (p. 176). Previously, having acknowledged the endurance of 'Anglo-Irish anxieties over security', she avers that the belief of 'those who ... work[ed] for improvement reflected an Enlightenment-era optimism about the perfectibility of society. Philanthropists and improvers believed that by addressing the roots of social problems they could eradicate them' (p. 170). Guided by these perceptions, which are more contestable than she maintains, Dr Sonnelitter engages with the religious, educational, voluntary hospital, associational, governmental ('national and local') and genderised worlds of philanthropy as they operated in 18th-century Ireland, identifying commonalities, establishing connections and affirming, by reason of the fact that each sought in their own way to improve the society in which they functioned, that one can describe 'improvement' and 'philanthropy' as expressions of 'a shared sense of Enlightenment values' (p. 19) that, she contends, was no less a feature of Ireland than it was of elsewhere in western Europe. The fact that no attempt has previously been made to portray philanthropy and improvement as manifestations of the Enlightenment or, even to link philanthropy to improvement points to the order of the task that Dr Sonnelitter has set herself, and if she falls short it does not diminish the value of the attempt. Indeed, she has done 18th-century Irish studies a signal service, since it will hardly be possible in the wake of this volume for historians of religion, intellectual activity, education, philanthropy, associationalism, improvement, government and gendered philanthropy to ignore the activities of other (related) strands of activity or to overlook the extent to which they were engaged individually and collectively in a common enterprise.

Guided by her perception that a strong commitment to improvement-bound organisations as diverse as the Incorporated Society for promoting English Protestant working schools in Ireland, Mercer's Hospital, the Royal Dublin Society, the Magdalene Asylum for Penitent Women, the Workhouse, the Foundling Hospital and the Dublin House of Industry, Dr Sonnelitter provides what amount to individual case studies of each as manifestations of what was taking place in key sectors of society. This is a legitimate, and explicable,

approach given the diversity of activity that can be embraced within the capacious categories – education, charity, improving societies, voluntary hospitals, relief initiatives, etc. – with which she engages. Indeed, it may be argued that a broadly focused approach is integral to an attempt to locate and to describe the *zeitgeist* of any era, and it is hardly coincidental that Michael Brown's more mainstream approach to the identification of an 'Irish Enlightenment' engages at length with the religious, social and political worlds in which he perceives it.⁽¹⁾ And yet the select nature of Sonnelitter's approach is not without negative implication, as it is not equally suited to all her investigative categories. One may instance, for example, the diversity of the charitable organisations that characterized the surge in associationalism that has been identified in 18th-century Ireland, which is critical to any assessment of the significance and effectiveness of the philanthropic impulse.⁽²⁾ Dr Sonnelitter is evidently aware of this, but understandably daunted by its implications. So instead of locating her chosen institutions in the round within the larger category to which they belong, she pursues an approach that traces the main features of the organizations that are her particular focus. The resulting reconstructions and presentations are generally informative and broadly supportive of the book's thesis, but none are exemplary and few are without issue; thus the welcome account of Lady Arabella Denny's Magdalene Asylum initiative would have benefited from closer scrutiny of the archive of that body and Rosemary Raughter's (lesser known) researches on that subject, while the failure to consult the work of J. D. H. Widdess on the House of Industry, or the House of Industry's papers in the Mercer Library can be identified as a missed opportunity.⁽³⁾ One may also highlight the failure to make *more* of the exceptional work of Toby Barnard on the Royal Dublin Society.⁽⁴⁾ Further, there will doubtless be many for whom her positive reading of the Charter Schools as an improving institution will fail to persuade; it was not as flawed in its treatment of those placed in its charge as the Dublin and Cork Foundling Hospitals, but the thrust of the critical reports presented by the Inspector General Jeremiah Fitzpatrick in the 1780s, and the refusal of the political and religious establishment to accept the implications of his well-founded criticisms suggest that this institution was more securely anchored in the world of the *ancien regime* than of the Enlightenment.⁽⁵⁾ And yet it is these case studies that are also the most constantly engaging, informative and valuable aspects of the book. One can but applaud the author for her decision to provide a focused account of Mercer's Hospital instead of another overview of the voluntary hospital sector. It is the single best essay available on that institution. Similarly, the reservations expressed above notwithstanding, the accounts provided of the operation of the Magdalen Asylum, the Royal Dublin Society and the Foundling Hospital are generally models of clear exposition. Even the more questionably sympathetic reading of the history of the Charter Schools stands out. The problem, of course, is that while each can be recommended on its own as a distinctive and valuable essay in institutional history, they are less successful collectively in sustaining the case that together they constitute a distinct manifestation of an improving culture and philanthropic impulse that is emblematic of the era because it is not demonstrated that they are fully representative not just of the sectors of which they are presented as typical and still less of the society as a whole.

A stronger case might have been made if that latter parts of the opening chapter, in which the author maintains that Ireland possessed 'a vibrant Enlightenment culture' and that 'in Ireland improvement was a way to put Enlightenment ideas into action' (p. 20), was extended, and the book offered a more detailed elaboration of its author's thesis and of the meaning and trajectory of the Enlightenment and the culture of improvement in Ireland. One might equally observe in this context that much of the opening chapter which is nominally assigned to an assessment of 'the Church of Ireland and improvement' would have been put to better use if it was devoted to an analysis of how the culture of civility and anglicisation of the 16th and 17th centuries evolved into that of improvement, and why, how and when it was embraced by the Anglo-Irish elite.

In conclusion, *Charity Movements in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* is a useful and engaging attempt to develop an interpretation that embraces the improving and charitable impulses of the 18th century. This approach accords with a view of the Enlightenment that conceives of it in expansive rather than narrow terms and as a social rather than simply an intellectual impulse.⁽⁶⁾ It has much to recommend it, moreover, but in the enthusiasm to make sense of diverse trends and currents and to identify the Enlightenment at work, it is necessary that we do not under-estimate the enduring influence of more traditional forces and

their responses to the issues of the day. The efforts of the Incorporated Society to develop educational structures to promote Protestantism remain more amenable to an essentially traditional sectarian interpretation than that advanced here, which sees the Charter Schools as agents of improvement. The endeavor of the Dublin Society fits more easily the quintessentially 18th-century improving model, but this drew on long established, and deeply contested, patterns of civility as much as it did not modern ideas of rational betterment. One could go on, and by so doing sustain a more negative impression that is apposite. This work may not entirely convince when it contends that Ireland was possessed of a ‘vibrant Enlightenment culture’, but it amplifies and reinforces the argument, now increasingly acknowledged, that the prevailing conception of the Enlightenment as a historical phenomenon as well as a philosophical idea did not leave Ireland untouched. Further, its particular achievements are many, and if it is the case that the attempt to identify and define the world of philanthropy and improvement as manifestations of the Enlightenment is less convincing, Dr Sonnelitter has taken a significant step nonetheless *en route* towards a more integrated understanding of their place and importance in 18th-century Irish society.

Notes

1. Michael Brown, *The Irish Enlightenment* (Princeton, NJ, 2016).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Clubs and Societies in Eighteenth-Century Ireland*, ed. James Kelly and Martyn Powell (Dublin, 2010).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Rosemary Raughter, ‘“Wild, ideal, romantic and absurd”: Lady Arabella Denny and the establishment of Dublin’s first Magdalen asylum’, *Greystones Archaeological and Historical Society*, 6 (2010), <<http://www.greystonesahs.org/gahs1/index.php/journals?id=267> [2]> [accessed 30 May 2017]; eadem, ‘Denny, Arbella (1707–1792)’, *Women in World History: A Biographical Encyclopedia* <<http://www.encyclopedia.com/women/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/denny-arbella-1707-1792> [3]> [accessed 22 May 2017]; J. D. H. Widdess, *The Richmond, Whitworth and Hardwicke hospitals ... 1772–1972* (Dublin, 1973), pp 9–46.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Barnard features in the bibliography, but more might have been made of the work cited; to this one may add ‘“Wedded to old customs”: the Dublin Society, John Wynn Baker and agricultural innovation’ in *Auguri: to Mary Kelleher*, ed. Fergus Mulligan (Dublin, 2009), pp 19–36.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Oliver MacDonagh, *The Inspector General: Sir Jeremiah Fitzpatrick and the Politics of Social Reform, 1783–1802* (London, 1981).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See John Robertson, *Enlightenment: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 2015) for an expert review of the approaches and of the historiography.[Back to \(6\)](#)

The author thanks James Kelly for this thorough and insightful review and does not wish to comment further.

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