

Reading Ireland: Print, Reading and Social Change in Early Modern Ireland

Review Number: 499

Publish date: Wednesday, 1 March, 2006

Author: Raymond Gillespie

ISBN: 071905527

Date of Publication: 2005

Publisher: Manchester University Press

Place of Publication: Manchester

Reviewer: Joad Raymond

Raymond Gillespie's *Reading Ireland* sketches the impact of print in early-modern Ireland. It is a wide ranging and stimulating overview that touches upon many of the themes that have shaped recent histories of books in other European countries, but especially in Britain.

It falls into three parts. The first discusses the social impact and social meanings of print. In chapter 1 Gillespie explores the relations between and among oral communications, printed books and manuscripts, and, fascinatingly, the iconic value of books in a low-literacy society. In chapter 2 he looks at changes in writing practices and attitudes to writing that develop through the exchange and production of property deeds. These are the consequence of political centralisation, and thus initially affect the English within the Pale, though they soon extended into the provinces. The spread of a 'textual culture' in Ireland, and the consequent increases in literacy, is closely related to legal documentation of land ownership. The second part traces the introduction and establishment of print in Ireland between 1550 and 1700, and is mainly focused on printing and the book trade. Chapter 3 tells the story of 'the coming of print' from 1550 to 1650, during which the development of the trade was restricted by under-capitalisation. Expansion was given a fillip by the 1641 rebellion, and the impact of war sharpened political polemic. Nonetheless, throughout the seventeenth century the Irish book trade had a 'colonial feel' because it was dominated by English language books, by imported books and imported printing conventions. It was the lack of capital investment, the significance of imports and linguistic division that distinguished the ascendancy of the book in Ireland from that in England. Nonetheless, as chapter 4 shows, print did triumph in the later seventeenth century, and in doing so it spread from Dublin into the provinces. This development was linked to both 'the rise of bilingualism' and entrepreneurial ambition.

The third part consists of three chapters on reception and reading, and uses a variety of evidence, both manuscript and printed, to show how readers responded, or were intended to respond to the advent of print. 'Reading for power' looks at the role of print in state formation, including the use of legal manuals, military manuals, propaganda and pre-printed forms for leases and other legal transactions. Print was increasingly used by state and church for practical purposes, but also to shape and influence culture through literary technologies. Readers were nonetheless able to resist print and to put it to their own uses. Chapter 6, 'Reading for salvation', looks at the devotional uses of reading. It considers the use of print in a range of religious communities, and suggests the relative importance of devotion over doctrine. Print was, however, used to challenge custom, and Gillespie writes of 'a new, orderly spirituality' that developed out of print

culture. This account, especially when considered alongside the arguments concerning print and state formation, suggests some sympathy for Elizabeth Eisenstein's thesis about the early-modern print revolution, though Gillespie does not position himself in this debate.⁽¹⁾ Among the several interesting readers discussed here is Elizabeth Freke, who composed emblems based on Scripture as an interpretative exercise during her reading (p. 137); and among the interesting themes is the smuggling of catholic works. The final chapter, 'Reading for profit and pleasure', looks at a miscellany of other kinds of reading matter: chapbooks, histories, news, etc. This chapter is a little too fragmentary to be satisfying: it neither situates these materials in the context of broader print culture nor offers a thesis for their development. I would have particularly have liked more on the rise of news media, its movement between areas and languages, and more on almanacs. Gillespie suggests that chapbooks were potentially used as reading materials before school: Lori Humphrey Newcomb has unearthed an example of a chapbook version of Robert Greene's *Pandosto* (the main source for Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*) being used as a school textbook in nineteenth-century Ireland.⁽²⁾ This wonderful example of an improvisatory attitude towards the printed text suggests room for a more sustained and integrative picture of cultural translation and the penetration and uses of texts.

Gillespie's *Reading Ireland* shows how complex – perhaps messy – the history of books can be. He makes some very useful and nuanced distinctions: such as that between cultural literacy (having a sense of the social significance of books) and the entirely independent technical literacy of being able to read. He touches upon a very broad range of themes and topics: shortages of type, the second-hand market in books, the extent of libraries (James Butler, first Duke of Ormond's is interesting), the significance of bilingualism and language issues, violence against books, book lending and borrowing, libels, censorship, print-runs and prices. There is a wealth of detail here. The structure of the work, however, means that the reader cannot find consolidated analyses of key topics – print runs or imports, for example – but instead has to search through the book (and index) for scattered references. There are some useful tables in appendix, however, which give more of a statistical overview.

It is perhaps inevitable that a brief survey of this kind has shortcomings, some related to its form. At times it reads like a series of essays: richly broad, but not offering a particularly dense or thick account of print culture. But limited evidence is more generally a problem. Gillespie can cite a single publication as evidence for generalisations about a market; and he occasionally interprets literary evidence as a factual representation of attitudes. Finally, there is very little on visual images and the use of illustrations.

Gillespie's *Reading Ireland* provides a strong sense of the publicity value of print in late seventeenth century Ireland. It is a useful contribution to Irish history, but also fills in a grey area for early-modern British historians and historians of the book in particular. The book developed in Ireland in a complex matrix of legal and economic restrictions, entrepreneurial and ideological initiative, and idealistic and sceptical attitudes towards print – towards its speed and capacity to illuminate, but also its unreliability – that only partly resembled those in England, Wales and Scotland. It leaves many details to be filled in, but is a distinguished and enjoyable introduction to the subject.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge, 1979).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Lori Humphrey Newcomb, *Reading Popular Romance in Early Modern England* (New York, 2002), pp. 247–60.[Back to \(2\)](#)

The author accepts this review and does not wish to comment further.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL:<https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/499#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/2873>

[2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>