

likely to encourage an unfortunate state of theoretical or conceptual innocence' (p. 60). (I must declare an interest: Dr Crooks, in reviewing a volume of essays I edited, described its 'historiographical mode' as 'one of traditional empiricism and theoretical innocence.' ['Review: Medieval Ireland and the Wider World' in *Studia Hibernica*, xxxv (2008–09), pp 167–86, quotation at p. 182.]) In a fine essay on the topic of 'crisis', Carl Watkins discusses how Marxist historians approached this concept through the prism of theory. The result, he argues, was that 'the commitment to the existence of a crisis was a stimulus to finding one, disparate examples being assimilated to the central explanation' (p. 80). Medieval historians should be theoretically aware and conceptually aware but will benefit by being prepared to distinguish between the two.

This is a volume of great richness and imaginative power. It deserves to be read carefully by anyone interested in the history of the middle ages in Britain and Ireland (and, indeed, beyond). To quote John Watts, who provides a review of the volume in its final essay, the contributors were asked to 'consider what might be learned from scrutinising key critical concepts in dialogue with the medieval concepts to which they most obviously relate. The experiment works.' Indeed, it does. There are no weak essays in the volume, which addresses concepts as remote from each other as 'Magic' (Sophie Page) and 'Frontiers' (Jackson W. Armstrong). From the medieval Irish perspective, Peter Crooks's contribution on 'Colony' is particularly important. By peeling back the term to its classical etymon, and then considering how the word was subsequently deployed in both medieval and more recent writings, he significantly advances our understanding of what remains a key concept in our historiography. 'By listening to our sources', he concludes, we can move beyond asking questions such as 'What is a colony?', to asking how colonies 'were imagined in the Middle Ages' (p. 71). Medieval historians, Watts remarks (p. 195), 'suffer from a particular kind of cultural cringe. We worry about our influence.' Publication of this excellent volume should encourage us to worry less.

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IRISH WOMEN IN RELIGIOUS ORDERS, 1530–1700: SUPPRESSION, MIGRATION AND REINTEGRATION.  
 By Bronagh Ann McShane. Pp 301. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press. 2022. £75.

*Irish women in religious orders* is a much welcomed addition to the growing corpus of studies concerning the history of female religious. In a largely neglected area of historical inquiry, McShane explores the history of Irish women religious who endeavoured to negotiate a space for survival during a period of sustained suppression of Catholicism in Ireland. The publication charts the lives of Irish female religious on the island of Ireland and across Europe from the Henrician suppression of the 1530s through to the Cromwellian campaigns of the mid-seventeenth century, and in so doing highlights the 'remarkable resilience' of these women during the early modern period (p. 248).

The women surveyed as part of this study were decidedly privileged, being primarily of 'Old English' or 'Anglo-Norman' descent. Where possible, lineage and familial kinships are thoroughly mapped and clearly suggestive of the notable social standing of these women and their extended family networks. The importance of parentage and strong political and religious affiliations plays a significant role in how these women experienced and responded to the challenges of the time. Some women, for example Mary Cusack (abbess of the Augustinian priory in Lismullen and sister of Sir Thomas Cusack, lord chancellor) and Elicia Butler (former superior of the abbey at Kilculliheen and sister to the earl of Ormond), received favourable pensions, following the dissolutions of their convents, due to their 'elite family background(s)' and the 'politically influential' positions held by their respective brothers (pp 42–3, 52). The elite family backgrounds of these women not only afforded them some financial security but also protection. Post-dissolution, many women continued their religious devotion, 'albeit in less formalised, structured, and visible

modes' (p. 90). Large family estates offered some women security, where they could 'lead a vowed or holy life ... shielded ... from the censure of government' (pp 89–90). Eleanor Preston, for example, was sheltered in her brother's estate in Meath while Eleanor Malone is reported to have been protected in her family's Dublin home (pp 89–90). Although these women benefited from the power and privilege of their family circumstances, their resistance to the regime is indicative of their commitment to their religious vocation and provides a rare insight into female Catholic devotion in the sixteenth century.

Family dynamics and religious connections were equally significant for those women who sought to pursue a religious vocation on the continent and were an important factor 'in determining Irish women's choice of destination and religious foundation' (p. 96). This was notable in the case of the Dillon sisters, Eleanor and Cecily. The Dillons were an 'influential Old English family' with a 'particularly close affinity to the Franciscan order' (p. 101). On account of the 'relationship that existed between the wealthy Dillon family and the Franciscan friars', the Dillon sisters joined the Poor Clare order, an affiliation of the Franciscans, at Gravelines, near Calais (pp 101–02). Another example is Mary Knatchbull, whose fraternal uncle was a Jesuit priest and 'confessor at the English Benedictine convent ... in Ghent' where her fraternal aunt was also abbess (p. 110). According to McShane, 'The Knatchbull family's close links with the Ghent Benedictines explains why that foundation was Mary's destination of choice' (p. 110). While the choice of destination and religious foundation was evidently influenced by familial connections, these cases provide a valuable account of the mobility of elite Irish Catholic women during the early modern period. It also highlights the transnational networks of women religious which were fostered during this period and became increasingly important to the revival of Irish monasticism post-reformation.

When members of the Poor Clare order, under the governance of Cecily Dillon, returned to Ireland in 1629, the establishment of their Dublin convent was made possible by the support of 'leading Old English Catholic families of the Pale' (p. 165). Connections with prominent politicians were again important when their convent initially evaded suppression in 1630 (pp 169–70). Following discovery of the community in October 1630, the Poor Clares moved to Athlone where a convent was constructed 'on land owned by the Dillon family' (p. 172). During a brief expansion of the order in the 1640s, locations of convents 'were chosen due to the presence of influential Catholic patrons in those areas who could ... provide support and finance to the nuns' (p. 188). Evidently, these Poor Clares were formidable women, who continuously resisted the regime of the time and shrewdly used the privilege and support of extended family members to achieve their agenda in maintaining a Catholic religious identity and presence on the island of Ireland.

Family status and important political and religious connections played an significant role in how these women negotiated their place and, ultimately, survived. Their stories are indicative of privilege and the unique opportunities afforded to them by that position and so they represent the exception rather than the norm. However, their determination to persevere despite religious persecution provides an invaluable insight into the ways in which Irish women religious contested suppression and generated new means of expressing their spirituality. By situating these women within the broader political and religious upheavals of the time, McShane challenges the limited scope of traditional Reformation histories, wherein female religious, and indeed women in general, rarely feature.

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