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Ireland and The British Empire: Essays on Art and Visuality

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BOOK REVIEW

Ireland and The British Empire: Essays on Art and Visuality, edited by Fintan Cullen, Oxford and New York: Peter Lang Reimagining Ireland, 2023, 234pp., ISBN 978-1-78874-299-3.



The relationship between Ireland and the British Empire has been a controversial subject for contemporary Irish and British scholars for various reasons, including the old prejudice against Ireland's imperial past. However, the large array of visual culture in Ireland whose footprint comes from the British empire proves how influential this resonance has been and continues to be on Irish cultural matters. If we add to this Irish artists' own extensive interests in a wide range of visual culture, the field's scope extends significantly. In this context, Fintan Cullen's collection of essays *Ireland and The British Empire: Essays on Art and Visuality*, which includes research into a new era of reflection on, and restitution of, uncomfortable past histories and practices involving Irish visual art and culture, will be an important contribution to the field. This volume will be of great use to both to scholars new to the relationship between Ireland and British imperialism, and to those who are not hugely familiar with the influential role of the British empire during the pre-Independence period.

The book comprises seven essays by academics from Ireland and Britain. It has an insightful preface by Cullen where he proclaims the expansive nature of the volume in terms of scope, interests, and periodization. The essays are arranged in a roughly chronological order, addressing a range of visual evidence of the connection between Ireland and the British empire from the seventeenth until the middle of the twentieth century. This research is devoted to mapping the art and politics of Ireland's relationship with Britain and covers a wide range of cultural activities: art exhibitions, museums and their displays, architecture, photography, illustrated books, fashion, public and private performances and entertainments, as well as paintings, sculpture, prints and book illustrations. The essays are illustrated by thirty-five

magnificent reproductions, in both black and white, and color, which will help readers develop an intuitive understanding of the visual aspects of Irish participation in British activities. Finally, the collection's index is very accurate, complete, and increases the utility of the book.

The picture of the influence of the British empire on Irish visual culture that emerges from this volume is one of multifaceted and cross-disciplinary involvement. Cullen's introduction conveys an awareness of the degree to which discourse regarding Ireland's imperial past has been subject to increased attention in recent years, foregrounding the usefulness of art and visuality in the project by analysing how, since at least the eighteenth century, Ireland has produced a range of material objects that refer to the imperial enterprise. Cullen is also fully aware of how important it is that the built environments in Dublin and other cities and towns should still possess publicly accessible images of empire, stressing the extent of an extensive Irish visual historiography. The broad scope of methodological and periodised interests across these informed essays, and the inclusion of contributors from an array of disciplines, is central to this endeavour.

The first essay, "An Index of Civility," is by Niamh Nic Ghabhann, and is a rewarding exploration of the relation between Ireland, imperialism and histories of medieval architecture. Nic Ghabhann attempts to account for the last of these, which were produced throughout the nineteenth century, concluding that the "Irishness of Irish architecture" in twentieth-century architectural histories whose focus is on architectural hybridity, networks and materiality, needs to be continually reassessed under the formative influence of systems of evaluation forged under the imperialistic era given that they remain a milestone of architectural history.

Angela Griffith's "Seeing the Second City of the Empire" discusses a selection of engravings that appeared in Dublin travel guides from the 1820s and 1830s, with a particular focus on artist and antiquarian George Petrie's illustrative work. Griffith discusses how these excellent engraved illustrations were welcomed by both contemporary Irish and British readerships. She also provides a large number of examples of fine artistic engravings and figures to show that these book illustrations fell somewhere between being considered a commercial commodity and examples of art, valued for their artistry, craftsmanship and aestheticism. There is much to admire in Griffith's piece, which argues so well how these visual artforms mirrored Dublin's political and cultural identity and became such a valuable interpretative instrument.

Justin Carville's essay "Pilgrims of the Sun" investigates John Shaw Smith's photography of Egypt from the 1850s as a material practice of imagining empire. Carville identifies the origin of networks of photography as a social

and cultural practice by examining how the material production of Smith's photographs was as much shaped by the conditions of taking and making images within colonized space as much as they were by the geographical imaginaries of imperial violence. The conclusion is that the practice of empire in early Irish photography by Smith was a form of bringing empire into existence in everyday cultural forms, yet also of reimagining it through practicing its representations.

The essay by Rachel Hand, "Museums and Empire," identifies interesting aspects of colonial histories of the 2021's Ethnographic Collection in the National Museum of Ireland (NMI) and its actively involved stance in the restitution of cultural material from Benin city since 2021. The critic strongly establishes the extent of Ireland's participation in the British empire and discusses the reasons why, after Independence, the stories around the treasures stolen in 1897 and taken to Ireland became not only a disagreeable prompt of Irish involvement with the British empire, but also revealed the complexity of the nation's role as both the colonized and the colonizer. Hand concludes by pointing out the importance of collaborating with, and making institutional change led by, the communities of origin to shape decolonization into an active practice.

The contribution of Joseph McBrinn, "From Parnell's Suit to Casement Closet," argues compellingly that men's fashions, as performed by these two key Irish political figures, played a key role in debates about national identity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their way of dressing revealed normative and dissident masculinities which proved significant in the shaping of the new Irish nation, a growing field of study, McBrinn affirms, that is worth exploring further.

In the next essay, "Fancy Dress and the 'Colleen' as Imperial Signifier," Elaine Sisson addresses the relevance of this nineteenth century trope which was appropriated into imperial discourse to mean loyalty to Ireland within the Union, and as a romantic ideal of traditional rural life. By investigating the representation of the Irish female peasant costume as a 'colleen', understood as passive and compliant, supported by attractive illustration, the critic unearths the complexities around its appearance and its implications in different social and political contexts. The essay concludes by claiming that, by the First World War, the ideological image of the colleen within imperial narratives was no longer in tune with the lives of unionist and nationalist women during wartime, who were active members of agency. It contradicted the conventional view of Irish womanhood brilliantly illustrated by an anonymous image courtesy of the NLI, where a figure in the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) uniform and an Irish Colleen, both children rather than women, appear at the same costume party at the end of World War I.

Finally, Luke Gibbons' essay on "Myles na gCopaleen, Modernism and Irish Art" provides a valuable commentary on the surge of interest in, and public debate around, Irish visual modernism occasioned by Myles entering the world of criticism by writing a number of ironic reviews of successive Irish Exhibition of Living Art (IELA) shows and related art events. Myles' writings expressed significant doubts about an avant-garde in which he was a key literary figure. Gibbon concludes that this acute critic's allusion to figures suddenly leaping out of the frame in a parodic opening address he gave to a modern art exhibition in 1944 hints at the fact that Irish Modernism did not have to travel abroad to understand that some things are beyond representation and that Irishness in art was in plain/ordinary Irish people's consciousness and in their own backyard.

For this reader, one of the most fascinating aspects of this collection is the large array of varieties of Irish high art, and the tremendous significance of imperial systems and ideas in shaping all the historical examples of visual culture that appear across its pages. These eight scholars identify experience of the empire in a wide range of eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth-century visual cultural forms that, in many cases, have until now been overlooked by academia. *Ireland and The British Empire* is also particularly valuable for its contributions on Irish modernist culture. The book offers an engaging, readable overview of things visual, including a wide range of cultural concerns, elements that continue to develop art and visuality's potential in the humanities.

Ireland and The British Empire seeks to assist both established and new scholars to understand the connections between Ireland and British imperialism as they come to terms with the full extent of the latter's complex resonance with, and disjunction from, Irish visual culture. Editor Cullen is to be praised for assembling a varied group of scholars to produce these essays, and for designing this stimulating volume to ensure deep and wide coverage of the artistic and visual arts. This is a clear and concise collection that provides thought-provoking analyses and highlights significant research into important areas of debate. This collection contributes significantly to those discussions and offers examinations from different artistic and cultural approaches in the hope that readers will find the relevance of Irish art and visuality engaging. *Ireland and The British Empire* will be a welcome addition to university libraries and serve well those postgraduate students and professors who teach or research the legacy of empire in Irish visual culture and Irish visual historiography.

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