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Reading Ireland: Print, reading, and social change in Early Modern Ireland

Annette Bramstedt

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Annette Bramstedt

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Book review

By

Annette Bramstedt

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Gillespie, Raymond. *Reading Ireland: Print, reading, and social change in early modern Ireland.* Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005.

Raymond Gillespie, author of *Reading Ireland,* is a professor at the National University of Ireland. He specializes in studying the social history of modern Ireland. *Reading Ireland* is his most recent publication, but he has also written or edited *Devoted people: belief and religion in Early Modern Ireland, Thomas Howell and his friends: serving Christ Church Cathedral* and *Print Culture And Intellectual Life in Ireland, 1660-1941* as well as several journal articles and other books.[1]

In *Reading Ireland,* Gillespie uses print to observe changes in early modern society in Ireland. He draws on two aspects of print to do this. The first is that print was a commodity. By tracing print as it was created and moved from place to place in Ireland through buying, selling, and trading, it is possible to see the changes that took place in Ireland as the economy changed from an exchange economy to a commercial one. The second aspect is that print is capable of transferring ideas. These ideas were adopted and applied to everyday life, and were displayed in the forms of books, pamphlets, and flyers to the outside world.[2] This display was a change from the Gaelic oral tradition that was prevalent prior to the popularization of print. By focusing on these two aspects of print, Gillespie is able to outline the social history and reading history of 17th century Ireland.

Reading Ireland is a series of essays. It is broken up into three parts and seven chapters. In part one, "The conditions of Print," Gillespie examines the social meaning of print. Printed materials had an iconic value as well as a literary value. Those who could not read still recognized the prestige and idea representation which a book carried. To destroy the book was to attack the idea, which explains book burning during the Ulster uprisings.[3] In the second chapter, Gillespie takes a look at the social changes that enabled writing to become indispensable in Ireland. Gillespie states, "Writing came

[1] National University of Ireland. "Department of History: Raymond Gillespie, Ph. D (Dublin)," National University of Ireland. http://history.nuim.ie/staff/gillespie.shtml (accessed 7 March 7, 2009).
[2] Raymond Gillespie, *Reading Ireland: Print, reading, and social change in early modern Ireland.* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005) 6.
[3] Gillespie, 20.

to be seen as one of the signs of civility", this aspect can most readily be seen in legal actions.[4] The increase in charters, grants, and deeds led to the need for print in everyday life. Leases also became more widely used and meeting minutes became more widely kept and were posted publicly during the 17th century.

In Part two, "The Development of Print," the author focuses on print as a commodity. Both chapters three and four tell of how books and print were obtained in Ireland. The government had firm control of printed works created in Ireland until the mid-1600s. Works were smuggled in, however, and many of the port towns had adequate book supplies.[5] More printing presses were used in Ireland as the 17th century wore on and availability increased. Also, anyone with connections in England or mainland Europe could readily obtain copies of works that might not be unavailable in Ireland.[6]

The last part, entitled, "The Strategies of Reading," attempts to describe how Irish inhabitants used printed works, thereby also showing glimpses of how the author perceived their use of print. This section is divided into three chapters entitled "Reading for Power: Institutions and Print," "Reading for Salvation," and "Reading for Profit and Pleasure," respectively. These chapters focus on reading in government, politics, the church (both Protestant and Catholic), and leisure. The book concludes with a useful appendix containing tables showing the output of the Irish presses in 1601-1700, analysis by book type of the output of the Dublin presses in 1601-1700, and imports of books by Dublin booksellers from 1680 to 1687. In addition, a detailed index is included at the end of the book, which is very effective for finding specific topics in the book.

Reading Ireland is an analytical survey of materials available from the reading history of Ireland in the 18th century. It was written for an academic audience. Individuals with some Irish history background would be the best suited to understanding the content of this work. Gillespie refers to many historical events without providing very much background information on these references. If the reader was

[4] Ibid., 45.
[5] Ibid., 93.
[6] Ibid., 66.

naive of Irish history, he or she would have trouble following the social historical references used.

Many sources, both primary and secondary, were used by Gillespie. Commonplace books, customs returns, state books, inventories, wills, port books, parish records, depositions, transcripts, and correspondence papers from all over Ireland were used as primary sources. At the end of each chapter, the author provides endnotes. This element is useful, but adds to the overall feel of the book being more a collection of essays then a cohesive work. There is also a lack of a formal introduction and conclusion. Gillespie introduces and concludes at the beginning and end of every chapter, and uses a longer introduction in chapter one to introduce his thesis for the book. This practice and the complete absence of a conclusion leave the book with an unfinished tone at the end. A recap of his findings and reflection on his work would be very beneficial in providing closure for the reader.

Reading Ireland is not a perfect work, but it is a very interesting read for those with some historical background. This reviewer genuinely enjoyed reading it and would recommend it to other readers who are interested in the history of reading or the history of Ireland. It offers a brief survey of the reading history of Ireland and traces the social changes which occurred during the 17th century in conjunction with the increased influence of print.

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