

Mary Ann Lyons's essay on 'Women and Jesuit ministry in Ireland, c.1600–c.1670' is invaluable in focusing due attention on the roles of women. She shows how a number of women exercised significant agency in supporting the Jesuits, most notably Elizabeth FitzGerald, countess of Kildare. This essay complements recent work published on women in Ireland in the sixteenth century which showed, *inter alia*, that a number of other women associated with the house of Kildare, including Countess Elizabeth's mother, Mabel Browne who came from a prominent English recusant family, were proactive Catholics. Significantly, there is no discussion of Catholic women exercising agency after Cromwell came to Ireland: the later evidence relates to women in passive roles only. Alma O'Donnell's essay on Jesuit involvement in exorcisms in the seventeenth century is interesting in reiterating from a novel angle the degree to which beliefs and practices in Ireland relating to the supernatural conformed to the norms elsewhere in the Christian world. Her most striking discovery is that, contrary to the general European experience, there are more records of demonic possession among Irish men than women. Brian Mac Cuarta's essay on conversions to the Catholic Church within the Slingsby family is presented in fascinating detail and reveals a great deal about New English responses to conversions to Rome, though it begs the question as to what exactly drew some of the Slingsby women to Catholicism in the 1630s.

By any standard this collection of essays is both stimulating and valuable. Yet, historians face a real challenge when trying to assess the true significance of the Jesuit missions in Ireland because a great deal of the records they produced were consciously designed to highlight their achievements as the shock troops of the Counter Reformation. While their *modi operandi* were in many ways comparable to those of their confrères in Catholic states, the Irish Jesuits were severely restricted by their very small numbers: there were two Jesuits in the country in 1599, about forty in 1626 and no more than seven or eight in the early eighteenth century — in a country of approximately 2,400 parishes. Furthermore they struggled to operate effectively under Protestant colonial régimes that were inimical to their ministry. Martin Foerster's essay on Jesuit schooling in Ireland between 1660 and 1690 shows graphically how a promising mission fell prey to Protestant enmity. Liam Chambers' essay on the Irish Jesuits' house of refuge in Poitiers, 1674–1762, is a marvellous piece of work, but it suggests that by the early eighteenth century the Jesuit mission was focused more on institutional survival than on ministry. At the time of the universal dissolution of the Society of Jesus in 1774, the Jesuits in Ireland were practically confined to parishes in Waterford and Clonmel and St Michan's parish, Dublin, 'typically as discreet assistants' (p. 20). All in all, then, this is a valuable book which may unintentionally flatter its subject.

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THE FIRST GREAT CHARITY OF THIS TOWN: BELFAST CHARITABLE SOCIETY AND ITS ROLE IN THE DEVELOPING CITY. Edited by Olwen Purdue. Pp xv + 310. Newbridge, Co. Kildare: Irish Academic Press. 2022. £24.79.

Historians have devoted greater attention to nineteenth-century Belfast in recent years, focusing in particular on the things Belfast had in common with other provincial cities in Victorian Britain: the creation and evolution of its philanthropic institutions and the range and vitality of its civic, intellectual and political culture. *The first great charity of this town* both reflects and contributes to this new social history of Belfast. Founded in 1752 to raise funds to build a poorhouse and an infirmary for the poor (opened in 1774), the Belfast Charitable Society provides contributors with a fascinating entry point to explore the development of the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century town.

In a clear and useful introduction, Olwen Purdue lays out the book's two primary goals: to provide a new history of the Belfast Charitable Society (B.C.S.); and to set the institution

within a wider context of urban poverty, welfare and public health provision in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ireland. While the quality of the chapters that follow is a bit uneven, the collection fulfills these goals admirably, enriching our understanding of a relatively neglected era. The collection opens with two short contextual essays, designed to situate the early history of the B.C.S. in its eighteenth-century legislative and international/political settings. The latter sets the stage for Jonathan Jeffrey Wright's insightful exploration of the links between the Atlantic slave trade and early nineteenth-century Belfast. Wright does this through the life of William John Brown, who escaped slavery in New Orleans and came to Belfast as a stowaway in 1830. Stepping off the boat, Brown was a free man, a status confirmed by recent interpretations of the famous Mansfield Case. He told his story before the Belfast Police Court in August 1830, providing Wright with a documentary core to reconstruct aspects of Brown's transatlantic life and experience in Belfast. Brown's time in the northern capital was short. He was buried in the Clifton Street burial ground in 1831, but his life highlights the rich intersections of race, slavery and freedom in pre-Famine Belfast.

The B.C.S. was a philanthropic association dedicated to providing a variety of services for the town's poor. Not surprisingly, some of the collection's best chapters examine the institution's efforts to support people as they struggled with urban poverty. Focusing on the B.C.S.'s late eighteenth-century history, Raymond Gillespie highlights its innovative nature, arguing that the organisation was part of a broader social experiment where mercantile elites attempted to reformulate the Belfast community through the mechanism of the voluntary association, something that allowed the 'middling sorts' an opportunity to demonstrate their leadership in a changing town. Ciarán McCabe takes this story into the pre-Famine era, where he examines the complexity and range of the welfare landscape in the fast-growing northern capital. The town's private charities were challenged by the passage of the Irish Poor Law in 1838, but McCabe shows how the B.C.S. successfully adapted its mission to focus its resources on the 'honest, elderly poor', a community not considered deserving under the state's new workhouse regime.

The history of public health has been one of the most dynamic subfields in modern Irish history in recent years. Robyn Atcheson ably surveys the development of Belfast's nascent public health infrastructure in the early nineteenth century. The essay's examination of the various places where women were situated in these medical networks (advocates and fundraisers through the B.C.S., as well as caregivers and patients) is of particular interest. Atcheson closes with a brief examination of the Cholera pandemic of 1832, which, she argues, underlines the fact that Belfast had a functional public health system by the 1830s. Christine Kinealy and Gerard MacAtasney's chapter highlights the degree to which this system was challenged by the Great Famine. This was particularly true in 1847, when the onset and spread of fever overwhelmed the town's medical infrastructure, emblemized by the B.C.S.'s reluctant decision to house medical and surgical cases forced out of the general hospital. The authors use a range of archival and press sources to highlight the voices of the suffering poor, something that underlines the tragic impact of the Famine in Belfast.

The book opens with a foreword by the former Irish President Mary McAleese, who reflects on growing up in the shadow of the old poorhouse in Belfast. It closes with an epilogue by the current director of the B.C.S., Paula Reynolds, who discusses the future of the organisation. Both are thoughtful and well written essays that celebrate the humane impact and vision of the organization, but they sit somewhat awkwardly with the rest of the volume, which, after all, focuses on the history of the B.C.S. between 1750 and 1900. This is a minor quibble, for *The first great charity of this town* is a valuable addition to the new history of Belfast, full of insightful scholarship that highlights the complex and often surprising histories that contributed to the making of the Victorian city.

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