

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Kilkenny: Irish Historic Towns Atlas, No. 10 by John Bradley; Discover Kilkenny by John Kilkenny

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Book Reviews

The Latest Books on Irish Art and Culture

An Anglo-Norman Monastery. Bridgetown Priory and the Architecture of the Augustinian Canon Regular in Ireland

BY TADHG O'KEEFFE

Cork Co Council and Gandon Editions 1999 p/b £25
160pp 24 col 124 b/w ills 0-946641-803

John Goodall

In comparison to the Cistercians – their principal partners in the extraordinary monastic revival that swept across Europe in the 12th century – the Augustinians have received little popular or scholarly attention. Not strictly monks but priests (canons) living in community, their rule is based upon a series of texts believed in the Middle Ages to have been written by St Augustine. The contents of these were variously ramed for use as rules of communal living in the 12th century and a variety of so-called Augustinian Observances became established, each one taking its name from the particular house in which it was first developed.

O'Keeffe's book is a monograph on one of Ireland's major ruined Augustinian houses, Bridgetown Priory, which followed the Observance of the foundation of St Victor in Paris. It is a generously produced volume with numerous drawings and large illustrations in both colour and black and white. In his introduction O'Keeffe expresses the hope that the book will appeal to an interested readership – both scholarly and general – and serve as an introduction to the neglected field of Augustinian architecture in Ireland.

Cork County Council has helped finance this project for which they deserve credit. The short text is divided into four principal chapters, of which the first sets the scene for the study, describing the development of the Augustinian rule and its place in the Irish Reform movement of the 12th Century. The second sets out the history of Bridgetown Priory and the third exhaustively describes its surviving buildings. In the fourth, the buildings of the principal Augustinian houses in Ireland are discussed. A final two page conclusion describes the fortunes of the priory buildings between the Dissolution and the present day.

The strengths of this book lie in its

thorough illustration and description of the buildings at Bridgetown, a self-evidently fascinating and important site. But, overall, three general criticisms might fairly be levelled at the work as a whole.

The first, and most serious of these, is O'Keeffe's failure to engage with the subject of the Augustinian life in any meaningful detail. Nowhere are the niceties of the Victorine Observance described and this deprives the book of a properly authoritative historical foundation. It is a reflection of O'Keeffe's insensitivity to this subject that he feels able to assert that one of the principal attractions of the Augustinian life in the 12th century was that it was 'an existence without challenge' (p.11). William of Champeaux – the principal figure in the establishment of St Victor – would not, I think, have agreed. My second criticism would be O'Keeffe's gentleness of approach to his subject. The book contains a great deal of general information and description which begs for scholarly digestion. This is particularly true in the two architectural chapters, where buildings and details are described one after the other without reference to a clear thesis. We are told, for example, that the east wall of the choir 'except for about 70cms each side, is taken up with the great three-light east window' (p.58), but not whether this fact is significant or remarkable. And on balance, a great deal of the architectural description does not seem to be either.

Finally, this book leaves its subject isolated in Ireland. It would be unfair to expect a long discourse on the place of Irish Augustinian foundations or their architecture in a European context, but O'Keeffe could usefully have explored these areas more fully than he has. Is it not of relevance to our understanding of Bridgetown, for example, that nearly all the Victorine houses founded in England were clustered around the Bristol Channel? Should not the question of an architectural relationship between Bridgetown and these buildings be posed?

It should also be observed that the bibliography of the book is select in the extreme; an odd circumstance if the work is really to serve as a foundation and

springboard for future research.

Despite its shortcomings, this book is both affordable and useful. It serves to demonstrate the astonishingly rich legacy of the Augustinian Canons in Ireland and will hopefully encourage more research into an unjustly neglected subject.

JOHN A A GOODALL is a graduate of the Courtauld Institute, London and is the author of *God's House at Ewelme* (forthcoming)

Kilkenny: Irish Historic Towns Atlas, no. 10

BY JOHN BRADLEY

Royal Irish Academy 2000 p/b £20

Large folio 28 pp + 12 loose sheets. 9 b/w 3 col maps,
9 b/w 2 col ills 1-874045-82-8

Discover Kilkenny

BY JOHN BRADLEY

O'Brien Press 2000 p/b £9.99

127 pp. 5 maps 73 b/w 27 col ills 0-86278-661-4

Michael Potterton

The publication of a series of European historic towns atlases was first recommended by the International Commission for the History of Towns in 1955. Coming just one decade after a war that had destroyed the historic fabric of so many towns and cities, an obvious aim of the project was to foster an understanding of shared European heritage. The primary academic objective was to facilitate comparative research on European urban development. Encouraging a unified approach to the project, the ICHT drew up a framework of guidelines, the main points of which related to cartographic criteria, leaving other elements largely up to individual organising bodies to decide upon. For each town there would be three principal maps – the town in the 19th century, the surrounding region in the same period, and a modern town plan.

The Irish Historic Towns Atlas was established in 1981 under the auspices of the Royal Irish Academy. It was decided to produce an atlas fascicle for each of forty towns. In addition to the recommended town-plans, each fascicle would include an essay and a classified gazetteer of buildings and features. 1986 saw the publication of Kildare and Carrickfergus,

and since then Bandon, Kells, Mullingar, Athlone, Maynooth, Downpatrick, and Bray have also appeared.

The most recent IHTA fascicle elucidates in literary and cartographic form the pre-1900 topographical development of Kilkenny, a centre of urban activity for more than a millennium. Embryonic stages of urban growth in Kilkenny date to the late 9th or early 10th century, and by 1200 the town had become a key Anglo-Norman stronghold, controlling much of south Leinster. Kilkenny witnessed population increase and physical expansion in the 13th century followed by the calamity of plague and decline in the 14th. 15th-century prosperity is evidenced in the numbers of new building projects but by about 1650 the town had once more begun to decline. Despite the symptoms of poverty and hardship, Kilkenny's population rose to a high of 23,000 in 1831 before the nation-wide disasters of the mid 19th century took their toll. By the turn of the 20th century the population had dwindled to 10,000 and, despite periods of steady growth, it has never reattained its 19th-century peak.

With precision and clarity, John Bradley charts the development of Kilkenny from its origins to the beginning of the 20th century. Bradley demonstrates a rare ability to extract, synthesise, and present coherently information from a panoply of sources – archaeology, historical documents, town-plans, architecture, trade patterns, burgh metrology, toponymy. The text is complemented by a meticulously collated compendium of topographical information with entries for almost 2,000 buildings and features. Certain sections of this gazetteer would be more accessible were they arranged alphabetically rather than chronologically.

Among the loose sheets accompanying the bound section are views of Kilkenny by Francis Place (c.1698) and Thomas Mitchell (c.1760), three photographs and eight maps. Map 2, which folds out and is in six colours, provides a fascinating and carefully-researched reconstruction of Kilkenny c.1842. Map 3 suffers slightly due to unclear contour lines and several misprints (such as Fr Walshe Close,

Patrick St Upper, Poyntz's Lane). Having the maps and plates printed separately makes it possible to consult them and the text simultaneously. Although the overall design and format of the fascicle are attractive and user-friendly (particularly for research and teaching purposes), storage can be problematic. The cover needs to be of stiffer card and the plastic sheath is not entirely satisfactory.

This volume achieves a delicate balance between text, gazetteer, and graphics. Each element is important in its own right but combined they constitute the single most essential reference work on the topographical development of pre-1900 Kilkenny. The editorial committee of the IHTA has established a standard of publication generally regarded as the highest in Europe. For their largest fascicle to date, the calibre of the editors is matched by an historian and writer of enthusiasm and ability in equal measure. The result is something special.

Much of the information which is presented in a tabulated and analytical way in the atlas has been converted by Bradley into narrative form in *Discover Kilkenny*. It is a fresh and accessible guide to the history and monuments of one of Ireland's best-preserved medieval towns.

MICHAEL POTTERTON is an occasional lecturer in the Department of Modern History, National University of Ireland, Maynooth and is currently preparing a PhD on the archaeology and history of medieval Trim, county Meath

Ordnance Survey Letters: Meath

EDITED BY MICHAEL HERITY

Four Masters Press 2001 h/b £45

146 pp 11 b/w ills 1. 903538-04-1

Ordnance Survey Letters: Dublin

EDITED BY MICHAEL HERITY

Four Masters Press 2001 h/b £35

94 pp 20 b/w ills 1. 903538-05-X

C E B Brett

Now that the Institute of Irish Studies in Belfast has brought to a successful conclusion its publication of all the extant Ordnance Survey Memoirs in the Royal Irish Academy in no less than 40 volumes, it is good to see a start being made on John O'Donovan's *Ordnance Survey*

Letters. Only one volume, the first in point of time – County Down – was published in 1909 when the previous project fell by the wayside. Let us hope that this new venture may equally successfully cover all the 23 counties for which volumes exist.

If the *DNB* is right in giving O'Donovan's date of birth as 9 July 1809, then he was only 21 when, in the autumn of 1830, he was recruited by Lieutenant Larcom of the Survey team. His earliest letters from the field date from 1834 and are very much a young man's letters: amusing and indiscreet. One wonders whether he would really have welcomed their posthumous publication? His account of his meeting with the aged Dr Dubourdieu, Huguenot and Church of Ireland rector as well as author of the *Statistical Surveys of Counties Antrim and Down*, is hilarious – ending with the observation: 'I was never so disgusted with any little cur, whelp or pup in all my life. His petty aristocratic assumptions and ungentlemanly remarks had a very disagreeable effect upon my sensitive nerve.'

As he got older, his letters became more discreet and less entertaining; he no longer called native Irish-speakers 'aboriginals', for example. For some reason, the promoters of this new edition are not publishing the volumes of letters in the order in which they were written which is perhaps a pity.

Those who may hope to find in these volumes the same kind of sociological and architectural treasure as is to be found in the *Memoirs* will be disappointed. O'Donovan's principal interest appears to have lain in the identification of places mentioned in the ancient Irish archives with the correct names of places actually on the ground. Indeed, that was a large part of his remit from Larcom. As Professor Herity remarks, his 'interest was so taken up with the early literature that he appears not to have been impressed by the archaeology of the sites he visited.' Certainly, his archaeological comments are here few and rather unenlightening: though he discusses Brugh na Boinne in a cursory way, he makes no mention of Newgrange or Knowth, any more than of the Giant's Ring in county Down.