

Book review: *The end of outrage: post-Famine adjustment in rural Ireland* (Breandan Mac Suibhne)

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History Ireland

Vol. 26, Issue 4 (July/August 2018)

In *Ways of Seeing* (1972) John Berger wrote of how 'capitalism survives by forcing the majority, whom it exploits, to define their own interests as narrowly as possible'. Echoes of Berger's poetic yet clear-eyed assessment of the wrenching forces of modernity, writ through small and large acts of exploitation and advantage, recur throughout Breandan Mac Suibhne's *The End of Outrage: Post-Famine Adjustment in Rural Ireland*, a study of the transformation of rural society in west Donegal in the post-Famine years. In Mac Suibhne's telling this period marks the 'era of infidelity' when the erosion of traditional bonds of community is an incremental, adaptive, but devastating response to the changed world experienced by those who survived the Famine.

The narrative spine of the book is the case of a rural Donegal schoolmaster, Patrick McGlynn, who in 1856 turns informant on the activities of local Molly Maguires in his community of Beagh. His motivations, character, and ultimate fate are paralleled with that of his neighbor James Gallagher, a smallholder with large ambitions, whose increase in property and influence make him the target of the Mollies. Gallagher is a man who 'adapted better to the new order of things', doubling his own rented acreage between 1845-55 and effectively evicting his 'tenants' (in reality sub-tenants who were his former neighbours) in the 1850s. If Gallagher is emblematic of an able yet exploitative 'survivor', McGlynn's anxious relationship to the local Mollies (first as member, then informer) reveals the organisation's internal divisions and crisis of legitimacy. Mac Suibhne performs a forensic investigation of the circumstances precipitating this act of betrayal; their context and complex cast of characters; and the significance of this event read across Ribbonism, land ownership, tenancy, language, faith, emigration and memory.

This is a story of the 'end of outrage' in rural Ireland, a concept here defined in two ways. On the one hand, it tracks the transformation of secret society activity as its tactical use of 'outrages' (incidents or threats of violence) declines. On the other, Mac Suibhne persuasively argues how in the 1850s 'the poor themselves came to terms with their loss, that is, how their own indignations at what had been done unto them and their forebears lost malignancy, how their outrage ended.'

Located within a tiny sphere of encounter and familial interrelationship, the book is remarkably innovative in scale, temporality, form, and tone. Microhistories of the Famine have experienced a resurgence of popularity, most recently in Ciarán Ó Murchadha's *Figures in a Famine Landscape* (2016), and here Mac Suibhne similarly identifies a specific landscape and point in time that yet lends itself to wider arguments about social

reorganisation and resilience. In so doing, he opts not to position the Famine as an unanticipated catastrophe, but part of a sequence of a long history of rural change. The rise of the modern state is observed via the proliferation of constables, policemen, postmasters, clerks, and other administrators who add to the 'coercive capacity' of the state. The role of school systems and the church in 'transforming notions of time and discipline, manners and obedience' – and that of the Ordnance Survey, transforming spatial and naming conventions, as well as systems of land rights – is also tracked at local level. Widening inequality is the product of the eradication of the rundale system in the 1830s and the 'squaring' of townlands, leading to intensified competition amongst neighbours and forms of tenancy structured to reward self-interest. Mac Suibhne resists any simplified story of survival or loss, with close readings of complexities of class and coping mechanisms, and vividly evidences the roots of social divisions that stretch back to the early 19th century and beyond.

Mac Suibhne's connection to Beagh as his own birthplace heightens the deep attention paid to its contours (physical and psychological) and contradictions, but as he asserts in the acknowledgments, 'genealogy's charms' hold little sway for him. This finely tuned sensibility — possessing intimate knowledge of the locality, and yet also sharply observant and thoughtful in argumentation— is conveyed through prose that especially shines in the study's prologue and final chapters. Here Mac Suibhne insists on the agency of those who adapted to new futures, and that the reader perform 'an act of imagination to see the people in these pages as more than shadows cold and wan, that is, to see them for who they were not who they became'.

Methodologically Mac Suibhne mines an impressive and vast array of sources including Poor Law Union records, census returns, calendars of probate, petty session records, valuation records, and parish registers – in addition to folklore sources and ethnographic research undertaken amongst the surviving community. Commentary on the ellipses of the historical record reveals a scrupulous self-awareness, particularly with respect to those sub-tenant families who suffered most (often at the hands of their neighbours) and whose traces in archive and memory have all but disappeared.

The density of detail can be overwhelming in its marshalling of examples to make a point, yet Mac Suibhne consistently manages to steer back towards conclusive argumentation just at the point when the text threatens to divert into narrow channels of concern. Mac Suibhne's technique of combining scrupulous documentary research with elegant prose makes for an admirable model of historical writing, as the reader emerges with a sense of a profound cultural loss both particular to locality, and emblematic of wider rural Irish experience resonating to the present.

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