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CULTURAL EXCHANGE AND IDENTITY IN LATE MEDIEVAL IRELAND: THE ENGLISH AND IRISH OF THE FOUR OBEDIENT SHIRES. By Sparky Booker. Pp xvi, 298. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 2018.

Sparky Booker argues in the introduction to this monograph that Dublin, Kildare, Meath and Louth constitute ‘an ideal place in which to explore the questions that have been at the heart of medieval Irish historiography for centuries: to what extent and in what ways were the English of Ireland ‘English’? How did they maintain and express this Englishness? How did they interact with their Irish neighbours and to what extent did they adopt Irish customs? How far and in what ways did these Irish people assimilate into colonial society?’ (p. 3) This is a bold claim for a regional study, but the author’s careful and imaginative use of evidence, combined with her willingness to place the Irish experience in the broader context of the late medieval English world, fully justifies her ambition. The combination of independence of thought and critical ability on display throughout the volume makes this one of the most important contributions to the understanding of late medieval Irish history published in recent years. Its focus on the neglected fifteenth century alone would make the work significant, but there is much more on offer here.

The introduction, as well as offering a concise account of the relevant historiography and setting out convincingly the methodologies to be employed in engaging with diverse and difficult primary sources, makes clear that in so far as the evidence allows what follows will attempt to move beyond the experience of the elite and explore the issues of cultural exchange and identity among the population at large. Subsequent chapters honour this commitment, and significantly broaden the social range of investigation in late medieval Irish studies. The first chapter explains when and why the four counties under review came to be identified by the settlers and the crown as a distinct region of ‘four obedient shires’. This involves a refreshing revisit of the origins and character of two other regional descriptors used by contemporaries for this part of Ireland – maghery and Pale. The author’s debt to the seminal work of Steven Ellis in this context is clear, and it puzzling that a bibliography that in other respects is exemplary in its breadth does not include the latter’s *Defending English Ground: War and Peace in Meath and Northumberland, 1460-1542* (Oxford, 2015). To have drawn upon the analysis of the military character of a region defined to a great extent by warfare provided therein would have added yet further to the strength of the book under review.

Having identified the region to be explored, the book then moves on, in Chapter 2, to a consideration of Irish immigration and the status of the Irish who lived in the four obedient shires. The fifteenth century, Booker argues, saw an existing Irish community added to by an increasing number of new arrivals. As their numbers grew, the need for these new arrivals to learn English declined while at the same time their status rose. In such a situation it was perhaps to be expected that the tone of legislation directed against the Irish should become increasingly harsh. This provides a nice contrast with the situation in the Church, which is examined in Chapter 3. No racial rhetoric was to be found in this sphere, and the chapter provides a detailed account of the increasing numbers of Irish clergy who ministered within the four shires. The author’s analysis then turns to the issues of intermarriage and fosterage, which, she argues, in their prevalence and increasing frequency posed a challenge to a settler community determined to maintain its English identity. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the use of Irish customs and the Irish language in the region, and make the vital point that in no-one’s

eyes did the use of coyne and livery, or the use of Irish as a medium of communication, by a settler lord make that individual any less English. The threat to Englishness lay not in bilingualism, but in the inability of those who were considered English to speak the English language.

This summary of the contents of the volume captures very little of its richness. One can, of course, question some points, and wish for more discussion of others. The ‘obedient’ in the term ‘four obedient shires’, for instance, begs consideration of the operation of the common law in the region, and especially its borders, but this topic is not addressed directly except with reference to the appearance of Irish names on jury lists. There is also less acknowledgement than there might have been of diversity within the four shires in matters such as the development among settler families of extended lineage, the use of march and/or brehon law, and acceptance of the billeting of kerne (Irish mercenary soldiers) among them. For reasons to do with patterns of lordship and density of original settlement, the English of Louth were more conservative in these matters than their fellow-settlers in Kildare.

Such observations, however, are not intended to detract from the overall excellence of the work. From start to finish a careful case is constructed which offers a way forward for historians interested in how a colonised region which increasingly adopted the culture of the colonised retained its Englishness. The author brings her argument to a powerful conclusion in the final pages of the book. ‘To speak of a colonist as gaelicized ... is only to say that he or she practiced some combinations of Irish customs and practices in some circumstances, not to imply that they adopted all of these practices, used them in all situations or became, in some way, “Irish”.’ (p. 252.) ‘Blood’ had, by the end of the Middle Ages, replaced culture as the marker of identity. ‘[The settlers’] sense of Englishness was dependent on their access to English law and involvement in the colonial government, their shared history of conquest in Ireland but above all their English parentage and ‘blood’.’ (p. 258.) In a manner reminiscent of the early work of Robin Frame, Sparky Booker has in this, her first book, altered the parameters of the study of late medieval Irish history.

BRENDAN SMITH

Department of Historical Studies, University of Bristol