Ian Higgins, "Jonathan Swift, Financial Revolution, and Anglo-Irish Print Culture",


http://ecti.english.illinois.edu/ 12/09/2013
Essay - Reviews

Volume 54, 2013, Supplement

Nicole Gray and Matt Cohen, "Danse Macabre: Cultural History, and Colonization"

Ian Higgins, "Jonathan Swift, Financial Revolution, and Anglo-Irish Print Culture"

Tom Jones, "Johnson, Macpherson, and Literary Truths"

Emily M. Kugler, "Imagining Insular Empire in Samuel Baker's Written on the Water"

Anna Neill, "Imperial Cacophony"

Pam Perkins, "Violents Passions: Anti-Jacobitism and the Early American Republic"

The Editors would like to thank the following Editorial Assistants for this volume: Caitlin Cress, Joel Haddorf, Sydney Ingram, Whitney Rinne, Jordan Sells, Michaela Templemire, Michelle Tuttle, and Caitlin Wiedenmann.

Volume 53, 2012, Supplement

Sarah Alderfer, "Politics, Deception, and the Novel"

Susan Carlile, "Politics: The Business of a Woman"

Shelly Charles, "L’homme sans qualités: l’abbé Prévost, ou l’écrivain à l’école du commerce"

Ian Higgins, "Jonathan Swift's Political Biography"

Elaine McGirr, "Genre and Gender: Time for an Inclusive Literary History"

Sally O'Driscoll, "Nostalgia for 'Inherent Perfection': The Incorporation of Balladry into Poetry Itself"

Laura Rosenthal, "Men Behaving Badly"

Beth Kowaleski Wallace, "Oh You Beautiful Doll: Objects in Eighteenth-Century Culture"

The Editors would like to thank the following Editorial Assistants for this volume: Ly'Tanya Culbert, Kolbe Krzyzanowski, Marie M. Mayhugh, Rebekkah Owens, Sandi Parker, and Erin York.

Volume 52, 2011, Supplement

http://ecti.english.illinois.edu/links-content.html 12/09/2013
Jonathan Swift, Financial Revolution, and Anglo-Irish Print Culture

Ian Higgins
The Australian National University

Jonathan Swift’s *A Short View of the State of Ireland*, published in 1728, proposed a short way of solving Ireland’s endemic economic crisis: “I have often wished, that a Law were enacted to hang up half a Dozen Bankers every Year; and thereby interpose at least some short Delay, to the further Ruin of Ireland.” Swift describes “the daily Encrease of Bankers” as “ruinous” for Ireland. Bankers “for their private Advantage, have sent away all our Silver, and one Third of our Gold.” Landlords had founded the first banking businesses in Ireland and the first Irish banks serviced the landlord class, enabling absentee landlords to transfer rents from their country estates to Dublin and then from Dublin to London. The banks were in the business of remittance and were a conduit of money out of Ireland. Swift describes the landlords in Ireland as a parasitical, blood-sucking class: “The Rise of our Rents is squeezed out of the very Blood, and Vitals, and Cloaths, and Dwellings of the Tenants.” In his notorious satire on the Irish poor and their oppressors, *A Modest Proposal* (published in 1729), cannibal landlords, having devoured their poor tenants, can be assumed to have the right to the bodies of their tenants’ babies “which, by Law, may be made liable to Distress, and help to pay their Landlord’s Rent.”

Swift’s searing satiric short view of absentee landlords and bankers reflects his understanding of that nexus, which economic historians of Ireland have shown existed, between landlords and bankers. By Swift’s accounting in the *Short View* “one third Part of the Rents of Ireland, is spent in England” which, with the other profits, pays, and “Remittances” sent there, amounts “to a full half of the Income of the whole Kingdom, all clear Profit to England”: “more than half the Rent and Profits of the whole Kingdom, annually exported; for which we receive not a single Farthing.” In his Tory polemic, such as in his first *Examiner* paper of November 2, 1710, Swift had attacked the financial revolution in England and Whig policies which saw wealthy people funding a permanent national debt: “those pernicious Expedients of borrowing Money by vast Premiums, and at exorbitant Interest.” A theme reprised in the satiric denunciation of deficit spending and the permanent national debt articulated in the King of Brobdingnag’s incomprehension at the “Management of our Treasury” in Part II, Chapter VI, of *Gulliver’s Travels*.

In Sean O. Moore’s *Swift, the Book and the Irish Financial Revolution: Satire and Sovereignty in Colonial Ireland* (Johns Hopkins, 2010), Swift is represented in a new light. Swift’s visceral hatred of Irish bankers and landlords is not much in evidence. Swift is presented as defending Irish bankers and Irish landlord investors. Swift’s apparent hostility to financial systems based on a permanent national debt advantaging wealthy private investors is discounted. Swift is said to have supported an Irish financial revolution that began in 1716 when a group of prominent Anglo-Irishmen loaned the Irish Treasury funds to raise troops for national security in the Jacobite emergency of that time. The Irish National Debt was thus funded by a coterie of Anglo-Irish landowners (rather than by the “Moneyed-Men” Swift had so deplored in his polemic against the financial revolution in England). The principal of the loan was not to be repaid. The
interest on this national debt was to be paid from future tax revenues in perpetuity. This Anglo-Irish system of funding a national debt Moore calls the “Monti” as it follows the banking model of the “Italian Monti” described in 1716 by Swift’s friend, the philosopher, projector, and churchman George Berkeley (3–6 and passim). Swift’s Irish writings are “on behalf of the Monti (itself representative of the Irish landed interest)” (45). Moore claims that though “Swift often chastised his caste for absenteeism, he mainly wished to help it sustain its wealth longer. His writings of the late 1720s, including A Modest Proposal, did not so much object to their rents, collection of interest on investment in the Monti, or transport of their wealth to England when they lived as absentees. Rather, he taught them to conceal the consequences of it more effectively and to create a print media capable of constructing a nationalism that would support their domination of Ireland” (167). Moore’s lens clearly differs from Swift’s Short View of Irish landlords and bankers in 1728, and he does not notice the satirist’s rhetorical wish for an indiscriminate shortest way with the bankers.

Moore comments that while the primary motive of the members of the Monti was private profit, they formed the foundation of an Anglo-Irish political economy, arguing for the rights of the Irish parliament to make its own laws, determine Ireland’s taxation, and resist British attempts at economic and political control over Irish finances. Swift is seen as instrumental, through his economic, political, and literary writings, in promoting a new national identity in a domestic publishing industry, and creating a market for Anglo-Irish literature. Moore argues that Swift “hoped to encourage Irish readers to consume the work of Irish writers and thereby value their regional culture in a way that would support the Monti and, by extension, the independence and health of the whole domestic economy” (15). Swift’s writings are argued to be part of a press mobilization of public opinion to defend the Monti. At the same time, Swift’s economic discourse is said to be promoting a national print culture which in Swift’s view was required to defend Ireland’s constitutional rights and to critique British imperialism. Moore reads Swift’s Irish satires and polemic literally and allegorically. Metaphors are made to do a lot of work in the argument. Paper was made from cloth rags and the old metaphor of textile as text, the connection between linen weaving and manufacture and paper-making and printing, are homologies always active in Moore’s account. These “metaphors are continuous enough” in Swift’s work “to be regarded as an allegory for national cultural production” (21). When Swift is writing about linen weaving or the wool trade or minting coins, he is also said to be writing about print culture and the book trade (34–35, 210–11). Swift’s writing on economic issues, as in A Proposal for the Universal Use of Irish Manufacture (1720), The Drapier’s Letters (1724), and A Modest Proposal, are to be read as meta-commentaries on national print culture (23). The Proposal’s “discourse on textiles, trade restrictions, and boycotting can be seen as an allegorical call to literary arms” (29). The persona of the Drapier, a dealer in cloth, is also a figure for the bookseller (138). The children to be consumed in A Modest Proposal, “stood not only literally for the native Irish young … but also figuratively for texts in search of publishers” (170).

Moore ranges over the entire Swift canon, but problematically his argument about Swift is sometimes based on works which are not securely canonical (see 63–68, 77–79, 108, for examples). The book evinces wide reading in the literary criticism on Swift, and he is deeply informed about recent scholarly work in postcolonial studies, book history, and the “new economic criticism” (10–13). He has investigated contemporary economic writings. He properly reports, for example, the evidence that Swift’s various proposals to address the trade
deficit and the drawing of currency out of the country to pay for imports and British manufactures—Swift’s advocacy of sumptuary laws, boycotts, schemes to encourage domestic manufacture, and so on—were not novel. Swift’s importance in Irish economic disputes is often inflated by cultural and literary critics, and Moore’s book is also inflationary in the credit it gives to Swift, who seems to have founded Anglo-Irish literature, inaugurated a literary public sphere in Ireland, and been a principal promoter of the Monti. Previous Swift scholarship has shown that Swift’s entry into the successful campaign against William Wood’s halfpence, for instance, was belated. Swift’s interventions in economic issues are characterized not by their originality, but by their rhetorical power and sensationalism, and by their inflammatory political challenge to British Whig authority. The material interests of the Church of Ireland often informed what Swift had to say on economic matters, a point that might have been accorded more attention than it receives in this study. Swift perceived that his polemical interventions were often impotent. The paragraph in A Modest Proposal which ironically lists Swift’s expedients for helping Ireland in its condition of economic extremis is a threnody of economic proposals advocated but not adopted and moral exhortations not heeded. When one of Swift’s proposals was taken up by authority there is a grimly ironical black humor about the rare success: Swift’s call for the Irish adoption of English legislation requiring that the dead be buried in wool was implemented.

Moore clearly has a new and interesting general thesis but as an intervention in scholarly debate this book has a serious problem in its lack of supporting detail and convincing evidence. Ezra Pound once remarked that “any general statement is like a cheque drawn on a bank. Its value depends on what is there to meet it.” This book’s arguments are conducted on a frustrating level of generality and speculative assertion and reach conclusions which seem too facile. Swift does not appear to have used the term Monti or explicitly written in support of such a financial system and his writings can certainly be interpreted as having purposes other than what Moore claims. Swift’s Short View set out to demystify the spin of pro-establishment economic writers who projected an upbeat future for Irish commerce and who claimed that Ireland was really in a flourishing condition. Alluding to the English colonial Acts fettering Ireland—the English Navigation Act of 1663, the Cattle Act of 1666, the Woollen Act of 1699—Swift imaged Ireland as “a Man shut up in a Dungeon,” afforded a rosy prospect which he views from behind bars. Moore emphasizes Swift’s hostile critique of the imperialist British fiscal-military state and its treatment of Ireland as a colony, but he claims that Swift’s task was to promote a favorable image of Ireland and its products (31) and that he is concerned to maintain the Monti’s property (73). Anyone who has read through the Swift canon will know that the images of Ireland projected in his writings are, at the very least, mixed, and very often unfavorable.

Swift’s characteristically unqualified satire on Irish bankers and the landlord class needed to be explained more if the argument is that Swift is their propagandist. At one point (in his account of Swift’s opposition to the Bank of Ireland bill), Moore explains the lack of explicit evidence that Swift wrote in defence of the Monti as tactical, since appearing in defence of the interests of the Monti would have seemed anti-populist (77). There is a lack of specific detail about the members of this Irish Monti and lack of evidence provided of contemporary recognition of its agency in forming the Protestant Anglo-Irish identity. Indeed, an odd aspect of Moore’s study of Ireland’s political economy and print culture is the absence of named Irish bankers and Irish
printers. There does appear to be a missed opportunity here to say something genuinely new, by investigating printers other than George Faulkner, men like the notorious Dublin Jacobite printer Cornelius Carter who, like John Hyde and Edward Waters and others, reprinted Swift’s works in Dublin. It is a problem for Moore’s thesis about Swift’s promotion of Dublin print culture in the service of the Monti that Swift seems to have preferred publishing his works in London. Swift’s contacts with bankers might have been explored. Some famous Jacobite bankers are glimpsed in Swift’s correspondence, such as Richard Cantillon, the Irish banker in Paris, and Robert Arbuthnot (with whom Swift had a correspondence which was technically treasonable under the treason laws). There is brief mention of the Copyright Act in this book, but it is not noticed that Swift seems to have taken a radical and concrete initiative in seeking to support the lot of authors in the print culture through political legislation. Swift appears to have written the clause in the Copyright Bill of 1737 stating that copyright should revert to authors after a period of ten years.⁹

Following J. A. Downie and David Oakleaf, Moore seems to understand Swift’s counter-hegemonic writings as essentially Whig even in their hostility to the Williamite English financial revolution.¹⁰ Swift was concerned about the rise of the English fiscal-military state because it threatened the Revolution Settlement and thwarted the Revolution’s promise of good government (42–43). I think Swift works such as the Examiner (1710–11), The Conduct of the Allies (1711), A Letter from Dr Swift to Mr Pope (wr. 1721–22, publ. 1741), and The History of the Four Last Years of the Queen (wr. 1712–13, publ. 1758) attest to the fact that Swift regarded the oppressive fiscal-military state as the pernicious product of the Williamite Revolution. Swift explained in his History that it was when “the Prince of Orange was raised to the Throne” that the expedient was found out “of raising Money upon the Security of Taxes, that were only sufficient to pay a large Interest.”¹¹ As Moore notices in his remarks on The Conduct of the Allies, that “pamphlet made the dangerous, nearly Jacobite assertion that before 1688 England’s wars had not required the kingdom to carry permanent debt and perpetual taxation” (44). Certainly Swift’s radical economic complaint could elide into dynastic disaffection in his Irish writings, as is the case in the Short View with its anti-Hanoverian references near the close of the pamphlet to “the meanest Prince in the German Empire” and seditious application of Exodus 5: 15–17, implying that “his Majesty” King George is the oppressive “Pharoah” forcing the Irish “Israelites” “to make Bricks without Straw.”¹² It would be interesting to know if the members of the anti-Jacobite Monti always welcomed Swift’s propaganda on their behalf.

NOTES


