

Irish
Geography

Irish Geography
May 2016



ISSN: 0075-0778 (Print) 1939-4055 (Online)
<http://www.irishgeography.ie>



Book Review

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How to cite: Horner, A. (2016) 'Review: V. Costello (2015) Irish Demesne Landscapes, 1660-1740. Dublin, Four Courts Press'. *Irish Geography*, 49(1), 97-98, DOI: 10.2014/igj.v49i1.649

Irish Demesne Landscapes, 1660-1740 by Vandra Costello, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2015, 256 pp., €50.00 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-84682-506-4.

This well-written book explores the characteristics of one of the most-visually prominent features of landlord Ireland: the demesne or large park that in country areas usually surrounded the principal residence of the landlord. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, demesnes, which were frequently demarcated by high stone walls, were a physical expression of the division between the landlord, who derived a wealth from the rents of his tenants, and the general population living in much more modest and sometimes very poor circumstances. Within the demesne, a landlord might focus some of his surplus capital on the creation of a lavish social and physical world that was responsive to pan-European changes of taste. One element of that world was the carefully-calibrated demesne, which was the scene that was viewed from the landlord residence and the arena for a range of landscaping and recreational projects that might extend from the creation of walks and water features to the provision of spaces for field sports and hunting.

In this book the garden history expert Vandra Costello focuses on the years 1660 to 1740, a period that extends from the restoration of Charles II after the Cromwellian episode to the early years of big house building and the advent of the 'natural' landscapes that have come to be associated with many of the great demesnes. This is an era of formal garden design, epitomised by geometrical layouts involving avenues, walks and canals. By focusing on this particular period, Costello builds on the research of Rolf Loeber, Toby Barnard and others, including the geographer William J. Smyth, to show how the dynamics of change and the scale of investment in seventeenth-century Ireland had a landscape expression concentrated on demesne development. The components of elaborate landscapes such as those that once surrounded such places as Kilkenny Castle, Killruddery (Co. Wicklow) and Eyrecourt (Co. Galway), as well as over a hundred other locations, are here given a wider intellectual setting.

Costello offers a distinctive approach in the abundance of her examples and in her careful development of contexts. She is good in emphasising that many initiatives of aesthetic value might also have had a utilitarian rationale, for example water features such as canals might be central components of planned pleasure gardens, but they might also act as well-stocked fish ponds providing food for the dinner table. Pigeon-houses or dovecotes could similarly be both ornamental and an invaluable on-site source of food. Costello sees demesnes as functioning complexes, 'integrating the pragmatic into their design' and seeking, sometimes apparently in vain, to create some sort of sustainability. Her approach takes her across a very wide range of features and issues, from deer parks to duck decoys, from fruit-growing to rabbit warrens, from bowling greens to beehives, and from horticultural improvement and the kitchen garden on into the physic garden and to the seemingly ever-greater challenge of woodland renewal.

As Costello points out, most of the landscapes discussed in her book are now greatly altered or totally swept away. Many were destroyed with the sea change in taste that favoured the 'natural' after about 1740, a shift that, for example, revolutionised the appearance of the great park at Carton, County Kildare. Others simply withered away, as the interests of their proprietors shifted or as the realities of economic management became unavoidable. But the demesnes that Costello describes, taking in places across much of Ireland, can certainly no longer be ignored. While the political power shifts in the late seventeenth-century and in early eighteenth-century Ireland have been widely reviewed by historians, Costello helps to highlight how some of the parallel social and economic shifts of the period produced a build-up of capital that fuelled a buoyant property market and the creation of new ornamental landscapes. This is an accessible and original book that will be of particular interest to historical geographers and landscape archaeologists among many other interest groups. There is no map to identify the location of the many places mentioned in the text. Otherwise, the book is most appropriately illustrated by 64 illustrations and nine colour plates.

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