

Speech by Professor Colm Lennon
launching Peadar Slattery's book
Social Life in pre-Reformation Dublin, 1450-1540
in the Teachers' Club on 15/8/2019

It's a great honour to have been invited to speak on the occasion of the launch of Peadar Slattery's *Social Life in pre-Reformation Dublin, 1450-1540*. Many years ago I published a book on Dublin in the Reformation period. As I read Peadar's work, how I wished that it had been available back then, as an invaluable guide to the political, socio-economic and cultural life of late medieval Dublin (that I and others have tried so painfully and inadequately to recreate).

Here in Peadar's book we find a wealth of information about people, places and events in the fifteenth-century city. We are introduced to those with appropriate names such as Richard Plummer who worked on the water-pipes, Marian Tapister, who sold ale, and John Paver, a street repairer – aptronyms, so popular nowadays, were invented in the middle ages to suit the occupations and the trades of the bearers. Here are evoked the places, both urban and in the rural hinterland, that Peadar has fondly reconnoitred, such as north County Dublin, or reconstructed mentally through the use of the latest archaeological evidence. Great events are colourfully described, most notably perhaps the crowning of a young boy, Lambert Simnel, as king of England in Christ Church cathedral in 1487. And above all, there is clearly on view a becoming

empathy for the inhabitants of the city, extended towards men and women in the various social ranks, or indeed those excluded because of race, poverty or contumacy.

Peadar's book is based on a range of records that he has mined with great perspicacity – wills, customs and franchise rolls, and official documents of various kinds, for example, – showing what can be done with carefully selected, if limited resources for medieval Ireland. Also demonstrated are areas of the author's specialist knowledge, such as the production and use of timber and wood in medieval Ireland, which illuminates his discussion of casks for fish and other produce, the types of shipping built for the vital commerce of Dublin, and the evolution of the wharves of the port at Wood Quay and Merchant's Quay, Dublin's early harbour. Another salient feature is the adducing of much interesting information on musical developments, particularly in polyphony, as used in the cathedrals and churches of Dublin, and also on liturgical and pious texts that were used for public rituals and private devotion. *[I wondered, by the way, about the advent of printed works in that age of the invention of the press.]* In respect of affective, personal piety, the devotion of women such as Ismaia Fitzwilliam of Dundrum, is highlighted, as are those of female merchants and tradeswomen, who engaged in maritime commerce or shop-based retailing. And the mechanics of this trading

nexus of Dublin with Chester and other ports, including the extension of credit and the use of coinage, are learnedly presented here.

Reading Peadar Slattery's book has led to reflections on how a late medieval city like Dublin represents a kind of urban work of art – that is, a community in which the citizens consciously sacrificed some of their individuality in the interests of civic well-being and prosperity. I'm not just referring to topical matters, such as how water charges were paid for connection to the city's efficient piped water-supply or the continual efforts (mostly unsuccessful) at management of animal and human waste. No, it's to appreciate how an essentially patriarchal, and certainly not democratic, regime developed a relatively effective civic administration by the 1500s, based on a corporate model of councils ruled by patrician and artisanal classes, merchant and occupational guilds (such as shoemakers and carpenters, for example), religious fraternities in the parishes, and hospitals, all institutions to which the enfranchised citizens either belonged, with which they identified, or which they supported by their alms. This sense of urban pride was most prominently displayed on occasions of civic and religious pageantry such as the annual feast of Corpus Christi, the body of Christ, as described by Peadar, when municipal leaders, merchant and trades guild members, and the lay religious brothers and sisters processed solemnly through the streets, and attended plays in a great celebration of civic unity.

In the sphere of economic life, Peadar Slattery has shown that the principle underpinning the regulation of the market and the supply of food and other commodities was based on the maintenance of fair prices and the prevention of profiteering from the sale of produce to which value had not been added in the form of domestic labour. Most of this control was exercised through the medium of the guild system for merchants and craft-workers, which managed the apprenticeship and qualification of new entrants into the commerce and, by extension, the franchises of Dublin. It was through the guild system that standards of social responsibility on the part of members and apprentices as well as charitable provision for distressed members were upheld. Although merchants from abroad may have complained about exclusion from the commercial world of Dublin, a flourishing fraternity of English merchants was established in 1460 for the economic and religious welfare of those who came to trade in Ireland from across the Irish Sea, while women's participation in commerce, if not in its administrative aspects, was assured. The close interplay of the agrarian hinterland and suburbs with the intra-mural world of the citizenry is demonstrated in a series of fascinating maps specially drawn for the book.

The ties that bound city-dwellers through the social orders of the civic corporation and the guilds are shown by Peadar Slattery to have been reinforced through their engagement with the associative life in the

parishes. Expression of religious devotion was reflected in membership of parish fraternities, such as the wealthy institution of St Anne's in St Audoen's parish, or the rural fraternity of St Mary's, Balscadden, for instance, that attracted pious men and women seeking the salvation of their souls and those of their families and friends, through perpetual masses celebrated by chaplains at special chantry altars and chapels. These religious confraternities also provided outlets for sociability on the feast days of patron saints, and opportunities for charity towards the poor and sick, thus paralleling the functions of the secular guilds. Bonds of ritual kinship, beyond those of mere family, were forged across the social orders, the rural and civic worlds, and the secular and the religious spheres, all reinforcing a sense of belonging to a unique and historic urban entity. These close ties also perhaps helped to stiffen the resistance of the urban community to proposed religious and social changes at the time of the Reformation.

Overall, then, this book not only tells us a huge amount about the formation of a confident, outward-looking urban community of Dublin in the late middle ages, but also raises for modern city-dwellers issues to do with civic responsibility and identity. A paternalistic mayoralty may not be attractive in an age of proposed directly-elected mayors, but a sense of civic solidarity on the part of the ruling group did provide comparatively good government, to which all the eligible inhabitants contributed. There

were intractable problems such as hygiene in the medieval city and the official exclusion of Irish people and migrants, but the framework of artificial kinship was expanded as far as it could be to include the enfranchised, including poor native citizens, and also selected newcomers. Individual striving for material and spiritual well-being was subsumed within the collective commitment to guild and fraternity, generating an ethos of charity and co-operation.

It is a tribute to Peadar Slattery's work that the relevance of the historic to the present is asserted through a myriad of examples and cases. I urge all here to buy this book and to read it with a view to understanding not just the pre-Reformation city of Dublin but also the timeless urban community values that can and should animate our city in the present day.

Congratulations, Peadar, on writing a wonderful book - which I declare officially launched.

[ENDS]