



Irish settlements and survival

Title	Irish settlements and survival
Author(s)	Dempsey, Karen
Publication Date	2021-03
Publisher	Center for Irish Programs, Boston College,

Rolf Loeber, *Irish Houses and Castles, 1400–1740* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2019). Hbk €55.

Karen Dempsey, NUI Galway

It is not often we might use the term ‘polymath’ but the late Rolf Loeber was just such. He led, along with his academic partner and wife Magda Stouthamer-Loeber, a distinguished career in psychology and criminology. Together they also curated and maintained an academic interest in Irish medieval and early modern social history as expressed through architecture, landscape and literature. Over his lifetime, Loeber published extensively on these subjects, some of which are gathered together in this book. These specially selected essays concentrate on elite domestic architecture over the period 1400-1700, as well as the broad cultural, political and geographic trends which influenced their creation, adoption and adaptation. The opening chapter is an architectural history of Gaelic castles and settlements during the period 1370–1600, followed by successive chapters on the practices of English colonisation in Ireland 1534–1609 (Chapter 2) and its architectural impact and legacy (Chapter 3), as well as the somewhat neglected period in architectural history of 1660 to 1690 (Chapter 4). The last two papers in this collection focus firmly on the early modern era examining first the beginnings of classicism in Ireland and a contextual exploration of the Irish country house after the Williamite War to the 1740s, co-authored with Livia Hurley. This book is a fine collection of previously published informative, well-researched essays, some of which were no longer in print or as easily accessible as they deserved to be. The collation of these articles preserves a legacy of scholarship from a dedicated researcher that are of value to academics, students and interested amateurs. These papers are in and of themselves works of reference where diverse material from historical geography, archaeology, history and literature are gathered together. This is supported by excellent maps, illustrations and photographs, indicating Loeber’s comfort with both field work and archival research.

The articles in this collection all start out with the same central question – what are the research gaps and how can they be approached? In each instance, Loeber consistently gave himself a series of incredibly tricky tasks from establishing a material record of Gaelic-Irish castles to exploring the material trace of colonialism and its architectural legacy. Chapter 2, is a stand-alone text having been originally published as a monograph by the *Group for the Study of Irish Historic Settlement*. It is an account of English colonisation in Ireland, 1534-1609. Through careful analysis of geography and historical documentation, this chapter outlines the practices of English colonisation in Ireland which are integrated within political and cultural history. Owing to the incredible level of detail and description of the process of colonisation and plantations this chapter benefits most from multiple readings. Helpfully there is a list of featured buildings and their geographical locations. Indeed, most of the appendices provided are neat and helpful lists that will be used by future generations.

Loeber was attuned to the life of settlements outside the main focal buildings that tend to dominate most scholarly focus. He consistently reminded the reader throughout the selected articles of the wider extent of castle and house complexes but also different forms of settlement from crannógs to turf and sod structures. Loeber was also drawn to material

culture beyond architecture, as evidenced by his publication with Stouthamer-Loeber, on book ownership, and their survival from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 'The survival of books formerly owned by members of Old English and Gaelic Irish families in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' in T. Herron & M. Potterton (eds), *Dublin and the Pale in the Renaissance* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011). His integrated or multi-disciplinary scholarship is worth noting (and emulating). Still relevant are his many excellent research suggestions that will provide avenues of enquiry for future students from the understanding the stylistic links between decorations used in ecclesiastical and domestic Gaelic architecture and their need to be compared to similar links in English areas (21) or exploring the overlapping colonists within Ireland and between Ireland and America (104 figure 2.16). These show his understanding of the different intersections and interactions of people, places and things that occurred at a variety of scales. Loeber has many research questions yet to be pursued from regional studies of individual lordships, as well as the border areas between them, examining the chronology, distribution and function of castles and castle sites, excavations of earth and timber castles, exploring the patronage of Gaelic families and many more. We could lament that more of these things have not happened, but perhaps it is better to see this as an exciting opportunity for greater and further study.

While there are many positives to these essays there are some points which perhaps require unpicking. There is ongoing dualism in which a Gaelic-Irish identity is opposed to its supposedly corollary of Anglo-Norman across a broad time range, for example "Gaelic architecture in this chapter refers to buildings of the native Irish, excluding Anglo-Normans or their descendants. Thus, castles of such families as the Barrys, Fitzgeralds, Burkes, and Stauntons are not included in this review, even if they adopted Irish habits. Irish architecture of Gaels who immigrated from Scotland is included (1, note 1)." This is unhelpful. Culture, including castle culture is not static – it moves around, it is shaped and in turn reshapes. Excluding castles that were seen as those of Anglo-Norman descendants is like excluding men from a gendered analysis. It is equally hard to accept the terms 'Gaelic-Irish', 'Old-English', 'New-English', 'settlers' and so on without qualification of how these labels are being applied, what criteria are used in their definition and how selection or exclusion of the different families or dynasties worked. That is not to deny the very real shifting cultures norms that existed in Ireland at this time. For the most part, by 1400, there had been many, many instances of intermarriage and inter-cultural exchange, as indeed evidenced by the very material Loeber presents. Of course, this critique is made nearly twenty years after his study was first published and it is not intended to detract from the exceptional detail given to the character of 'Gaelic-Irish' castles or residences.

While these essays were written over the course of a lifetime, a clear thread runs throughout the book. Loeber sets out the different ways in which knowledge, styles and design moved between people and places, making interesting points about how influences shifted over time. He draws inspiration from the connectedness of architectural styles with manuscripts, contemporary images and tomb sculpture. He is clear to point out that these exchanges are not just from the top down suggesting unsurprisingly that migration of styles was partly aided by craftworkers from Scotland, England and within Ireland (138). Later, he moves beyond more typical explorations of Irish / English / Scottish relations to show international parallels

of Ireland and the Netherlands. It is particularly good to be reminded of this lest we believe all of the travelogues from this time “One traveller, writing from Enniskillen (Fermanagh) in 1620, commented that ‘the residences of the gentry were, as a rule, extremely mean in appearance’ and that ‘most of them were thatched’” (154). Instead, Loeber highlighted possible continental classical influences on Irish architecture, for example, the combination of step-gables and voussoirs (wedge-shaped stones used to build an arch) around the windows at the ruined Castle Cuffe, Laois (141, figure 3.12) which he suggested were remarkably similar to Dutch buildings of the period, including the town hall of Hoorn in the Netherlands (157). Perhaps these international comparisons reflected his own life experience and understanding of shared culture as he was born in the Netherlands, and lived in the United States before moving to Ireland.

Despite his excellent understanding of multiplicity of meanings and cultural transmission of knowledge, an unchanging adherence to militarism seem to have been his blindspot. During the time some of the papers on elite domestic accommodation were published, there were ongoing debates across castle-studies related to the role and function of castles. This mostly circled around defensive capabilities versus display in terms of wealth or status. In other words, castle scholars were moving beyond military explanations to explore more social concerns. Not all castles were primarily military structures, and it appears this way something that Loeber inadvertently overlooked. He mused that continued construction of towerhouses in Carrickfergus throughout the 1550s and 1560s indicated the residents lack of confidence in the town’s defences (61) but does not seem to entertain other related factors such as status or tradition. Later, he wonders why certain castles such as Garrycastle and Franckfort Castle (both Offaly) and Killyleagh Castle (Down) seem not to have been overly troubled about ensuring flanking fire (140), without considering that it may not have been their primary concern. This overreliance on military explanation are issues to which the contemporary reader must be aware and be mindful that castles operated at multiple scales as centres of administration, often as places of ceremony and as residences of people who live or worked there.

Chapter 4’s opening gambit “An earlier generation of architectural historians believed that the second half of the seventeenth century in Ireland was ‘architecturally speaking, a featureless gap’” (164) indicated that like his other work, Loeber was not afraid of deconstructing well-worn statements. No doubt many readers will be all too familiar with this trope having read or heard the same thing about other time-periods. Is it time, I wonder, to realise that our desire to box things neatly into meaningless decades or even centuries hampers our understanding? This need to pinpoint start dates, and patrons prevents deeper understanding of how people lived in spaces and desired to make them their homes.

Across all papers are thematic threads of continuity and change as well as an insightful understanding of the different ways in which traditions emerge, are shared, adapted or rejected. It is through these threads that Loeber intended to disentangle the composite factors that made the material past on the island of Ireland 1400-1700. The material presented in the final two chapters moves further away from the later medieval into a time of further architectural, landscape and cultural change. They are as informative and well

presented as the previous four bearing in mind that there were often decades between the publication of these papers. The original publications have been edited and re-worded in places and some images have been omitted. But some missteps might be noted in the switch from Loeber's 'country house' to the more politically loaded 'Big House' – one could ask was this necessary? This is minor quibble, however, in a well-presented and keenly edited book that acts as a worthy tribute to Loeber's extensive scholarship as evidenced by the bibliographic compilation of his work (266-70). This plus the *Tabula amicorum* indicates just how truly he was valued and esteemed.