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Book review for *Rural History*

Frank Keohane, *The Buildings of Ireland: Cork, City and County* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020). xix + 681 pp. + 126 colour plates. £45.00. ISBN 9780300224870. hb.

It is all but impossible in an 800-word review to do justice to a ‘Pevsner’ guide, especially one that is a first edition rather than a revision. This is certainly the case for Frank Keohane’s magisterial *Cork, City and County*, the result of over twelve years of extraordinary dedication to the built environment of Ireland’s largest county. Not only has Keohane chronicled almost every building of significance across 737,000 hectares of countryside (equivalent to one-third of Wales), but he has also penned the most comprehensive architectural guide to date of Ireland’s second city and the dozen largest towns that surround it. His book builds on the important work of the Irish Historic Towns Atlas project through their studies of Bandon (published in 1988) and Youghal (2015). Keohane, a native of the county, shows his intuitive understanding of the thousands of buildings that dot such a varied landscape from the rich farming land in east and north Cork to the ‘jagged mountainous peninsulas’ and ‘spectacular beauty’ of the western and southern coastline. He introduces his volume by referencing James S. Donnelly’s theory, first suggested in a book familiar to many readers of this journal – *The Land and the People of Nineteenth-Century Cork* (1975) – that Cork’s striking variety of landscapes, economies and cultures means that it can be seen as a ‘microcosm of the island of Ireland’. Keohane’s guide shows this to be true as he moves from Dursey Island, accessible only by a ‘rather exhilarating’ cable-car trip across a dangerous sound, to the tidy geometrical street patterns of late Georgian ‘improving’ landlords in Mitchelstown, Fermoy, and elsewhere.

Followers of the Irish Pevsners will know that they have been slow in the making. The first, *North-West Ulster*, by Alistair Rowan, appeared in 1979, and this was followed in 1993 by *North Leinster*, co-authored by Rowan and Christine Casey, and much later by Casey’s *Dublin City* (2005). Over the last decade, thanks to the Buildings of Ireland Charitable Trust, who fund the research for the series, there has been a new spurt of volumes: Kevin V. Mulligan’s *South Ulster* (2013), Andrew Tierney’s *Central Leinster* (2019) (reviewed in vol. 30, no. 2 of this journal), and now Keohane’s *Cork*. Further volumes on Dublin County and beyond are in progress. This latest volume expands dramatically the geographical range of the series into the southern province of Munster. It also, rather remarkably, is the first time in over 40 years that an Irish Pevsner has charted any part of the western Irish coastline – now rebranded by tourism agencies as the ‘Wild Atlantic Way’. Keohane understands the central role of the sea in Cork’s history – from the trade networks of the Munster Plantation towns to the embarking of armies in the seventeenth century, and from the fortifications built to protect the coastline from invasion by Napoleon to the ‘heroic task’ of building the Fastnet lighthouse on a distant rock in the Atlantic between 1896 and 1904.

Keohane’s prose is at times perhaps more cautious and understated than other Pevsner authors. For example, the architect J. R. Boyd Barrett’s many 1950s-60s Catholic churches in the county are treated more sympathetically than in other accounts of post-war Irish architecture. And, eschewing any dramatic flourishes, the kidnapping and enslavement in 1631 of the inhabitants of Baltimore by Algerian pirates is noted as a ‘setback’ for that coastal community – one wonders what the enslaved villagers thought! This carefulness is not a criticism as such, and

Keohane is no doubt conscious of how the odd throw-away remark by Nikolaus Pevsner or one of the other authors in the series was sometimes used maliciously by developers to condemn and demolish important buildings. Keohane is wisely judicious in offering his own opinions. But he does not hold back when it comes to recent conservation disasters in the county such as the ‘cruel and derelict limbo’ endured by the spectacular nineteenth-century pile of Dunboy Castle, half-restored and left to dereliction since the great financial crash of 2007, or the ‘inexcusable neglect’ of the neoclassical villa of Vernon Mount (built 1794) near Cork, ‘shamefully’ lost to arson in 2016. He also notes the numerous convents, closed in the 2000s, that are now quickly falling into ruin without any clear plan for their protection, and how their many fine altar fittings, statues and artwork have occasionally found a new life in nearby parish churches. Overall, Keohane demonstrates in this volume a mastery of all building styles and time periods as well as an eagerness to tell us of the sometimes eccentric personalities of the people involved. *Cork, City and County* is a formidably impressive work of reference that will inform and educate Irish and international readers for many decades to come.

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