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Book review for *Rural History*

Andrew Tierney, *The Buildings of Ireland: Central Leinster, the counties of Kildare, Laois and Offaly* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019). xx + 697 pp. + 127 colour plates. £45.00. ISBN 9780300232042. hb.

The Irish Pevsners have been a long time in the making: the first, by Alistair Rowan (*North-West Ulster*) appeared in 1979, and there have been three others since, by Rowan and Christine Casey (*North Leinster* (1993)), Casey (*Dublin city* (2005)) and most recently Kevin Mulligan (*South Ulster* (2013)). Now we have *Central Leinster*, and a volume for *Cork* is imminent, bringing the total coverage to around half of the entire island. This volume, by Andrew Tierney, has been worth the wait: it is a splendid, authoritative, thoroughly readable and an immensely scholarly study of the buildings of three central counties (incorporating some material from an earlier survey by Michael O'Neill). Taking the reader from the commuter towns at the edges of Dublin to Offaly's rural hinterland in the lower reaches of the River Shannon, the author introduces us to the history, architecture, art, sculpture – and much more – of a remarkably varied landscape of rolling hills and vast expanses of bog (a full third of Offaly, we learn (3)). Like the best of Pevsner authors, Tierney understands the immutable bond between landscape from architecture. We learn of the ancient timber tracks across the bogs, the canal routes that linked Dublin with the Shannon, and the now rapidly vanishing concrete cooling towers of state-sponsored peat electricity generation – all part of an enmeshed entity of landscape and human endeavour that the author explores with great sensitivity and vivid description.

Scholars of rural history will find much rewarding material here. *Central Leinster* is an overwhelmingly rural Pevsner – the total population of the three counties, heavily concentrated to the east, is less than 400,000 persons, and the largest towns (for there are no cities) are Newbridge and Portlaoise, both of around 23,000 persons. The volume is filled with rich descriptions of castles and tower-houses (about which the author writes with expertise), and the urban and architectural legacy of sixteenth-century plantations (Offaly and Laois were in a former life King's and Queen's counties; Portlaoise was Maryborough). We discover the many interesting survivals of early farmhouses, some still in thatch, as well as a selection of Ireland's finest country houses and estates. All are explained to the reader with deep local knowledge and infective enthusiasm. The ruins of the medieval castle on the dramatic Rock of Dunamase in Laois, for example, are 'best approached ... on a summer's evening, when the rugged silhouette is clear against the sky'; 'a more evocative or romantic site will not be found in the midlands.' (607). More surprisingly, we learn that the best introduction to the great Palladian Castletown House in Kildare is 'from the top of the 67 bus from Dublin to Celbridge' (215), its principal façade set amidst eighteenth-century parkland and the meandering River Liffey. The volume includes a comprehensive account of the monastic site at Clonmacnoise as well as settlements with much later ecclesiastical connections such as Maynooth, with its grand neo-Gothic St. Patrick's College quadrangle by Pugin and chapel by J. J. McCarthy. Nineteenth-century enthusiasts can also delve into the detailed accounts of the great romantic Gothic houses of Birr Castle and Charleville Forest (both in Offaly), the more classical Emo Court and Ballyfin (both Laois), the many 'picturesque' railway stations by Sancton Wood, and the peculiar, severe neo-Gothic churches of John Semple. Similarly, the coeval revival of the Catholic church and its big-

farmer donors (another subject on which the author is particularly knowledgeable) is richly catalogued in the array of convents, schools, chapels and mid-size country houses; we learn that one architect-priest in Durrow, Co. Laois, was remembered by local devotees as no less than a ‘man of genius, taste and learning, painter, sculptor, designer, [who] devoted rare talents to the building ... of the house of God’ (318).

The author’s command of more recent architecture and art is no less informed or discerning. The many post-war Catholic churches are treated sympathetically throughout (and well featured in the illustrative plates); Tierney highlights the ‘structural drama’ of the Gothic interior of an otherwise greatly derided 1960s church in Portlaoise (52). Furthermore, this is perhaps the first Irish Pevsner that offers a critical perspective on the fruits of the red-hot years of the ‘Celtic Tiger’. Alongside deserving criticisms of its most destructive and vandalistic impulses we learn of major civil buildings that capture the ‘optimism and ambition’ (54) of these years and hidden gems by local firms such as *Architecture53seven*, including the ‘unexpected delight’ (552) of an elegant juice bar and nightclub in Portlaoise, finished around 2007. All in all, *Central Leinster* is one of the most important new publications in Irish architectural studies for many years and a major reference work for counties whose heritage is sometimes overlooked by locals and tourists alike.

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