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Book Review

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An Cumann Tíreolaíochta na hÉireann

Book Review

Mapping Laois from the 16th to the 21st century by Arnold Horner, Dublin, Wordwell, 2018, 376 pp., €30 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-9997909-6-7.

Mapping Laois from the 16th to the 21st century is Arnold Horner's recent contribution to the history of cartography in Ireland. Coming 50 years after his undergraduate thesis in 1968, *Mapping Laois* is the latest in an accumulated body of work that has positioned him as the leading expert in Ireland on the history of Irish cartography and surveying. Horner is also esteemed in the practice and teaching of wider aspects of contemporary and historical geography having enjoyed a career in UCD's Department of Geography from which he retired in 2011. His commitment to the geography discipline and its multiple areas of research in Ireland is reflected in his role as reviews editor of this journal, *Irish Geography*, from 1979 to 2006. He received the Geographical Society of Ireland Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014.

As Andrews (2012) has noted in this journal, dedication and patience are two characteristics that underpin Horner's research approach to the study of maps and their makers, traits that are no less evident in this latest addition to his scholarship. But before any detailed reading of *Mapping Laois*, the first instinct is to thumb through the pages, so enticing are the rich selection of maps and associated depictions that give an immediate sense of the geographical breadth and historical depth covered within its chapters.

Mapping Laois builds on Horner's earlier books examining mapped counties of Ireland, in particular William Larkin's county maps of Offaly (2006), Meath (2007), and Sligo (2011). Here, however, his investigations extend to capture the variety of maps in Laois's cartographic history, traversing over 450 years in a record that contains well over a thousand surviving documents in print and manuscript form. In dealing with this substantial archive Horner is unavoidably selective in copy reproductions, yet the book is nonetheless comprehensive in mapped examples and contextual detail on important and ordinary events that occurred in places big and small. Horner shows us how he reads the maps under his scrutiny, accurately and precisely connecting their various features and subjects. In this, he illustrates the ways in which maps and map-makers bore witness to, perhaps sometimes created, the county's history within wider social, economic and political contexts.

Organised into three parts *Mapping Laois* is both a history of cartography of Laois and a reference for its maps. Part A charts the cartographic history of the county in thematic and chronological form over 12 chapters beginning with the earliest map of c.1560, 'probably the best known and most informative of all early Irish maps' (p. 8). Horner

demonstrates how this early map, depicting part of Laois, offers a glimpse onto the county at a point between the medieval and early modern eras and enables an understanding of territory that reflected an 'intimate relationship between landscape and the family units dominated by the seven tribes of Leix', the name by which the county was then known (p.11). Horner brings our attention to key features in the physical environment: the Slieve Blooms 'where wolves still lurked' (p.11) is set in contrast to the lowland areas, while evidence of the human impact is analysed in place name and the built environment.

Succeeding chapters chart the county's mapping experiences and illustrate the changing nature of map type and creator in facilitating change over time from an early 'frontier' landscape through periods of major transformation from the 17th to 21st centuries. There is a sustained focus throughout these chapters on land units, the natural and built environment, and settlement as each responded to this ongoing transformation and reflected the evolving purposes of maps in the organisation of land, resources and society. From the major 17th-century forfeiture surveys to planning maps of the 21st century, Horner examines themes of land confiscation and ownership, infrastructure and investment, boundaries and units, landscape resources and valuation, and administration and planning. A striking feature of the book is the alternating scales of analysis on any one page that moves from county to local level and illuminates people and places within their historical setting.

Part B of *Mapping Laois* gathers together those maps previously discussed in atlas form and dedicates double spread sheets to presenting the county (or most of it) over individual points in time from c.1560s to 1901. The uniformity in mapped representation of the landscape and its features within each atlas enables comparison across the towns, villages and countryside in contrast to those analysed earlier at a range of scales and over multiple map types. Part C then is a book in itself providing an excellent detailed reference listing of the main map resources for Laois, housed primarily in public archives and repositories but also including some privately held sources. These provide invaluable information to the researcher of cartography and local history interested in a particular locality, be it farm, townland, village, property or person; but potentially applicable also to other counties.

Attention to detail is second to none in this book. There is useful cross-referencing between chapters of places, maps, and people as the book progresses. Horner also provides the reader with practical information on reading maps, giving valuable explanations on historic units of measurement and scales. The appendices offer additional notes on surveys, manuscript maps and a helpful list of all surveyors known to have worked in Laois, while an index, separated by people, place and subject, reiterate the multiple readings Horner draws from the maps encountered in his analysis. The quality of a few images suffered in the reproduction process but this pales in contrast to Horner's appraisal and the overall production quality of the book by its publisher, Wordwell.

Laois's map record, which is continuously growing in the current digital era, 'is both a key to, and part of, the heritage of the county' (p. 229). This point is firmly made as Horner acknowledges the ongoing map archive of the county, the value and role of

which can only be understood if recorded and preserved. Through Horner's experience and insight we have been shown how to appreciate the extent and wealth of Laois' map resource, understand the history it contains, and acknowledge maps of the 'continuous present' (p. 230). *Mapping Laois* is the first of its kind in Irish cartographic scholarship and its approach, method, insight and format enables other Irish counties to follow this path forged by the leading voice in Irish cartographic history.

References

J.H. Andrews (2012) Arnold Horner and the study of Irish cartographic history, *Irish Geography*, 45:3, 283-288.

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