

PROJECT: Irish Confraternities, 1400–1700

We congratulate SCS member Colm Anthony Lennon, of the History Department in the National University of Ireland at Maynooth on the award of a Government of Ireland Senior Research Fellowship in the Humanities and Social Sciences for 2002-03. Dr. Lennon's award-winning project is for the first comprehensive survey of all Irish confraternities, with a broad review of their role in social, religious, and political life through the early modern period. The text of his proposal follows. Those wishing to contact him for further information can do so at: Department of Modern History, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, County Kildare, Ireland. or at Colm.Lennon@may.ie

The confraternity has had a long history in Ireland. Over many centuries, Irish men and women have expressed their sociability as well as their need for spiritual reassurance by banding together in associations of prayer and charity, most typically within the parish setting. Based on external models adapted to indigenous circumstances, the confraternities or religious guilds came to flourish in Ireland by the fifteenth century. There were at least a dozen in the Dublin area alone, and in most other regions and localities these pious corporations also found a domicile. Their primary purpose was of an obituarial nature: the members could hope to benefit by their being commemorated in perpetuity in the prayers and liturgies of the clerical personnel. The confraternities also performed a range of social services including education, the care of the sick and the relief of the poor. Before the upheavals of the sixteenth century they were lay-run, the brothers and sisters administering the property of the confraternities and appointing the clergy. Changes wrought by the religious reformations of the early modern period brought about a divergence in the confraternal impulse. Within the Counter-Reformation mission, new clerically-controlled sodalities were formed to take up most of the functions of the older bodies. There was also a strand of social development within the increasingly Anglicanised municipalities that perpetuated the charitable functions of the confraternities within the setting of the civic parish. Although subject to major changes in the course of modern Irish history, the confraternal system proved to be durable and flexible in fostering a sense of belonging, especially in times of transformation and uncertainty down to the later twentieth century.

The purpose of the proposed research project is to study Irish confraternities in order to distil the essence of their social, cultural and religious importance. By undertaking an intensive analysis of the institution of the confraternity in Ireland between 1400 and 1700, this project aims to divine a pattern in the adduced evidence for the crucial transition from the late medieval system of piety to the reformed and renewed confessional milieu of the early modern period. A necessary step will be the identification and listing of all the institutions (with their locations) that were in being during the study period. Also, the specifically Irish context for the evolution and growth of the confraternal system needs to be

addressed. The influence, for example, of the rich heritage of Gaelic religious forms upon the predominantly urban confraternities bears scrutiny, as does the impact of the sixteenth-century reformations in sundering the late medieval unity of religious experience of people in Ireland.

The specific objectives of the proposed project encompass the assessment of the medieval forerunners of confraternities in Ireland, and the various forms of association connected with diocesan institutions such as cathedrals and religious orders, including the 'third orders' characteristic of the Gaelic world. A survey of the panoply of late medieval chantries and religious guilds will incorporate topics such as their foundation and membership, the systems of appointment and management of buildings including chapels and colleges, patronage, wealth and property, and links with trade and craft guilds. The changes wrought by the Reformation will be explored through an assessment of the impact of legislation on the system of guild piety and practice, and the fate of their chapels and personnel. Of particular significance is the continuation of the late medieval guilds in the post-Reformation period, the deployment of funds and wealth from the older establishment helping to nurture an alternative system to that of the state church. In the seventeenth century the Counter-Reformation clergy pioneered new types of sodality, embodying innovative devotions and practices, in which the laity had much less of a controlling influence, but of equal importance will be an investigation in the context of this institutional change of the implementation of welfare measures to deal with problems of poverty and deprivation in the municipalities which were increasingly Protestant-dominated. Key issues concerning conflicts of jurisdiction between the clergy and laity, the churches and the civic corporations, and secular and regular clergy that were raised during the seventeenth century and persisted into later periods will also be addressed.

The sources for the proposed research project will be multifarious, and the methodology will draw upon a number of disciplines. Gaelic literature will be a rich source for quasi-confraternal cults and devotions in the middle ages. Especially for the earlier periods, archaeological, architectural and iconographical evidence will be adduced to reconstruct the world of the early religious guilds and chantry chapels. The recent project for the restoration of St Anne's guild chapel in St Audoen's church, Dublin, for which I was historical consultant, provides a useful model. For some of the late medieval institutions such as St Anne's guild, and also Christ Church cathedral confraternity, Dublin, the written records are comparatively voluminous, and for the rest, the scattered documentation for the late medieval period including wills, deeds, leases and institutional records will be collated. An evaluation of the impact of religious reforms within this pre-Reformation framework, centring on the crucial factor of the failure of the now-Protestant regime formally to abolish the late medieval confraternal system, will adduce records of the central administrations of state and church as a counterweight to those of local institutions and individuals. For the post-Reformation period, the sources are more plentiful as the Anglican parishes became more proficient at record keeping, and in this connection the transmutation of some of the confraternal forms of charity into municipal welfare schemes will be

examined. For the Counter-Reformation, the documents of the religious orders, such as the Society of Jesus, Dominicans, Franciscans and Carmelites, contain much information on the new-style confraternities, as do those of the newly settled Catholic episcopate which fostered devotional and social forms of communion in its mission of renewal.

The proposed project interfaces with current studies in early modern society, culture and religion. Under the aegis of the Society for Confraternity Studies in Toronto, which publishes the journal *Confraternitas*, the study of confraternities in many countries has been greatly advanced through the application of sophisticated methodologies. The investigations have incorporated not just the religious beliefs underpinning the confraternity movement but also artistic, musical and ritualistic aspects which played a major role in the pageantry of European life. Also, most crucially, the agenda has included an assessment of the role of confraternities and sodalities in the evolution of modern welfare policies dealing with poverty, illness and underprivilege. There are herein potentially productive possibilities offered for a comparative approach.

Although relatively little scholarly attention has been focussed on Irish confraternities to date, suggestive lines of enquiry have opened out in the past decade and a half in the field of early modern Irish social and religious history to form a backdrop to the proposed project. My own work on the impact of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations on the Dublin and Limerick patriciates has been complemented by studies of society and religion in other regions and localities. Recent studies of popular religious beliefs and attitudes among the communities in early modern Ireland will provide a context for the examination of confraternal practice there.

Current debates about the formation of confessional identities in early modern Ireland have drawn upon research into the impact of religious and social changes upon the communities of natives and newcomers in Ireland. The guild system, with its religious component, was one of the salient unifying and bonding forces before the divisions of the sixteenth century occurred. It is in this setting that I have already investigated the fate of the Dublin religious guilds during the Reformation, undertaken a case-study of St Anne's in Dublin, and probed the emergence of a system of welfare in the sixteenth-century Irish towns with their inherited corporatist mentalities. Against the background of confessional divergence and religious division, it is worth studying the extent to which the confraternal impulse survived as a component of this corporatist spirit among the borough populations within, and perhaps transcending, the opposing confessional milieu.

The proposed project will advance the study of a vital aspect of early modern Irish history firstly by giving a fillip to confraternity studies in this country. By bringing to bear upon the area the issues and methodologies of this historiographical field, I hope moreover to further the consideration of Irish Renaissance and Reformation studies within a context that allows for more comparison and contrast with continental models (as opposed to British forms exclusively).

Besides the quantification of research material for the efflorescence of a variety of types of confraternity in town and countryside, the project will have

the added value in thematic terms of contributing towards a synthesis of much recent scholarly work in Irish social and religious historical studies. Various studies of poverty and welfare in parish and community may be synthesised by a thoroughgoing analysis of the confraternities and their post-Reformation substitutes in the Irish towns. Accordingly a contribution will be made to the burgeoning field of early modern Irish urban studies. Furthermore, upon the groundwork laid for a more thorough investigation of the social history of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation in Ireland, the examination of the history of confraternities will provide insights into the centrifugal and centripetal forces at work within the confessional groups in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The study will contribute to the ongoing discourse on the subject of Irish identity formation in the early modern period. Various forms of belonging – to family and kin-group, to guild and to civity – were vital in the creation of a sense of individual and communal self-worth. The part played by participation in confraternal life in helping to forge cultural and religious identities is one of the objectives of the study: an examination of membership of new forms of confraternities and sodalities, and the changing role of the laity in their organisation and management, is important for understanding the pattern of Irish civic traditions since the Reformation.

More generally, at a time of potential disjunction between the present inhabitants of Ireland and their cultural and religious past, the fostering of an awareness of a crucial strand in the heritage of the country is to be valued. The proposed project would make a contribution in this respect.

The award of a Fellowship would advance the proposed project by allowing the applicant to engage in full-time research for a year, during which the subject-matter would be divided into two modules. The first of these would be a study of the pre-Reformation period to be written up in at least two chapters. The Reformation and post-Reformation divergence within the confraternal system would be the focus of the research in the second half of the Fellowship period, giving rise to the composition of three chapters. The opportunity of presenting a public lecture on the subject area of the proposed project would be welcome as a means of disseminating research findings to a general audience. While the chapters produced during the term of the Fellowship would form a discrete study of early modern confraternities in Ireland, it is hoped that a larger monograph on the history of the Irish confraternity from 1400 to 2000 would be feasible by about 2005, if grounded upon the research-work produced by the proposed project. A comprehensive database of all confraternal institutions, including chantries, colleges and hospitals would be constructed and updated throughout the research year and thereafter to aid other researchers in the field.