

## Richard J. Butler, *Building the Irish Courthouse and Prison. A Political History, 1750-1850*

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**Richard J. Butler, *Building the Irish Courthouse and Prison. A Political History, 1750-1850*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2020, 610 p.**

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Michel Foucault explains the 19<sup>th</sup>-century newly-thought prison building: “The old simple schema of confinement and enclosure – thick walls, a heavy gate that prevents entering or leaving – began to be replaced by the calculation of openings, of filled and empty spaces, passages and transparencies”.<sup>2</sup> Prison buildings as visible elements erected in Irish cities and constantly adapting to new penal reforms are the core subject of this book.

From the mid-18<sup>th</sup>-century anarchical constructions proposed by local architects who knew very little about punishment and prisons to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century model Pentonville prisons with the one-cell-one-prisoner system, the reader follows the questioning and uniformisation of prison buildings. The book also gives a realistic and thorough perspective of all the issues Ireland faced from 1750 to 1850 (the decreasing power of the middle-class, the emancipation of the Catholic population, the opposition between local and central powers, transportation, the Great Famine, sectarianism and rebellions) and as such remains a valuable study at the crossroads of history, politics, social studies and architecture.

Divided in two sections, the book first focuses on the Assize Courthouses. The first three chapters describe the fluctuating and decreasing power of grand juries from full power at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the loss of their freedom in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Riddled with corrupted members, the grand jury system controlled prison buildings and used them to achieve personal wealth and fame – the most impressive the building, the most powerful and rich they were. Competition between counties and cities was raging in Ireland, all the more so as grand jurors were regularly offered loans for prison building by the central government. This first and perhaps most significant contribution of Butler’s work sheds light on the fact that, in a quasi-colonial Ireland, Westminster was pulling the strings and regulating the balance of power between local and central government.

The second part of the book focuses on County Gaols constantly adapting from 1770 to 1855 and mirroring the questioning of penal reformers. Its first chapter analyses the building boom during the 1780-1790s, the hiring of experts and the growing interest in penal reforms and theories. The 1810 Act imposing a model gaol design based on segregation, dry and airy cells, a chapel, an infirmary and yards for exercise is then documented and raises the issue of rebuilding part of Irish prisons to stick to a constantly evolving model; in the 1820s and 1830s the separate system based on isolation was imposed, its best examples being Crumlin Road (Belfast) and Nenagh (Co. Tipperary). The Irish prison system was then impacted by the end of transportation to New South Wales in May 1840 with the necessary building of depot convict prisons like Mountjoy in Dublin or Spike Island (Co. Cork) to keep up to 1,500 prisoners awaiting transportation to Van Diemen’s

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2. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, New York, Vintage Books, 1995, p. 172.

Land. But it was soon blown away by the Great Famine and its sharply increased number of prisoners and fevers.

This book is a key contribution to the research about Irish prisons in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and its major asset lies in its thorough investigation into the various histories of prison buildings, criminal indictments and grand-jury presentments for courthouses and prison-building works for each county and big city. The appendices are clear examples of that huge archive work and Butler's impressive study is based on a large range of sources like prison reports, prison works reports, extracts from criminal courts but also journals of architecture, topographical dictionaries of cities and more personal documents like the memoirs and correspondences of notable inhabitants to say the least. Truly fascinating are the plans and pictures published on each page of the book since they capture the inner working and organisation of prison buildings and contribute to their comprehensive review.

But Butler also goes off the beaten tracks by delving into the grand jury system, a unique local form of power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while studying the reforms coming from Westminster through various Acts of Parliament and Parliamentary Papers. All in all, with a clear and precise analysis of the role played by grand jurors along with the early appointment of prison inspectors (which was copied by the English system in 1837) and the involvement of the population in the Association for the Improvement of Prisons and Prison Discipline in Ireland and women's associations, this book contributes to establish that the Irish prison system was very adaptable and unique; a unicuity confirmed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Intermediate Prison System, a prison with no bars offering prisoners a better chance to rehabilitate.

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**Eunan O'Halpin, Kevin Barry. *An Irish Rebel in Life and Death*, Newbridge, Merrion Press, 2020, 260 p.**

*Kevin Barry. An Irish Rebel in Life and Death* is an atypical and extraordinary work by one of Ireland's most respected and prominent modern historians. It not only explores the Irish revolutionary period in an original and thought-provoking manner, but also illuminates aspects of the course of the republican movement in the period after the formation of the Free State and down to the present century through the prism of the family of a "republican martyr". Kevin Barry joined the IRA at 17 and on 1 November 1920, less than three months shy of his 19<sup>th</sup> birthday, the University College Dublin (UCD) medical student became the first IRA volunteer in the Irish War of Independence to die by the hangman's noose. The book is also centred on women, exploring the lives, actions and reactions of the