

## Culture



**Marilyn SILVERMAN and PH. GULLIVER, (Eds.), *Approaching the Past: Historical Anthropology through Irish Case Studies*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1992, 428 pages, U.S. \$19.50 (paper), \$49.50 (cloth)**

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By Michael G. Kenny

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This collection of essays grew out of ethnographic and historical research in the Republic of Ireland and was given shape by a 1989 conference on the relationship between history and anthropology. Though the subject is Ireland, *Approaching the Past* has far broader range; four of its ten essays discuss generalized methodological issues, while the rest are in one way or another aimed at developing greater sophistication in the study of local manifestations of systemic change.

The book, therefore, has a mission. The contributors are dissatisfied with the ideological biases of Irish nationalist historiography, but also with traditional community-based studies which leave out the big picture or pre-judge issues such as just what the actual unit of local-level analysis is or should be. The editors emphatically point out that "community" is not a place but an ideological construct. They also warn of the tendency inherent in the writing of national history of "turning the reality of local and regional variety into the simplified, misleading monolith of 'Ireland'" (p. 195) — a comment which may stand as a central message of the work as a whole.

*Approaching the Past* has little to do with Irish particularism; *culture* is given short-shrift. With the exception of an essay on Catholicism in Donegal, the book altogether avoids the western Gaelic-speaking region in favour of detailed case-studies in the central and eastern parts of the country more exposed to "modernizing" influences emanating from England or the North Atlantic world at large. Exoticism is eschewed in favour of analysis in terms of political history and the expansion of capitalist modes of social relations.

The authors are in search of dynamic and flexible models of historical process which can do justice to the complexity of their findings. Most of the substantive work has a political economy focus; and,

with the exception of one essay about post-Cromwellian 17th Century land-holding, they all concentrate on the 19th and early 20th Centuries and are specifically preoccupied with the encroachments of the modern economy and the bureaucratic state or church — with tension between private and communal property rights, with inheritance, kinship, or the treatment of the poor. For example, one writer wishes to understand increasing privatization of the southeastern salmon fishery in terms of "the local and regional dynamic through which the process of encroachment wound its uneven but inexorable way in the context of a century increasingly dedicated to the rights of private property" (p. 100); another contributor, criticizing the three-generation Irish "stem family" model advanced by Arensberg and Kimball, examines the inheritance strategies of numerous actual farmers as deduced from deeds and wills, concluding that "when we abandon the rigid stem family model in favour of a loose model, our views of Irish rural history are transformed" (p. 226).

The methodological essays which follow the substantive core of the book discuss cross-disciplinary issues bridging historical anthropology, social history, sociology, geography, and political science, and run through considerable reviews of the literature in doing so. However, so far as anthropology itself goes, one is left with a certain puzzlement about what it is that makes the empirically oriented essays "anthropological" in nature. One contributor, a sociologist writing in comment on this blurring of disciplinary boundaries, observes that "for the most part, these authors are doing what historians would do — more precisely what local historians would do." He asks, "Why are these anthropologists behaving like historians?" (p. 344). On the other hand, it can just as well be asked why social historians are behaving like anthropologists, and the final essay addresses precisely that question.

*Approaching the Past* is an interesting and provocative book which suffers somewhat from the extent of its ambition and scope. This would not be such a bad thing if aimed at an exclusively specialist audience, but the sub-title after all is "Historical Anthropology through Irish Case Studies." Non-specialists would have benefitted from a general summary of relevant Irish history and an overview of the current state of Irish historiography. The empirical studies could stand more detailed contextualizing; instead we are cast right into the fray to extract from it what we can. But it is certainly worth the struggle.