

**Amy Prendergast, *Literary Salons Across Britain and Ireland in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. 238. £ 55. ISBN 9781137512703.**

‘I prefer a sociable evening in Dublin, to all the diversions of London, and the conversation of an ingenious friend, though in a black gown, to all the powdered toupee at St. James’s’ (93), the Irish-born critic Anne Donnellan, whose mother hosted salons in eighteenth-century Dublin and London, mused. If much current research on Bluestockings has focused on a handful of English female writers and hostesses, Prendergast’s wide-ranging study opens up new venues by considering Anglo-Irish connections especially in the second half of the eighteenth century and by concentrating on *salonnières* who were often active in England *and* Ireland. Her study commences with a thorough investigation of the French salon, a model to be ‘emulated’ (50) in Britain and Ireland. Madame du Deffand, Julie de Lespinasse and Madame Geoffrin occupy the centre of Chapter 1, which defines salons: they occurred on a specific day of the week, were spaces of elite sociability and devoted to intellectual exchange, a testing ground for unpublished literary texts. If many of the observations are based on established criticism (e.g. Dena Goodman’s work), the innovative part of this chapter uncovers the presence of rarely considered Irish visitors to French salons, such as Sarah Lennox, or the Irish hostess Anastacia Fitzmaurice, whose presence in Paris proves that Irish eighteenth-century Enlightenment culture is anything but marginal.

Chapter 2 considers the literary salon in eighteenth-century Britain and treats several hostesses who held famous salons in their London town houses: the ‘Queen of the Blues’ Elizabeth Montagu, Frances Boscawen and Mary Monckton, but also Hester Lynch Thrale at Streatham and hostesses in Edinburgh. What these salons have in common is that they attracted a mixed-gender clientele, who engaged in conversations informed by the ideal of ‘politesse’: ‘Friendship and mutual support amongst the Bluestocking hostesses replaced the open animosity found amongst the *salonnières* in France’ (60). Prendergast draws exact boundaries when it comes to nomenclature, for example in her claim that Thrale has ‘erroneously’ been labelled a Bluestocking (66).

The most innovative part of this study are Chapters 3 and 4, which describe Elizabeth Vesey’s and Lady Moira’s sociable activities on both sides of the Irish Sea. The Irish-born Vesey not only hosted a salon in her ‘Blue Room’ in Bolton Street (London) but was also in charge of two more similar formations back home in Ireland: in Westmoreland Street in the centre of Dublin, and at Lucan, a manor with spectacular grounds and interior. Both Irish salons attracted Irish politicians and *litterati*. A remarkable exchange of books across the Irish Sea was one result of Vesey’s enthusiastic hospitality. That Prendergast gives visibility to such cultural transfer and to interactions and correspondences of visitors like Anne Dawson, Anne Donellan, Martha Perceval and Emily Fitzgerald, the Duchess of Leinster, linking them to better-known figures like Bishop Percy, is one of the noticeable achievements of this study.

Moira House with its magnificent interior, the focus of Chapter 4, no longer exists. It was a salon dedicated exclusively to Irish concerns, especially antiquarianism, translation and regional writing. Among the specific concerns of Anglo-Irish antiquarianism were the language and culture of ancient Ireland. Offering a unique forum for key figures like Charlotte Brooke and Thomas Moore, Moira House became a centre for Irish culture and scholarship. The impressive list of visitors who participated in discussion and aided in the dissemination of ideas included

famous figures like Maria Edgeworth, Sydney Owenson and Sir Walter Scott, as well as numerous politicians, but also many lesser-known persons.

Chapter 5 provides a useful survey of barely known provincial salons in Ireland and England, where reading was conducted as a communal activity, where books and ideas circulated freely. One example is Anna Miller's circle, which was devoted to poetic games, competitions and the patronage of Anna Seward, but found itself ridiculed by Horace Walpole. These salons did not exist independently of one another but were linked by visitors, correspondence and the exchange of material books. Chapter 6 maps out the effects of the 1798 Rebellion: Dublin lost its status as political and cultural centre, while many of those interested in intellectual exchange continued to run their circles in England. Finally, alternatives to the reading of unpublished literary manuscripts (a key activity of eighteenth-century salons) are described: theatricals, reading circles, book clubs.

Prendergast's study is immensely useful in many respects. Among its shortcomings is the fact that the nomenclature sometimes seems rather strict: What is the exact difference between a Bluestocking, a *salonnière* and a hostess, between a circle and a salon? Are Bluestocking women only ever mutually supportive? Debates around luxury goods (and exclusive interiors; see e.g. Maxine Berg), research on women's travel writing, or book studies might throw additional light on the salons. Moreover, the textual layers of the source material, ranging from unpublished manuscripts to sometimes highly problematic nineteenth-century editions, to modern, accurate editions, should be mentioned. Yet overall, Prendergast's study is impressive and highly informative.

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