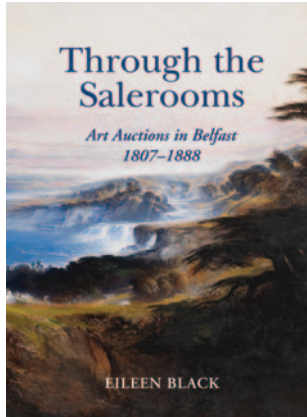


Eileen Black

## THROUGH THE SALESROOMS: ART AUCTIONS IN BELFAST, 1807-1888

(Ulster Historical Foundation, Belfast, 2022) isbn 978-1-913993-33-7, 446pp, 30x21cm, 12 illus, £24.99 hb

review by Peter Murray



DR EILEEN BLACK HAS HAD A LONG AND DISTINGUISHED career as an art historian and chronicler of art in Northern Ireland. Now retired as a long-serving curator at the Ulster Museum, she has published catalogues of the art collections of Belfast Harbour Commissioners, Queen's University and Down County Museum. Based mainly on newspaper reports of over two thousand auctions held during the nineteenth century, *Through the salesrooms: art auctions in Belfast, 1807-1888* is a weighty and impressive volume, with a foreword by Brendan Rooney of the National Gallery of Ireland. It is part of a similarly impressive trilogy of publications by Dr Black, the other two being *Art in Belfast, 1760-1888: art lovers*

or *philistines* (2006) and *Window to an age: a chronicle of art in Belfast, 1760-1888* (2016). All three volumes are based on her 1998 doctoral dissertation 'The development of Belfast as a centre of art, 1760-1888'. Among the newspapers she consulted were the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, *Belfast Daily Mercury*, *Belfast Morning News*, *Belfast News-Letter* and *The Northern Whig*.

The results are impressive, with *Through the salesrooms* including a detailed alphabetical list extending to over four hundred pages of artists whose works were sold at auction. Many of the names – Frith, Teniers, Etty, Crome and Morland – are familiar, but thousands of lesser-known artists are also detailed. In addition, there is a section devoted to biographical notices of the main dealers. The great value of this volume lies in Dr Black's meticulous research and her identification of works sold. Sadly, many of the paintings cannot be identified even by title as they were listed as 'unspecified' or 'untitled', while the origins of some collections were equally vague – one being identified, not very helpfully, as from 'One of the Noblest Mansions in Ireland'. It evidently suited some property owners in Dublin, such as Sir Charles Compton Domville, to send works to Belfast to be sold at auction. In 1877 several hundred items from Domville's residence, Santry Court, were auctioned by Hugh Hamilton. Included was a portrait, listed as a Joshua Reynolds, of Pamela, wife of Lord Edward Fitzgerald.

The end date chosen by Dr Black, 1888, marks the opening, in rooms above the Free Public Library on Royal Avenue, of the first publicly funded art gallery space in Belfast; eventually, this would evolve into the Ulster Museum. The establishment of the city's School of Design in 1849 was also a significant milestone, as was Marcus Ward's opening a commercial art gallery (in Donegall Place) in 1864, with William Rodman following suit thirteen years later. Three Art Union exhibitions were held at Ward's in the 1860s. It may come as a surprise to readers unacquainted with the high level of activity

that characterised Ulster in the nineteenth century to learn that the Belfast salesrooms saw many works by European Old Masters, including Canaletto, Correggio, Jordaens and Poussin, offered for sale. Many of these came from dealers in Brussels, Edinburgh and London, who thrived on the glut of European artworks appearing on the market as a result of the French Revolution. Granted, a significant proportion of these ‘Old Masters’ had optimistic attributions, but even so the appetite for art was clearly healthy. Dealers were active in promoting and selling works by contemporary British artists such as Thomas Sydney Cooper. Landscapes and seascapes were much in demand, as were equestrian paintings, particularly work by members of the Herring family. In contrast, local Belfast artists were less well represented in these salesrooms; they either avoided sending their works to auction, or perhaps were ignored by a system that saw Belfast auction houses working closely with English-based suppliers such as Thomas Gilbert, John Paterson and George Wilson. Occasionally, as when local artist Andrew Nicholl decided to live abroad, in 1839 and 1846, studio sales of works would take place. *Dunluce Castle* and *Giant’s Causeway* were among several works by Nicholl sold by William Montgomery and Son in 1882.

Paintings of biblical scenes by John Martin were popular in Belfast. In 1878, John Cramsie sold Martin’s apocalyptic *The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah*, while eight years later Hugh Clarke sold Martin’s triptych *The Last Judgement*, *The Great Days of his Wrath* and *The Plains of Heaven*, canvases depicting the end of the world, as recounted in the Book of Revelation. The painting of Sodom and Gomorrah is now in the Laing Gallery in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, while the triptych is in Tate Britain. In 1885, Cramsie sold Alfred Elmore’s 1844 painting *Rienzi in the Forum*, inspired by Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s novel *Rienzi*, the last of the Tribunes and Richard Wagner’s opera of the same name, performed in Dresden in 1842. Elmore’s painting was part of a collection owned by Wolfe Lessorf, a London dealer who features regularly in this volume. Belfast had its own ‘art district’ which took in Donegall Place, Queens Square and Castle Place, and where auctioneers and art dealers competed – and just as often co-operated – in their quest for business. There was no shortage of enterprise, as when local auctioneer John Cramsie conducted a sale in 1870 of works supplied by the Viennese dealer Rudolf Schnell.

The first proper Belfast auction house, founded in the early nineteenth century in the Commercial Buildings by James Hyndman, and specialising in Old Masters, grew

*John Martin (1789–1854)*  
*THE DESTRUCTION OF SODOM*  
*AND GOMORRAH*  
 1852, oil on canvas, 136 × 212 cm  
 (courtesy Laing Art Gallery,  
 Newcastle-upon-Tyne)



rapidly. In 1840 the family business relocated to Castle Place. Another member of the family, George Hyndman, was first president of the Belfast Naturalists Field Club. Among the Hyndmans' competitors was John Devlin, who operated on a much smaller scale, while other auctioneers included John Cramsie, Hugh Clarke and John Cowan. Of these Cramsie was the most enterprising, and in 1859 he established a partnership with a Belgian art dealer named Henri Everard. A notable sale held at Cramsie's in 1867 included around fifty paintings from the Earl of Shannon's residence, Castle Martyr, in county Cork. In common with other smaller cities in Britain and Ireland, societies for the encouragement of the visual arts were established, including the Belfast Association of Artists, the Northern Irish Art Union and the Belfast Fine Arts Society. These were mainly founded in the buoyant years of the late 1830s and early 1840s, but only the Fine Arts Society was to last. Even the School of Design, established with great optimism in 1849, lasted less than a decade. However, the commercial side of the art business in Belfast flourished in the 1860s, with Hugh Hamilton the most prominent of the ten new firms founded during that decade. The opening of the Ulster Hall in 1862 provided valuable exhibition space, both for art societies and auctioneers. Two years later, the city's first proper commercial art gallery, Marcus Ward, opened its doors for business. The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw a plethora of new auction houses being established, but many lasted a short time. The twelve or so firms that endured included Clarke and Cramsie, James Morton and Walter Watson. This book, and the trilogy of which it forms part, are the fruits of many years' research and are valuable additions to the cultural history of Ireland in the nineteenth century.

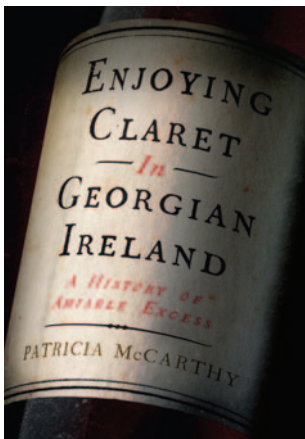
Patricia McCarthy

## ENJOYING CLARET IN GEORGIAN IRELAND:

### A HISTORY OF AMIABLE EXCESS

(Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2022) isbn 978-1-80151-013-4, 224pp, 24x17cm, 63 illus, €40 hb

review by Terence Dooley



PATRICIA MCCARTHY'S NEW BOOK *ENJOYING CLARET in Georgian Ireland* opens with the following: 'Much of the blame for the spread of drunkenness in eighteenth-century Ireland was laid, according to Revd Samuel Madden, with the landed gentry'. As the landed gentry have been blamed for every other social ill in Irish society – admittedly mainly by nationalists, of which political persuasion Madden did not belong – why not drunkenness as well?

The blame, it seems, stemmed from the Irish gentry's near obsession with fine wines from the Bordeaux region – their penchant towards 'amiable excess' – and they were well supported by associates in the military, the