A.P.W. Malcomson
The Maxwells of Finnebrogue and the gentry of County Down c.1610-c.1960: A resident and responsible élite

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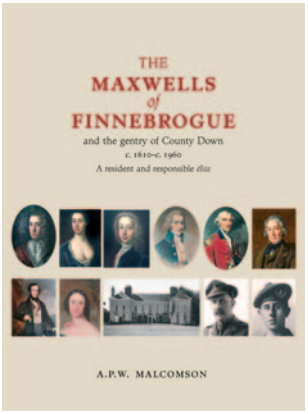
review by S.J. Connolly



The publication in 1978 of A.P.W. Malcomson's study of John Foster, Speaker of the Irish House of Commons, stands out as a transformative contribution. Its richly documented analysis of a key figure forced readers to reconsider a range of cherished beliefs – about the effectiveness of patronage as a tool of parliamentary management, the role of deference as well as economic coercion in maintaining landlord electoral influence, the inadequacy of crude distinctions between principled patriots on the one hand and Castle hirelings on the other. Traditional stereotypes did not disappear; lazy clichés about 'the Ascendancy' remain common. But for serious students, the political history of eighteenth-century Ireland would never be the same.

The Maxwells of Finnebrogue produced no figure of the stature of Speaker Foster. The closest is Henry Maxwell (1669-1730), MP for a succession of boroughs between 1698 and 1730, and author in 1703 of a pamphlet advocating a political union between Ireland and Great Britain. John Waring Maxwell represented Downpatrick as a largely silent and frequently absent MP between 1820 and 1830, and again during 1832-35. Robert David Perceval-Maxwell sat in the Northern Irish Senate during 1921-25. His son 'Jock' followed him in the Senate during 1936-45, and had four years in the Lower House as representative for Ards before being dropped in 1949 in favour of a more substantial local notable. Otherwise, the Maxwells' sphere of activity was county Down, as magistrates and grand jurors, with occasional stints as sheriff or deputy lieutenant.

What gives the story of this county dynasty a wider interest is in part the family home. The construction of a solid mansion, Finnebrogue outside Downpatrick, apparently commenced soon after 1662, is striking evidence of how quickly life in eastern Ulster recovered following the violence of the 1640s and 1650s. Its architecture, two storeys laid out as a symmetrical H, represented a sharp break with the fortified houses of the Plantation era. It was, in fact, as Dr Malcomson establishes in a meticulous survey of possible rivals, the first example in Ireland of the 'Protectorate' style that had gained favour in post-Civil War England. (On the other hand, the inclusion of musket loops and a reinforced wall were indications that the recent past had not been entirely forgotten.)

How the building work was financed remains unclear, given that its owner, the Revd Henry Maxwell, had only recently returned from a period of exile in England; Dr Malcomson speculates that he may have received compensation for his losses from the Court of Claims. A later chapter analyses the extensive works that in 1796-99 converted

a Restoration into a Georgian mansion. A newly installed elegant staircase gave access to the second floor, where the removal of attic accommodation created space for higher, more impressive ceilings. Enlarged sash windows replaced the original casements, and plastered walls the earlier wainscotting. Outside straight tree-lined avenues and geometrically shaped enclosures gave way to curving paths and artfully scattered plantations. Careful analysis of the circumstantial evidence – aided as elsewhere by the splendid illustrations in this characteristically fine production by the Ulster Historical Foundation – allows Dr Malcomson to identify the architect as Charles Lilly, who through a connection with the Marquess of Downshire made several notable contributions to the buildings of county Down. A further remodelling in 1934-36 was more modest, replacing Georgian grandeur with informal comfort, and including the belated installation of electricity. Visitors in the mid-twentieth century offer conflicting accounts, some implying well-worn comfort, others dilapidation of the kind that is a staple of Big House literature. One guest's recollection of a carpet 'so wet it literally squelched with each step' (p.503), suggests that in this case the literary stereotype is a reasonable guide.

The other theme that Dr Malcomson extrapolates from his study of the Maxwells concerns horse flesh. Three substantial chapters offer a detailed account of two institutions in which the Maxwells played a significant part. The Down Hunt Club, established in 1757, began to lose its original function from the 1820s, as reliance on privately owned hounds gave way to corporate packs maintained by subscription. But it survived as a dining club, accommodated from 1798 in the county rooms at 19 English Street, Downpatrick, another design by Charles Lilly. Down Royal, tracing its origins to a charter of 1685, never aspired to rival the Curragh as a national institution. Instead it remained a county affair, organising races at Downpatrick and at the Maze near Hillsborough.

The aim of Dr Malcomson's study of John Foster was clearly to make the case for a less black-and-white view of the Protestant élite. But its argument was largely implicit, established through the cumulative accumulation of specific insights. *The Maxwells of Finnebrogue*, as its subtitle makes clear, is more openly a celebration. Occasional remarks reveal the extent to which the author has come to share his subjects' world view. The Hearts of Steel, a movement of tenant protest of the early 1770s, were 'terrorists' (p.87); the Whig government's decision in 1833 to remove the Orange grand master William Blacker from the magistracy was 'captious' (p.404). That said, it seems clear that the Maxwells did in fact live up to the image of 'a resident and responsible élite'. Edward Maxwell (1768-1791), the one member to show a preference for foreign fields, died young. Otherwise successive proprietors dutifully occupied the mansion at Finnebrogue. (This did, however, mean – echoing a point made by Dr Malcomson in an important article as far back as 1974 – that they were absentee proprietors of the other lands they owned, in counties Tyrone, Waterford, Tipperary and Cork, not to mention Amherst Island, in Lake Ontario.)

Finnebrogue House, entrance front, 1936
(photo: Crown DFC Historic Environment Division)

opposite

Maxwells of Finnebrogue family crest

The family had not come to county Down as predators: the lands acquired by the Revd Henry Maxwell and his successors came from the break-up of the estates owned by the earls of Kildare and the Southwells rather than the dispossession of native or Catholic losers in the seventeenth-century struggle for power. Their later politics varied. John Waring Maxwell was a supporter of political reform and full Catholic emancipation, although, like other liberals, he was ready in the crisis of the late 1790s to defend the established order at the head of his yeomanry corps. His son, the sometime MP for Downpatrick, was a member of the Orange Order and a supporter of campaigns against papal aggression and creeping Romanism in the Church of Ireland. His nephew and heir Robert Perceval Maxwell (1813-1905), possibly reflecting his upbringing in the different world of southern Irish Protestantism, was initially less militant, although he eventually joined his peers in opposition to Home Rule. Robert David Perceval-Maxwell (1870-1932) rallied more decisively to the defence of Protestant Ulster, as a member of the Ulster Volunteer Force and county commandant of the B Specials. In contrast the last male proprietor, Jock (1896-1963), supported the unsuccessful move in 1959 to remove the ban on Catholics joining the Unionist Party.

Dr Malcomson's subtitle, however, seems to apply not just to the Maxwells, but to county Down landed society as a whole. Here the evidence is thinner. Records of dinners at the Down Hunt Club suggest that the eating and drinking were on a moderate scale; there is nothing to suggest an Ulster rival to the Hell Fire Club of legend. Down Royal, equally, remained focussed on its declared purpose of improving the quality of horses in the county, with none of the heavy betting seen at the Curragh or on major English courses. Beyond this, Dr Malcomson can offer only the rather weak argument that the Maxwells would not have been so highly esteemed by their peers if the values by which they lived were not widely shared (p.519). The landed élite of Down, as a battery of quotations in the closing pages of this volume attest, certainly believed that their county was distinguished, not just by its prosperity and loyalty, but by its progressive agriculture and civic spirit. How far, as a group, they lived up to this self-image must remain an open question.

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