

Compte rendu de lecture de "Letterbook of Greg & Cunningham, 1756-57, Merchants of New York and Belfast" by Thomas M. Truxes

Guillaume Daudin

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Letterbook of Greg & Cunningham, 1756-57, Merchants of New York and Belfast. Edited by Thomas M. Truxes. Oxford: Oxford University Press for The British Academy, 2001. Pp. xxxi, 430. £50.00.

Researchers have been giving Irish trading networks more attention recently (cf. for example Louis M. Cullen. *The Irish Brandy Houses of Eighteenth-Century France*. Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2001). Thomas M. Truxes has already written a pioneer book on the subject (*Irish-American Trade, 1660-1783*. New-York: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Ireland could trade directly with British America since a modification in English navigation laws in 1731. In his new book, Truxes gives us an in-depth view of the most successful Irish-American partnership of the time based on the letters sent by its New-York partner during nine months in 1756 and 1757. These were interesting times: the Seven Year's War had opened new opportunities – like (British) privateering and troop supply – and caused new difficulties – like the renewed fight against smuggling by the English authorities and (French) privateering – without disrupting fundamentally the traditional flows of trade between Ireland and British America: Ireland mainly exported linens, salted beef, pork, butter and passengers and imported flaxseeds, rum, lumber, staves and some pig iron and semi-manufactured goods.

The book is divided in three parts. A 100-page introduction covers a lot of ground. It first presents the context of the activity of the partnership: the towns of New-York and Belfast alongside with traditional Irish-American trade and the Seven Years' War. Then, it tells us whatt is known of the history of the partnership and the partners. Finally it sums up what can be found in the letterbook about the one hundred and thirty correspondents of the partnership, the goods in which they traded, their use of bills of exchange and maritime insurance, the way they managed their ships and their smuggling activity. The 338 letters sent by Wadell Cunningham between May 1756 and January 1757, presented in chronological order, form the core of the book. The Appendix are: two "deeds of copartnership" between Thomas Gregg and Wadell Cunningham in 1761 and 1768; the partners' newspaper advertisements between 1752 and 1757; the wills of the two partners; and a glossary of maritime and mercantile terms built from contemporary sources. 50 pages of index conclude the book. Truxes has also gathered eight plates of iconographic documentation.

The amount of research and the amount of erudition put into this book are impressive. Thanks to his knowledge of contemporary sources and modern works, Truxes has collected extensive information on "individual persons, business enterprises, places, ships, commodities, business practices and other features of Greg & Cunningham's economic, political and social environment" (p. 93). For example, as Cunningham is glad not to receive gunpowder in June 1756, we are given the price of gunpowder on the Amsterdam Exchange from 1 May 1754 to the end of 1758 (p. 133). In the same way, because one letter was sent to Robert Wells (or Wills) of Belfast, we are given the information that can be found about him in *The Belfast News-Letter* from 1754 to 1771 (p. 308).

However, after reading the whole book, the "So what?" question comes to mind. It is actually unfair. This is not an essay on Irish-American trade, or even some part of it. Even the long introduction is mainly factual, and does not try to relate the letterbook with current issues on the links between social and economic relations or the importance of trading networks to economic development. This book should be used like a tool. The non-specialist will not be interested. Yet, anyone studying Irish-American trade or more generally merchant networks and practices in the eighteenth-century will find in it very useful material – much more useful than the raw source. For its small public, this book will probably prove invaluable.

Guillaume Daudin
OFCE, Paris