licence register can be matched to a federal database at the weekend. The procedure described consists of Agent Ren putting up maps and photographs of the dead women in a conference room and telling her colleagues to look for connections. After that, brilliant guesses pop into the detectives' heads but they ultimately don't find the killer so much as he, in a sense, finds them.

That doesn't ultimately matter as regards whether it is a good read—and it is. The strengths of this series are snappy pace, witty, realistic characters and good surprises taking place in the human relations of the detectives.

Clive James tells us, dismissively, that all plots for mysteries have been used up and no function remains for them except as travel writing. If it were true there would be nothing wrong with that. The existence of many dedicated web pages proves that I am not the only person who searches for 'detective novel set in the city I am going to on holidays'. But in fact it's not true. John le Carré shows us that a spy thriller can be about office politics. I would attribute a large share of Thomas Harris's sales to the audience for stories about women in difficult jobs being underestimated by their bosses.

Here the real story is one about a heroine whose job requires her to think fast and leap to dangerous conclusions—who has gone off her mood-stabilising medication and now is not just dancing and drinking with handsome Everett a bit later than is compatible with working hard on a serious investigation but also maybe thinking a bit too fast and leaping to dangerous conclusions a bit too quickly. You don't know whether it's the job, or the medication or life, and she, and her boss and her friends, can't really be sure either.

There are great short characterisations of the bit players: the disconcertingly too-pleasant neighbour welcoming Ren to her new apartment block; the oafish visiting agent making tone-deaf jokes about photos of dead women; boss Gary's wife, whose perfect, careful make-up and elegant accessories are trying to stave off the danger that her family life has just been destroyed while she wasn't noticing.

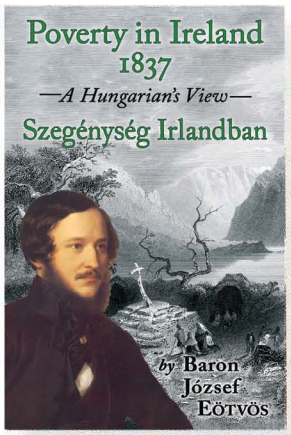
A writer who can consistently produce this level of entertainment is to be valued and encouraged. This is a good bet in any airport bookshop, and even a safe bet on dry land. Recommended.

*Paula O'Hare*

## History

**Poverty in Ireland 1837. Szegénység Irlandban: a Hungarian's view.** Baron József Eötvös. *Phaeton Publishing; 199pp; € 19.99/£16.99 pb; 21cm; 978-1-908420-20-6.*

### A remarkable study of pre-Famine Ireland




This remarkable study of the causes and effects of poverty in pre-Famine Ireland was written by one of Hungary's first novelists and it's an acutely accurate account of conditions in the country in the mid-1830s.

Baron Eötvös came from the multi-layered aristocracy of Hungary, but this was no hindrance to his remarkable insights into a country far from his own. That very distance gave him remarkable perspicacity regarding the social and economic problems of Ireland, through which, inspired by Daniel O'Connell, he travelled extensively. Unlikely as it may have seemed to many of the dispossessed poor whom he met, his sympathies were entirely with them.

His book was first published in Hungarian in 1840 but, amazingly, it has had to wait until now for publication in English. The Phaeton Press has done an

excellent job in creating this bilingual publication, with the Hungarian text on one side of the double pages and English on the other, all intermingled with an excellent series of period lithographs and a striking cover.

The descriptions of the poor are heart-rending: 'everywhere people are in rags, and wearing the traces of hunger and disease on their pale faces'. Much of the blame is laid on the British administration of Ireland, and while the baron notes that, to the stranger, Britain presents an image of public well-being, he documents its malevolent incompetence in Ireland.

He discovered that about a third of the Irish population of eight million was poor. He analyses the system of land ownership and its effects on the three most evident layers. At the top of the pile are the small farmers, then come the cotters and, finally, the day labourers. The worthy baron depicts the squalid home life of countless Irish families in graphic detail and says that the Irish deserve pity, not the contempt and hatred commonly expounded by the English.

In one remarkable passage that seems very prescient in view of our own times, when the country is riven by gross inequality between the supremely wealthy and the rest of us, Eötvös notes that the rich and powerful can wander in Ireland with satisfaction. They can find palaces as well as extensive parkland, and brightly dressed servants, in scenes mimicking the glamour and enjoyment with which the English aristocracy surrounds itself. He quotes, with some irony, the words of Arthur Young, from his account of his 1780 tour of Ireland, that landlords of consequence told him that many of their cotters would think themselves honoured by having their wives and daughters set out for the bed of their masters, which Young rightly said was the mark of the slave.

The baron's sources are impeccable; he quotes widely and wisely, to add to his own observations. He explains that neither the judicial nor the tax systems can be fair to the afflicted, since they are constructed in the interests of the well-off. He says, with great truth, that what the people need are bread and clothes, and sometimes a little dancing and wine.

He points out, in pitiful detail, the wholly deplorable conditions in which many people lived. Their clothes were often so ragged that priests had to say Mass twice on Sundays, so that one part of the household could return and hand over their clothes to the others so that they in their turn could attend Mass. The single room of many houses was occupied by the hearth and the entire family in rags, together with pigs and other small animals. One bed, one chair and one cooking pot were frequently all that a family possessed.

Neither did he believe that over-population was to blame for the widespread poverty. He says that England is more densely populated than Ireland, so that if this precept were followed through, England would be poorer than Ireland, whereas the opposite is the case. He points out that the farming county of Galway, among the poorest in Ireland, has exactly the same number of people per acre as some of the richest counties in England. The failures in Ireland were all due to the massive toxicity of the government system.

After 175 years the book rings so true for the devastating accuracy of its reporting of the ills of Ireland and the reasons why the poor suffered so much. Eötvös does not explicitly forecast the Great Famine but makes clear that all the conditions for it had already been set in place by the 1830s. It's a vivid and gripping tale that totally contradicts the official story of Ireland peddled by its then British administrators.

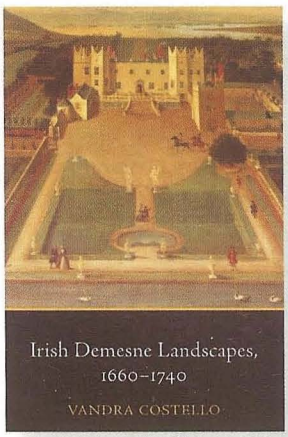
One interesting side note to the enterprise is the mention of Richard Griffith, creator of the valuation system that is so invaluable for researchers today. Griffith lived at 2 Fitzwilliam Place, Dublin, from 1835 until his death in 1878, the house now occupied by the Hungarian Embassy.

Only in the very last paragraphs does the worthy baron falter. He says that 'we can expect Ireland to settle down in peace after winning its rights' and that, while the Irish would continue to rebel for a while in the advancement of their aims, that wouldn't be for much longer. A peaceful settlement of Ireland's ills was never delivered, however, and the ultimate consequence was the 1916 Rising.

*Hugh Oram*

## Landscape history

**Irish Demesne Landscapes, 1660–1740.** Vandra Costello. *Four Courts Press; 256pp; €50/£45 hb; 24cm; 978-1-84682-506-4.*




### Cutting, weeding, re-seeding, mowing and rolling

Demesne is a word familiar in Ireland but little used elsewhere. Even here the word is often only vaguely understood, seen broadly as a term for the estate surrounding a 'big house'. Its exact definition was the cause of much deliberation in the early days of the Ordnance Survey, and the Survey is to be thanked for the decision that demesnes were to be shown on the first six-inch sheets 'as matters of topographical information'. Demesnes can be defined as the gardens, parkland and home farms of large estates, usually surrounded by a high wall and distinct from the rest of the estate as held by tenants. They are prominent features of the early Survey sheets, as they were, and to a large extent still are, of the Irish countryside. Indeed, it has been estimated that demesnes once occupied nearly 6% of the country. Once mainly the preserve of the wealthy and their guests, today many of the surviving