

The Account Books of the Franciscan House, Broad Lane, Cork 1764–1921. Edited by Liam Kennedy and Claire Murphy. Pp xx, 949. Dublin: Irish Manuscripts Commission, 2012. €80.

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This book, making accessible in printed form the accounts of the Cork Franciscan Friary, should be read in conjunction with the database available on the Irish Manuscripts Commission website. Both book and database are the result of painstaking and meticulous transcription and analysis by Clare Murphy and Liam Kennedy of almost 130 years of accounts (no records are extant for the years 1785 to 1803). Although the level of information available varies over the period, with the greatest detail appearing up to the mid-nineteenth century, the work is an invaluable guide to the day-to-day expenditure as well as to some of the larger capital outlays of a religious house in a provincial Irish city from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century. Every entry (almost all exactly dated) outlines the nature of the transaction and the amount of payment in pounds, shillings and pence, with decimalised equivalents for those unfamiliar with the ‘old money’ of pre-1971.

Fingering through the book – all 900 pages of it – provides exciting insights into the social, economic and religious history not only of Cork but also of further afield. Used in conjunction with the database, this work becomes an immensely valuable tool which will certainly open up many avenues of research. Firstly, it brings us into contact with the network of Franciscan (Friars Minor) houses extending from Limerick and Waterford to St Isidore’s in Rome, and with another major religious order in the Franciscan family – the Poor Clares, especially the sisters of the monastery at Nun’s Island in Galway. Interestingly, there are

relatively few references to the Capuchins (apart from support for their bazaar in 1891 and 1906), something which opens up interesting questions regarding the interaction between these two male orders within the Franciscan tradition. The book and database also provide tantalising glimpses of the place of the Franciscans (always popular in Cork city) in local social and economic life – their relationship with individual locals employed in the friary as washerwomen, maids and cooks, with artisans employed on various repairs and improvements, and with a large number of local retailers ranging from butchers to wine merchants.

The day-to-day life and diet of the friars can be examined through these account book entries: expenditure on bread, potatoes, bacon, fowl, tripe (though more frequently drisheen, that specifically Cork delicacy). Tea and coffee figure regularly throughout the accounts, as do the cakes, buns and lemonade for altar and choir boys, and the ‘plum cake’ and other treats for visitors to the friary. Provisions for sick friars (payment of a nurse in 1859) and, more frequently, for those locals outside the friary who came under the care of the friars appear, with references to ‘milk, lemons, etc. for sick man’ in 1828 or ‘child sick [at] home’ in 1912. As facilities within the friary improved, the community experienced the same financial burdens that modernisation brought to the world ‘outside’ – gas bills from the mid-1860s onwards, and electricity bills from the opening years of the twentieth century.

This work also facilitates an exploration of the intertwining of religion and business: the manufacture and provision of ecclesiastical goods ranging from a ‘crown for Our Lady’ in 1883 to banners, banner tassels and banner poles (1860–1900) and rosary beads and scapulars (1845–1915) were all part of a thriving economic enterprise built on devotional Catholicism, while in the references to the payments for altar breads we can trace a movement from

individual enterprise ('Woman who makes altar bread', 1821) to a business centred on religious orders (in this case the Poor Clares) a century later.

Though overt references to broad political developments are infrequent, it is possible through the account book entries to see how closely the Cork friars interacted with the secular world. The friars were supplied with (or at least periodically purchased) the main newspapers of the day (Freeman's Journal, Cork Examiner and Cork Daily Herald) and while (unsurprisingly) they do not appear to have subscribed to the Protestant Cork Constitution, they had no problem in inserting advertisements therein. The friary, like other property holders, paid poor rates, water rates and city rates into the twentieth century, and in the early nineteenth century were also liable for minister's money (the urban equivalent of tithes) – a matter of some obvious resentment on the part of the account keeper who in 1779 recorded – 'I paid 5 shillings to a Devil of a Minister.'

This twin project of print book and database is, as we have come to expect from the Irish Manuscripts Commission, a major contribution to historical research. It is a truly exciting work – and I use that term advisedly – since it opens up windows into areas that call for further exploration: the relations between religious orders and local populations in Ireland since the late eighteenth century; the importance of devotional Catholicism as a spur to economic enterprise; and the changing material conditions within male religious communities over a 150-year period. Hopefully, this is just the first of a series of such projects.