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The Irish Reformation in European Perspective

Karl S. Bottigheimer / Ute Lötz-Heumann

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The Irish Reformation in European Perspective*

By Karl S. Bottigheimer and Ute Lotz-Heumann

The Irish Reformation is an intrinsically jarring subject. Readers are entitled to raise a quizzical eyebrow, or even smile in the superior knowledge that – like Shakespeare's "Seacoast of Bohemia" – there is no such thing, because the Reformation in Ireland was a dismal failure. To some it has even appeared inevitable, or natural that it should be so. But like its sibling concept, the Renaissance, the Reformation took different forms in different places, rather than simply meeting, or falling short of, a single standard. It was far from an irrelevancy in Ireland, where the sectarian conflicts which it spawned have endured. The modern "Irish problem" is an anachronism in a world in which religious conflict among declared Christians is rare, and the distinctive form which the Reformation took in Ireland is a palpable source of that peculiarity.

We are defining the Reformation as a series, and era, of challenges to the medieval church and its Roman hegemony. In some cases that challenge was internal: the principal agents were local, as Luther in 1517 was local to Wittenberg. In other cases, the agents were external, remote voices or authorities urging, or demanding, radical change. No scholar has contended that the impetus for, or sources of, the Reformation in Ireland were internal. They came in the first instance from England and Scotland, kingdoms which themselves were in the process of drawing heavily on external, continental models. Late-

* The inspiration for this article was the publication by Bob Scribner, Roy Porter, Mikuláš Teich (eds.), *The Reformation in National Context*, Cambridge 1994, in which regional experts discussed the nature of the Reformation in a dozen localities, but not, unfortunately, Ireland. We wish to remedy that *lacuna*, and are indebted to Professor Scribner for his encouragement to do so. Like so many others, we regret his premature death in early 1998. As co-authors we approach the subject from different, but converging, areas of interest. Ute Lotz-Heumann, initially trained as a German early-modernist, is completing a Ph.D. dissertation on the application of the paradigm of confessionalization to Ireland, under the supervision of Professor Heinz Schilling at the Humboldt University, Berlin. She thanks the *Gottlieb Daimler- und Karl Benz-Stiftung* for a fellowship enabling her to do research in Ireland in 1995. Professor Karl S. Bottigheimer previously addressed aspects of this subject in "The Failure of the Reformation in Ireland: Une Question Bien Posée," in: *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985), pp. 196–207 and in "The Hagiography of William Bedell," in: Toby Barnard, Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, Katherine Simms (eds.), *'A Miracle of Learning': Studies in Manuscripts and Irish Learning. Essays in Honour of William O'Sullivan*, Aldershot 1998, pp. 201–209.

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