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Powering the Nation: Images of the Shannon Scheme and the Electrification of Ireland

Sorcha O'Brien, Irish Academic Press, 2017. 344pp., 100 illus., paper, €29.99. 13 digit ISBN: 9781911024675

In 1929 Ireland's first hydro-electric power station opened on the River Shannon near the village of Ardnacrusha, in West Ireland. Initially known as the Shannon Scheme, and now as the Ardnacrusha Power Station, its establishment followed the birth of the Irish Free State in 1922, which signalled the nation's (partial) independence from British rule. Commissioned by the Cumann na nGaedheal government and managed by the national ESB (Electricity Supply Board), the scheme spearheaded both Ireland's electrification and transformation.

The Shannon Scheme was enveloped in questions over the embryonic nation's identity and its relationship with technology and modernity. These questions form the core of *Powering the Nation: Images of the Shannon Scheme and Electricity in Ireland*, by Irish design historian Sorcha O'Brien. This is the first in-depth examination of these questions and the first focus on the multi-faceted visual representation of the Scheme in the 1920s and 1930s. The book complements existing accounts of the Scheme and Irish electrification, offering a series of detailed vignettes that mobilise visual culture to enrich knowledge and understanding.ⁱ Embedded in extensive archival research and richly illustrated, *Powering the Nation* is a significant contribution to histories of Irish design, technology and visual culture.

The book is structured around 11 chapters. The first chapter offers a historical contextualisation of the Scheme and introduces the book's tripart theoretical framework: national identity, international concepts of technological modernity, and the technological sublime. With each O'Brien adeptly mobilises relevant existing literature: for questions of nationhood she draws on voices such as Clifford Geertz, and whose concept of "essentialist" and "epochal" approaches to defining national identity particularly useful appear repeatedly throughout the book.ⁱⁱ

The second chapter focuses on the Shannon Scheme's buildings. The book's originality really starts appearing here, as O'Brien demonstrates the importance of Germany in the scheme's development, something often overlooked at the time and subsequently. Central to the scheme's development was the Irish engineer Thomas McLaughlin, who had worked for the German engineering firm Siemens on a hydro-electric power scheme in Pomerania (now Poland). McLaughlin pushed to build a similar scheme on the Shannon, and in 1925 Siemens was commissioned to design and execute it. O'Brien shows the firm also imported German workers to build the scheme, and German architects, whose design sought to express both industrial modernity and the local vernacular.

The next nine chapters are loosely chronologically organised, working through the design, construction, marketing and public engagement with the building. Each does this by focusing on one medium or related media, such as drawings, photographs, paintings, postcards and cigarette cards. This strategy is particularly effective in the third chapter, which utilises multiple drawing types to trace the Shannon Scheme design's process and show how this developed through paper-based discussions.

Interestingly, Siemens sought to control the Scheme's visual representation. It commissioned photography of the construction to promote the Scheme in Germany and Ireland. The result was over 1,700 silver gelatine prints, most of which focus on the Scheme's formalist and physical qualities rather than the workers involved – a theme touched on repeatedly in the book if not investigated in detail. Siemens also commissioned a German printmaker, Anton Scheuritzel, to create a series of lithographic prints for corporate gifts.

Following these official representations O'Brien offers up photographic collections by two German workers who temporarily moved to Ireland to construct the Scheme. The collections

constitute just a small and partial representation of the workforce's experience but are no less illuminating for it, with the photographs and accompanying scribbles revealing a collegiate but dangerous working environment.

The following chapters focus on Irish representations. First ESB's print-based advertising campaigns, which sought to exhort the benefits of electricity and encourage people to visit the construction. This is followed by a focus on photographs from three families who took up this invitation. Next up is the work of three Irish artists who documented the scheme: the influential realist painter Seán Keating, printmaker and art education advocate George Atkinson, and Brigid O'Brien Ganly, who had been a student of both artists at Dublin's Metropolitan School of Art. The chapter is a case of diminishing fame and scale; it opens with Keating, who painted several works on the scheme, the most famous of which is *Night's Candles are Burnt Out* (1929). Atkinson produced just three etchings, while for O'Brien Ganly we are treated to just two watercolour drawings. It is unclear whether these are the only artists who documented the scheme (O'Brien Ganly was the only such known female artist), or whether they present a broader creative interest in it.

The final two chapters focus on imagery produced following the Scheme's completion; a commemorative stamp launched in 1930, designed by Anglo-Irish artist Edward Louis Lawrenson, and postcards (for tourists, collectors, or both) and cigarette cards published between 1928 and 1932. By this point the scheme was firmly in the Irish public consciousness, their familiarity translating into the Scheme's transformation into the subject of collectibles and communication media.

One of the more unexpected aspects of *Powering the Nation* is that each chapter does not just present short explorations of particular postcards or specific photographs, but rather gives a short history of each medium and its culture in Ireland at the time. For example, the final thematic chapter gives a brief definition and history of ephemera, the Irish postcard

industry and cigarette cards before considering the particular imagery of the Shannon Scheme. For the chapter on the three artists, O'Brien gives an overview of Irish art in the late 19th century. Such contextualisation is impressive, as O'Brien will have digested substantial literature to give such concise but informative accounts on several cultural forms. It opens up the book to readers unfamiliar with art and design histories and increases the book's contribution: *Powering the Nation* is almost as much a history of early 20th century Irish visual culture as an account of visual representations of the Shannon Scheme.

Occasionally though this felt a distraction from the book's stated focus; I wanted to know more about what the different representations said about the Scheme as a whole, more about the reception of this imagery (or a note if such information wasn't available), and if any dissident imagery was produced.

This is tied up with the book's structure. While this generally works well, the division of the chapters into different media made for occasionally short chapters based on sometimes limited visual material (presumably due to the lack of such material, as it is impressive that O'Brien unearthed what she has). However a different structure would have meant a different book, and in emphasising the visual O'Brien makes the case for other subjects to have a similar treatment, highlighting the power of otherwise overlooked material.

Powering the Nation is an engaging and impressive undertaking, and a valuable read for those interested in the histories of technology and visual culture in Ireland and elsewhere.

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ⁱ O'Brien cites existing histories including: M. McCarthy, *High Tension: Life on the Shannon Scheme* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2004); A. Bielenberg (ed.), *The Shannon Scheme and the Electrification of the Irish Free State: An Inspirational Milestone* (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2002).

ⁱⁱ C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 2nd edn (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000)