

## Reviews and short notices

IRELAND: A HISTORY. By Thomas Bartlett. Pp xvi, 625, illus. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2010. £25.

Thomas Bartlett's book, which he admits he has long dreamed of writing, covers nearly two millennia of the Irish past. He asks the reader's permission to begin in A.D. 431 but makes no such request for taking his story up to 2010. There are few surveys as ambitious as this, but in an age of complex and detailed research, with the monograph and the refereed article key to a department's research-output score (an exercise not yet applicable south of the border), it might be asked: what purpose is served by this kind of survey?

Several virtues are obvious. This is a handsome volume with an attractive cover (one of Paul Henry's immediately recognisable Connemara scenes). There are plentiful and telling illustrations. It is enlivened by Bartlett's wry humour: who can resist the description of the hapless Major Chichester-Clark as 'an amiable old duffer' (p. 504)? The chronologically arranged chapters, seven in all, drive the narrative and meet the needs of the reader, specialist or general. There are regular pauses for refreshment in the 'assessment' sections (a method of historical writing strongly recommended by A. J. P. Taylor). But does it go any further than this?

There are two possible answers to this question. One is that Bartlett distils the best of contemporary professional Irish historical research. His own work on Catholic politics in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries enables him to straddle in fine style the century dividing line so beloved to historians. When he moves outside his research field, he offers bold and stimulating assessments. This can be dangerous, for the specialist defends his or her patch jealously, but Bartlett passes the key test in (for example) his discussion of Tudor Ireland, a battleground that has left many academic bodies in its wake. There are, of course, breaches in the long walls of the general survey. His discussion of the effects of the Act of Union would benefit from a straightforward description of its main provisions. The negotiations conducted by David Lloyd George in the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rising came nearer to success than Bartlett suggests. The chapters on the 'two Irelands' perhaps emphasise the divisions at the expense of the (admittedly few) common factors that survived partition in 1921: the all-Ireland ecclesiastical structures, some sports organisations, and – for a time – a broader sense of Irishness among Northern Ireland Protestants than Bartlett allows.

These are minor quibbles, and are perhaps dangerously close to academic one-upmanship. Bartlett was not ill advised to follow the dream (as they say these days) and write his general survey. There are even more significant issues raised by this book. It offers what Irish history needs: an attempt to ask what is Irish history all about? What are the connections between past and present? Does an investigation of these connections lead to teleological writing and a deterministic concept of the past? Does the historian lose sight of the conditional results of human free will and personal choice? For example, why has the Irish experience been marked by confrontations, most of which have resulted in disastrous and evermore divisive consequences? Can – should – connections be made between the 1798 rebellion and earlier and later violent episodes?

There are many examples of Bartlett's investigation of these issues, and not only those of violence and division. His discussion of some of the results of attempts to alleviate or head off confrontations illustrates his methodology. Efforts made by British governments to resolve the land question through engineering a peasant proprietary are well known. Bartlett

widens the scope of the debate, arguing that the social and economic conditions created by this policy rested on Ireland experiencing a ‘continual haemorrhage, even an annual blood sacrifice, of its surplus citizens in order to validate its social structure and to offer (barren) consolation to those held unworthy to wed and thus deemed surplus’ (p. 330). He makes comparisons between the Ulster unionist government’s strategy in the O’Neill years of ‘modernising economically without reforming politically’ (p. 488) with those advocated by Irish Protestants in the late eighteenth century, notably John Foster, and by British unionists who after 1886 sought to kill home rule with kindness.

Bartlett is not afraid to make these deeper-level investigations. His reputation as a foremost historian of Ireland enables him to act as a forerunner of a new kind of Irish history, secure in the knowledge that he cannot be ignored even by those who do not ask such questions or acknowledge their existence. Here is an exciting and intellectually rewarding debate for Irish historians – if they can answer yes to this question: have you looked in Bartlett’s *Ireland*?

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EDWARD II. By Seymour Phillips. Pp xvi, 679, illus. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2010. £25.

Supposed sexual deviancy, military humiliation, catastrophic famine, bloody civil war, marital breakdown, invasion, deposition, obscene murder, rumoured survival: Edward II’s career and the troubled course of English history in the early fourteenth century have generated interest among historians and fiction writers over the centuries for reasons that need little elaboration. It was not until the publication in 2003 of Roy Martin Haines’s fine *King Edward II: Edward of Caernarfon, his life, his reign, and its aftermath* (Montreal), however, that a reliable, full-length biography of this king became available, and Seymour Phillips’s book now raises the level of scholarship for the subject to new heights. Phillips’s work has not been confined to this topic – his *Medieval expansion of Europe* (Oxford, 1988) displayed the full range of his interests and insights – but since the publication of his ground-breaking *Amyer de Valence, earl of Pembroke, 1307–24: baronial politics in the reign of Edward II* (Oxford, 1972), most of his writings have been concerned with Edward II and his reign.

Phillips observes that ‘The “Middle Party” has largely disappeared from historical treatments of the early fourteenth century’ (p. 304), yet is too modest to note that its virtual disappearance, along with the Whiggish constitutionalism that spawned it, is to a large extent the result of his labours over thirty years. Welcome, from an Irish perspective, has been his according of due prominence to the role of Ireland in the politics of the king of England’s domain in the early fourteenth century. In *Edward II*, Phillips deals comprehensively with the many moments – usually moments of crisis – at which Ireland impinged upon the reign: it was to there that Edward sent his favourite, Piers Gaveston, as lieutenant in 1308, travelling to Bristol to see him off on what was supposed by his enemies to be a lifetime’s exile; in 1321 the king considered sending his then current favourites, the Despencers, to Ireland for safety; and it was almost certainly to the lordship that Edward was fleeing before being captured in 1326 – indeed, one of the fantastic stories that circulated following his murder in 1327 had it that Edward did reach Ireland, spending nine months there, after escaping his captors in 1327, before travelling as a hermit to the Continent. The Scottish invasion of Ireland between 1315 and 1318, Phillips insists, is one of the most important, and until recently one of the most neglected aspects, of the reign. The failure of the invasion, he argues, can be attributed to a significant extent to the skilful handling of the crisis by Edward’s government both in Ireland and in England. The Battle of Ardscoil in January 1316, in which little happened and few casualties were suffered by