

Reviews of books

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Matthew Potter, *The Municipal Revolution in Ireland: A Handbook of Urban Government in Ireland since 1800*. Dublin: Association of Municipal Authorities of Ireland and Irish Academic Press, 2011. 491pp. 19 tables. Bibliography. €49.95/£45.00 hbk.
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The preface to *The Municipal Revolution in Ireland* claims that it will become the standard work on Irish municipal government since 1800. This seems likely. Matthew Potter has combined extensive primary research in county archives across Ireland with a valuable synthesis of the secondary literature on Irish urban history. His argument is that, through a revolutionary set of legislative innovations, municipal government emerged from a profusion of medieval and early modern structures into a golden age, between 1871 and 1923. The symbiotic relationship that developed between robust local democracy and Irish nationalism led to the emergence of both the Home Rule movement and its nemesis, separatist republicanism. Having made a convincing case for his analysis of the pre-independence period, Potter then presents the sad fate of urban government under the new Irish regime.

Neither traditional monograph nor pure reference book, the unusual format works well. Each chapter opens by considering a specific phase of development in municipal government, presenting the challenges and explaining the legislators' intentions. The chapters then turn to the actual impact of these factors on a series of cities and towns across the country. Unsurprisingly, the disparate origins and demographics of the sample towns produce an interesting range of outcomes. Rather than following the complete text, one could read each opening analysis and trace an individual town's history against this broader political and ideological backdrop. By skipping to the relevant section in each chapter, for example, Limerick's administration can be explored from Viking roots through Victorian sophistication to twentieth-century stagnation. Alternatively, a comparative approach might place Donegal, 'a rare example of urbanization in a [fifteenth-century] Gaelic lordship' (p. 60), alongside 'Protestant' Bandon, founded under a charter of James I. How did these diverse towns respond to the rise and fall of local elites or the trial and error of municipal legislation?

In his selection of specimen towns Potter makes a significant contribution to the cause of urban history in Ireland. Echoing Mary Daly's complaint (made in *Dublin: Deposed Capital*, 1986) that cities came to be seen as alien to Irish history

and identity, he responds by demonstrating just how widespread urban life in Ireland actually was. Opting for 11 municipalities scattered across the country, he deliberately excludes the obvious candidates of Dublin and Cork. His list comprises Ballina, Bandon, Clonmel, Donegal, Drogheda, Galway, Limerick, Tuam, Tullamore, Waterford and Wexford; thus municipal concerns were played out in town halls and council chambers the length and breadth of Ireland. Admittedly, some of these towns had population figures below the norm for urban histories internationally, but their 'gas and drainage' concerns, their mercantile elites and developmental efforts clearly set them apart from their rural cousins. Explaining his choice to exclude the six counties of Northern Ireland from the survey, Potter argues that towns governed by Stormont evolved along a different path after partition and independence in 1922. As a result of the current work therefore, there is a clear need for complementary research on urban history in north-east Ulster and, subsequently, Northern Ireland.

References to trends in civic government both internationally and across the United Kingdom make the important point that urban Ireland was part of a broader world. It was presumably this awareness that led the author to mention the potential for a Scottish–Irish comparison (p. 126). On a side note, Dublin and Edinburgh were both 'deposed capitals' within the UK, yet they evolved along remarkably different municipal paths; Potter's work suggests similar explorations.

The research for this book was funded by the Association of Municipal Authorities in Ireland (AMAI), a body established in 1912. The half-page devoted to the association's origins and early years seems, initially, laudably modest. By the final three chapters on the late twentieth century however, a policy agenda is apparent. In a section entitled 'Stagnation', Potter sets out the demise of Ireland's golden age of municipal government and local democracy since independence. A relentless stream of legislation undermined the structures of democratic urban administration, he argues, replacing it with a highly centralized state and subservient county councils. Carrying his analysis up to 2001, Potter makes interesting observations which are perhaps better suited to a work on political science. Concluding with recommendations on the way forward for municipal administration in Ireland, he has arguably left the realm of history entirely. These minor criticisms aside, *Municipal Revolution* is a very readable contribution to the emerging field of Irish urban history. It highlights the emergence of a confident Catholic mercantile class and challenges a simplistic historiography of rural, agrarian Ireland at odds with urban modernity.

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Richardson Dilworth (ed.), *The City in American Political Development*.
New York: Routledge, 2009. vii + 268pp. £95.00 hbk; £23.99 pbk.
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This collection of essays, the fruits of a 2005 panel at the Social Science History Association conference, focuses on the relationship between urban government and political authority in the United States throughout the past two centuries, with particular emphasis on the generally ambivalent and frequently hostile relationship between these two factors. The contributors, nearly all of whom are