

Review article: a new approach to Irish history?*

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According to the publisher, ‘Oxford Handbooks offer authoritative and up-to-date surveys of original research in a particular subject area’. The *Oxford handbook of modern Irish history* consists of an introduction and thirty-six chapters, thirteen thematic essays and twenty-three period studies, though some of these have a tight thematic focus. Many of the contributors are the acknowledged experts in the field, and these essays offer readers a readily-accessible guide to the current state of knowledge on many topics. Some, though not all, engage extensively with the claim made on the book jacket that the essays also assess future directions for research on each topic. The time span covers the period from the late sixteenth century until the near present.

The volume opens with two sets of thematic studies. The first set titled ‘Nation, empire and landscape’ includes essays on ‘Patriotism and ationalism’, (Sean Connolly), ‘Loyalists and Unionists’ (Alvin Jackson) and ‘Ireland in the British Empire’ (Stephen Howe) – three scholars with the intellectual capacity to combine the *longue durée* with some pointed specific examples. Connolly steers a particularly adroit course through the centuries using a distinction between ‘the gap that existed between a clearly defined sense of national identity ... and a programme executed in the name of that nation, of direct and ... violent political action’ (p. 27); he also excavates the thorny issues of defining Protestant patriotism/‘colonial nationalism’ of the eighteenth century and decides that it ‘amounted to more than the defence of a particular set of vested interests’ (p. 33). In the concluding section he highlights the fact that Irish nationalism followed ‘a pattern very much at odds with its own rhetoric’. Although its true origins lay in the American and French revolutions it appealed to ‘a political and cultural tradition imagined as stretching backwards across the centuries’. Yet one factor in its success was the capacity to address ‘the social needs of the people’. Connolly gives relatively little attention to revolutionary nationalism; he is dismissive of the conventional narrative of a strong revolutionary tradition, while recognising that this ‘constructed narrative’ has proved highly seductive. The limited attention devoted to revolutionary nationalism is continued throughout the volume.

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Unfortunately Connolly ends in 1921, and none of the essays on independent Ireland engage at any length with questions of nationalism. Therefore readers are given no guidance to literature on questions such as one/two nations, the history of physical force republicanism post-1923, or the impact of Northern Ireland on politics and society in independent Ireland post-1969. By contrast the time period in Alvin Jackson's essay on 'Loyalists and Unionists' extends to the present day, and its treatment is reinforced by Henry Patterson's trenchant examination of the historiography relating to Unionism 1921–72, particularly those writers who focus on 'Unionism as a problem, the roots of whose inadequacies needed to be explained' (p. 693).

In 'Colonized and colonizers: Ireland in the British Empire', Stephen Howe suggests that the early writings about Ireland from a post-colonial perspective – mainly by literary scholars – which attracted considerable criticism from historians, have been superseded by 'a fast-growing literature', which pays attention to 'complexity and nuance'. Although gaps remain in the historiography, 'the intellectual landscape is being transformed with conspicuous speed' (p. 67). He suggests that the heat has gone out of this debate, not only because of the appearance of more nuanced and historically-informed research, but because of changing attitudes in contemporary society. Writings about Ireland from a postcolonial perspective were strongly associated with the adoption of nationalist assumptions. 'If politics in Ireland is slowly ceasing to be so much a matter of clashing nationalisms, Irish history-writing too needs ever less to be about rival varieties of nationalist historian – let alone "patriotic" ones in Terence Ranger's pejorative sense' (p 77). It will be interesting to re-read this statement at a future date, when the impact of the current wave of centenaries has passed. The fourth of these thematic essays by Yvonne Whelan focuses exclusively on the twentieth century – with a long descriptive section on the 1932 Eucharistic Congress, political statues in Dublin, and famine memorials in New York and Sydney. This is not content that this reader would instantly expect to constitute an essay on 'Landscape and politics'.

A second set of thematic essays discuss: 'Land and the people' (Terence Dooley); 'Migration and diaspora' (Enda Delaney); 'Business and industry' (Philip Ollerenshaw); 'Faith' (Marianne Elliott); 'Gender' (Maria Luddy); 'Literary culture', but only in English (Margaret Kelleher); 'Visual arts' (Fintan Cullen); 'Material culture' (Toby Barnard); 'Film and broadcast media' (Rob Savage). These are strong contributions by established scholars, but the list prompts questions about the choice of topics and those omitted. The most glaring omission for this reviewer is demography. Ireland's population history is unique and it merits a separate essay. Alternatively Delaney could have been given a wider brief. The growing literature on Ireland's towns and cities is not covered here or anywhere else in the volume; class, and the labour movement is also largely absent. The essay on film and television could have been extended to include print media, a topic not covered elsewhere, yet one with a dynamic historiography that ties in with the development of nationalism both at home and abroad. Language – or perhaps languages – is/are another omission. A later chapter by Ó Ciardha examines Irish language sources for the early modern Ireland – but on the whole the Gaelic world, which constituted a majority of the Irish population for much of the period covered – is absent from this volume, and at no point is there any discussion of the decline of the Irish language, though the question of language revival makes a brief appearance in later chapters. These criticisms should not

detract from the content of these chapters. Kelleher's discussion of literary anthologies/historiographies – ranging from the late eighteenth century to the 1991 *Field day* anthology – offers historians who do not regularly engage with such material, a useful guide for doing so. Toby Barnard's chapter on material culture skips effortlessly from piggins to pier glasses, Donegal tweed and much more, highlighting Ireland's exposure to an international market for clothing, domestic goods, and religious artefacts, and the women and men who fought to promote Irish design. Cullen also manages to cover a remarkably wide topic – one underlying theme, as in Barnard, is the relationship between foreign and native elements. Marianne Elliott's chapter 'Faith in Ireland, 1600–2000' opens with the statement that, 'contrary to the stereotype Ireland rarely experienced widespread religious-based conflict' (p. 168). This essay is a remarkable exercise in compression, with sections on 'What the churches taught', 'What the people believed' in addition to a chronological account of their institutional and political religious histories. Luddy's essay is a useful starting point for any reader who wants to explore writings on gender in Irish history, though it would have benefited from some comparisons between Irish historiography and gender studies elsewhere – my sense is that momentum has waned in many countries, whereas it remains buoyant in Ireland.

'Migration and diaspora' (Enda Delaney) engages with one of the underlying themes of the volume – the transnational and, associated with this, Irish exceptionalism – though these topics are rather like the Cheshire cat – in some essays they make a brief appearance and then vanish, other contributions ignore them entirely. Delaney concludes that when Irish migration and diaspora are viewed in this wider context, 'untested assumptions of Irish exceptionalism have been questioned and found wanting' (p. 140). He also highlights the 'polyphonal' (p. 141) dimension of Irish migration – with migrants' experiences shaped by class, region, gender and religion'. Dooley, 'Land and the people' focuses mainly on landlords and changes in land ownership. His brief contrast between landlords in the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland (where he draws on the work of Olwen Purdue), is an example of a topic the demands further investigation. This essay says much more about land than it does about the people: cottiers and rural labourers feature only in passing and they are largely absent in the remainder of the volume. Some sense of a more transnational story – land ownership in Britain or Europe – would help to provide further insights, but given the constraints on words, these omissions are more than excusable. Ollerenshaw on 'Business and industry' is concise, and it covers the topic up to the present, in Ireland north and south, in a pithy and polished essay.

Approximately two-thirds of the book is devoted to period studies, which are divided into four sections. The first 'The third kingdom' covering the period c.1580–1690 opens with a chapter by Tadhg Ó hAnnracháin on 'Plantations, 1580–1641', followed by three chapters covering the years 1641–60; 1660–88, and Robert Armstrong 'The war of the kings, 1689–91' – the author with the shortest chronological period in the entire book. The major question that arises to this non-expert on the period is the starting date. The year 1580 is not a date that automatically comes to mind and the compression of the Tudor and Stuart periods into a single essay focusing on plantations, results in no real discussion of the Protestant Reformation, or Tudor efforts to assimilate the Gaelic elites. Don't look here for a discussion of Reformation or Counter-Reformation Ireland. Ó hAnnracháin concludes that the story of plantations presents 'an important aspect of the general failure of the policies

of the English state in Ireland' (p. 308). Nevertheless the impression that emerges from these essays on sixteenth/seventeenth Ireland is of a narrative firmly focused on the New English elite. This is partly redressed by Nicholas Canny's chapter on Ireland and continental Europe. Research into the Irish in Europe has flourished in recent decades and this essay by Canny, who is best known as a scholar of the Atlantic world, indicates the potential for integrating the two research fields. He concludes that Irish emigration to continental Europe and trans-Atlantic meant that 'Ireland at this time was suffering a loss of its population – particularly its adult male population – greater in percentage terms than that experienced by most countries in Europe (other than Portugal and Scotland) – Catholic emigration to continental Europe was matched by Protestant immigration to Ireland' (p. 347). Ohlmeyer is to be commended for including sections on society and culture and highlighting future areas of research in her analysis of the period 1641–60. A strong advocate for digital humanities, she champions its potential for scholars interested in changes in landholding or language, especially 'the language of conflict'. Ted McCormick concludes his investigation of Restoration Ireland with a paragraph headed 'Gaps and Departures', which draws attention to the dearth of book-length studies on Restoration Ireland, despite its long-term importance as the period that mark the end of Gaelic society, the foundations of a future Protestant Ascendancy and 'initiating Ireland's own transition to "modernity"' (p. 367) – a transition that other historians see as happening in the second half of the twentieth century!

While McCormick suggests that there are gaps in the historiography of restoration Ireland, Hayton by contrast celebrates the transformation of our understanding of the first half of the eighteenth century in recent times, and the fact that the early eighteenth century is no longer seen from the perspective of the later decades of that century, though he acknowledges that this revised view is not universally accepted. Jimmy Kelly's 'Patriot politics, 1750–1791' expands on some themes discussed by Connolly. He concludes that colonial patriotism was doomed: 'having achieved the holy grail of commercial and constitutional reform, they no longer possess the big idea that would provide them with purpose and a reason to cling together'. 'Famine and economic change in eighteenth-century Ireland' by David Dickson, is one of only two period essays with a title that emphasises an economic theme – the second by Peter Gray, also features 'famine' in its title. Dickson gives an invaluable summary of the extensive revision that has taken place in the economic history of eighteenth century Ireland – to which he himself has made a significant contribution; it is regrettable that we don't have a comparable essay on the nineteenth century. This section also includes a very welcome discussion by Éamonn Ó Ciardha of Irish language sources for the period. He emphasises that eighteenth century Ireland is a story of 'two Irelands', one story in English, a very different story, focusing on the Stuart monarchs, told in Irish. He suggests that Daniel O'Connell, 'the uncrowned king' was 'the ultimate inheritor of the messianic Stuart mantle', with his heart deposited in Rome 'the mausoleum of the exiled Stuarts' (p. 453). O'Connell also makes an appearance in Maurice Bric's examination of 'Ireland and the Atlantic world, 1690–1840', and at greater length in Tom Bartlett's 'The emergence of the Irish Catholic nation, 1750–1840', which also straddles the division between Ireland before and after the Act of Union. Bartlett links O'Connellite politics back to processes that began before the Union. He suggests that O'Connell took

advantage of the complex social and political forces that emerged in Ireland over several decades; he did not bring these forces into existence: ‘the sectarianized, democratized, socialized and militarized masses that would bring O’Connell victory ... had not been called into existence by him ... he may have been the principal beneficiary of a generation of politicization in Ireland’ (p. 532).

If O’Connell looms large in this study, the Act of Union gets much less attention. Patrick Geoghegan dismisses it as ‘a symbolic superstructure’, while acknowledging that it would ‘cast its shadow over the entire nineteenth century’ (p. 511). But the expansion of the state under the Union – the Poor Law, the national schools, the Irish Constabulary, the Board of Works – are absent from the nineteenth century chapters. Peter Gray takes the story from the famine up to the Land War. One strong message in this chapter is ‘the continuing shadow of the famine’ (p. 555) in the decades that followed, up to, and including the late 1870s when Matthew Kelly takes up the baton. Kelly presents a Home Rule Ireland as a missed opportunity: ‘Home Rulers, at their most open-minded and progressive, articulated their politics in terms of pluralism and toleration’, but the failure to achieve Home Rule handed ‘Northern Ireland over to Protestant rule’, and created in the Irish Free State ‘one of the most religiously homogeneous societies in modern Europe’ (p. 598). Donald MacRaild ‘Emigration, 1800–1920’, which complements Delaney’s earlier essay, suggests that future research should focus on what happened to emigrants once they left Ireland; the role that they played in the society of settlement, with more emphasis placed on assimilation and modes of assimilation as opposed to non-assimilation.

Tim Bowman’s essay on ‘Ireland and the First World War’ provides a comprehensive historiography from the early regimental histories to more recent publications by scholars and amateur enthusiasts. His treatment of World War memorials highlighted the preference of some Ulster Unionists for practical memorials such as a hospital or a school. He suggests that while we now know more about recruitment and commemoration than the rest of the U.K., comparatively little has been written as the “‘war and society’ approach ... rather passed Irish history by’ (p. 615). It might have been helpful if he had expanded on this latter point in the hope of prompting researchers to fill this gap. Niall Whelehan’s chapter on ‘The Irish Revolution, 1912–23’ deals with the 1916 Rising in little more than a page, devoting much greater space to the War of Independence and Civil War, including the contentious debates about ethnic cleansing and rules of engagement. He makes a strong case for seeing the Irish Revolution in transnational terms, highlighting the moderation of the Irish Revolution compared with similar conflict during these years. The main challenge for future researchers is ‘how to combine broad perspectives with the intricate local detail’ (p. 638).

The final section ‘Dominion, republic and home rule: the two Irelands, 1920–2008’ says little about the Dominion, and the chapters are firmly partitioned, dealing with either Northern Ireland or the Republic. Those by Fearghal McGarry, ‘Southern Ireland, 1922–32: a Free State’, Diarmaid Ferriter, ‘De Valera’s Ireland, 1932–58’ and Brian Girvin, ‘The Lemass legacy and the making of contemporary Ireland, 1958–2011’ give much greater attention to socio-economic topics than earlier sections of this book. McGarry is good on continuities, especially with respect to the civil service. He highlights the dangers of ‘methodological nationalism’ – a term he borrows

from Ulrich Beck – a ‘tendency to regard the nation state as the natural unit of study’, which underestimates other factors. He argues the case for studying the local, examining Ireland in a transnational context, changing the periodization. ‘Change appears to occur rapidly in the 1960s, more slowly in the 1930s, and hardly at all in the 1950s’ (p. 663). Eunan O’Halpin, ‘The Second World War and Ireland’ was an opportunity to examine the war in an all-Ireland context, but this essay focuses exclusively on independent Ireland. He suggests that neutrality was more damaging to Ireland’s relations with the U.S. than with Britain. Girvin casts a cold eye on ‘the Lemass legacy’, suggesting that ‘in many respects the Irish economy performed no better under free trade and E.E.C. membership than under protection and this requires explanation’; he suggests that more attention should be paid to ‘continuity and constraints’ (pp 735–6). While the emphasis on socio-economic themes is welcome, as I noted earlier there is a gap in the coverage of Irish nationalism or republicanism post-1922, and almost nothing on Anglo–Irish relations pre-1969. The concluding chapter by Paul Arthur on ‘The long war and its aftermath’ concentrates on Belfast and London – Dublin is relegated to a walk-on part at best.

I have deliberately postponed discussing Alvin Jackson’s introductory essay until the end. He begins with the statement that ‘In the first years of the millennium Irish history has been in flux’(p. 3), highlighting two factors: the ‘fall’ of the methodological model promoted by the founding editors of *Irish Historical Studies*, and the Northern Ireland peace process. Jackson’s reflections on the founding fathers of *I.H.S.* are broadly sympathetic and should be widely read. He suggests that they ‘exercised a disproportionate influence in Ireland itself’. He is critical of their hostility towards theory; their insistence on a robust empirical approach; the fetishizing of the archive and the manuscript; and suspicion of the contemporary (p. 6). Yet anybody who returns to these comments after a close reading of this book must see more similarities than differences between this volume and the values criticised here – though today’s generation are less suspicious of the contemporary. He also describes the founding editors as ‘relatively unconcerned with national sensitivities’ (p. 5), a comment that also applies to this volume, which gives little space to nationalist heroes (or to unionist heroes), and their ‘desire to connect with mainstream British and continental European scholarship’ (p. 5), could be presented as an earlier wish to promote transnational history – though its success was undoubtedly patchy at best. The predominance throughout this volume of chapters focusing on political and constitutional questions – with the exception of the twentieth-century chapters – is also very much in the original traditions of *I.H.S.* This is not to dismiss the significant contributions made to Irish history and historiography in recent times, simply to suggest that, as in many aspects of Ireland’s history, continuities are strong.