

Síle de Cléir, *Popular Catholicism in 20th-Century Ireland: Locality, Identity and Culture*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017, pp. xiv + 249, £85, ISBN: 9781350020597

In a similar manner to the way in which the phrase ‘de Valera’s Ireland’ has often become a synonym for a rural conservative society, the soubriquet ‘Catholic Ireland’ is rarely far from press and popular discussion of twentieth-century Irish history. The phrase has gained particular currency in recent years as major changes in attitudes towards the Church and religion have taken place and Ireland becomes a more secular society—a transformation never more evident than in the recent referendums on same-sex marriage and abortion. This book by Síle de Cléir, which covers the period from independence up to the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s, reminds us of the time in the very recent past when religion was absolutely central to the vast majority of the population and influenced all aspects of life from the home and the family to work and social activities. It is an attempt to understand the nature of devotion and the particular contours of Catholic belief in Ireland; it is a very timely publication and this thoughtful and well-researched local study of Limerick city and its surroundings offers numerous insights into Irish society of the period.

There has been a burgeoning literature on the institutional Catholic Church in Ireland for some time. J.H. Whyte’s remains the classic on the Church and the state in independent Ireland (1923-79) while Mary Harris has shed important light on the response of the Catholic Church to partition and the foundation of the Northern Irish state in 1920.¹ Other texts have examined the Church’s role in institutionalisation and the moral culture of the period. De Cléir is much more concerned with popular religious practices; her focus is on the local, the familial, and the everyday. In this respect, her work is better compared with the seminal research of Emmet Larkin on what he termed the ‘devotional revolution’ of the nineteenth century. However, where Larkin mined clerical archives, de Cléir’s examination of the twentieth century allows her to take a different approach, utilising oral testimony which is underpinned by a strong theoretical framework.

The material here is well organised. The opening chapter examines historical writing on the Church and the practice of Catholicism in modern Ireland and offers an overview of her chosen site of enquiry while also outlining the ethnographical approach taken in this study. The chapters which follow are thematic and examine key features of religious devotion in the period. The chapter on ritual and city life is

¹ J.H. Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923-79* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1984); Mary Harris, *The Catholic Church and the Foundation of the Northern Irish State* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993).

particularly interesting for the way in which it highlights how rituals such as Corpus Christi parades and religious feasts were not merely discrete Catholic events but were closely bound up with work practices and people's daily lives. De Cléir's research demonstrates how the community often behaved like a family, yet the treatment of funeral rituals highlights strains between the two. The tension between the family and the wider community is especially evident in one interviewee's account of her family's Christmas being marked by the passing of a loved one and the invasion of privacy occasioned by the traditional communal funeral (pp. 48–9).

Another chapter focuses on senses of place as de Cléir successfully demonstrates how local pride interacted with religious practices. This work illustrates that the key to Catholicism's vibrancy was how it became embedded with other aspects of identity and social customs—the confraternities in the city were a central feature of Limerick's social and religious life. In this sense, de Cléir highlights how the ritual of religion in the urban setting helped people to create meaning. The traditional often intermingled with the modern and de Cléir advises against using the 'priests and people' model in examining pilgrimages. Rather, she looks at the ritual aspects in how the community mediates modernity (p. 86). The discussion in chapter seven on sense and speech is illuminating in its analysis of language and material aspects of devotion. Other chapters provide windows into wider Irish social issues of the period. For instance, the discussion of fasting and Lent highlights how the impositions placed on people still meant more food was allowed than many working-class people could sometimes afford (p. 108).

De Cléir casts her work in the context of similar examinations of religious practice and devotion such as Williams's account of religious belief and popular culture in Southwark and Wildman's study of inter-war Manchester.² However, as she acknowledges, the case here is different: Limerick had an almost entirely Catholic population. Protestants appear rarely in the text and where they do, it is in reference to sectarian songs in the schoolyard and Church leaders condemning attacks on Protestant property in 1935 (p. 179). However, de Cléir points out that the relationship was 'complex' and interactions must have taken place, with one witness recalling friendly relations (p. 180). Tensions with the Jewish community in the city are also noted in the attack on Jewish businesses in Limerick in 1904 following a Redemptorist sermon. Thirty years later, one of de Cléir's interviewees remembers hearing a joke in his youth about a Jew being struck on the street after someone found out at Mass that Jews were responsible for

² S.C. Williams, *Religious Belief and Popular Culture in Southwark c. 1880-1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Charlotte Wildman, 'Religious Selfhoods and the City in Inter-War Manchester', *Urban History*, vol. 38, no. 1 (April 2011), pp 103–123.

the persecution of Christ (p. 182). This story was intended to be light-hearted though as the author demonstrates, humour of this nature helps to manipulate history and disassociate it from more sinister undertones — yet such concerns highlight tensions and differences that may sometimes be obscured in such a largely homogenous community.

This study is a major contribution to our knowledge of mid-twentieth century Irish Catholicism and adds to the existing literature which has focused on the Church and lay Catholic action groups. De Cléir's research is meticulous and her arguments are well presented. While her work is grounded in a strong theoretical framework, the author makes extensive use of oral testimony and this book remains accessible and engaging throughout. It offers an appeal to popular as well as academic readership, and is unquestionably an important book, now more so than ever, in attempting to understand a society which is going through a remarkable transformation in religious beliefs and attitudes.

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